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"Television and Children's Culture"

Henry Jenkins, Director, Film and Media Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology,
"Revenge of the Sponge Minions: Childhood Innocence,
Children's Television, Children's Culture"

Marsha Kinder, University of Southern California,
"Ranging with Power on the Fox Children's Network"

21 October 1994

Killian Hall

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The following is an edited summary, not a complete transcript of the remarks made by the panelists.

Henry Jenkins (HJ): On the Internet recently, I stumbled into the Jihad Against Barney The Purple Dinosaur. The opponents of Barney argue that the television character brainwashes the children who watch his program, offering his "sponge minions" a dangerously sugar-coated vision of life. Their complaints about Barney include concerns about the program's commercial exploitation of children and its poor content, in particular the subtext of the show that all negative emotions should simply be denied.

The Jihad's mock holy war against the purple monster reflects an increased cynicism and demonization of the media. It is only a small step from the Jihad's description of young television viewers as sponge minions passively soaking up lethal doses of cuteness to media reformer Marie Winn's account of television viewing as an addiction to the plug-in drug. The reformers' metaphors of addiction, intoxication, seduction and "spongification" present television as a dangerous and seductive technology. The culture industry is presented as an evil seducer and merciless exploiter of children. Watching television is assumed to be a simple, passive recreation, by its nature isolated from other kinds of social contacts or aspects of a child's life. In the view of the reformers, television is seen as competing with family life but never as a meaningful part of parent-child relations. The reformers devote much attention to worrying about the potential effects of television on children's impressionable minds. But they spend far less time considering what pleasures or desires motivate television viewing or what uses children make of television content. Reformer Winn's solution is to simply "just say no" to popular culture.

As with other reform movements, the anti-television campaign depends on the construction of "victims" who are powerless and defenseless. Children in the 20th century have been the ultimate victim in whose name a broad range of political struggles — both progressive and reactionary — have been waged. A prerequisite for seeing children as victims has been the assumption of childhood innocence and the depiction of outside forces as amoral corruptors of that purity. Throughout the 20th century, childhood has been seen as threatened by one manifestation or another of mass culture, such as comic strips, pulp fiction, rock music, television, and video games. Reformers throughout the century have always looked on previous decades as a simpler, purer time to be a child.

Although reform rhetoric often offers a universal concept of childhood innocence, it originates in a specific historical context. Recent historians argue that it arose in response to the shift from an agrarian, craft-based economy to an industrialized economy. Economic changes meant the child was no longer a source of productive labor within the domestic sphere, so the child became an economic liability. Almost in response to this loss of economic value, a new rhetoric emerged that sentimentalized childhood as a source of emotional value for the family, pointing to children as the hope for the future. In addition, declining infant mortality allowed parents to make greater emotional investments in individual children, and their concerns shifted from medical to psychological ones. This resulted in a view of the media as a potential source of psychological trauma and a negative influence on children's moral development.

As Jacqueline Rose notes, the innocent child is a universalized child, existing outside of the contradictions and pressures of gender, sexuality, race and class. This universalized image of the child as victim denies children a sexuality, a political agency, and a cultural voice. Children's minds are depicted as blank slates upon which parents, teachers or the media write their messages. Or to use the more recent metaphor, children are sponge minions who soak up media content.

The myth of childhood innocence depicts the child as a pale, frail victim of adult exploiters. I would like to counter this image with a more robust image of the child at play in L.M. Montgomery's classic *Anne of Green Gables*, written in 1908. After learning the tales of King Arthur and the Lily Maid at school, Anne comes up with the idea of acting out the story with her playmates. She proceeds to distribute parts and collect the necessary props. When one girl asks whether play-acting is not wicked, Anne says she is spoiling the effect of the fun.

We can draw at least four insights about the relationship children have to popular narratives from Anne's enactment of Arthurian romance. First, the social context in which children encounter popular narratives matters. The children learned the story of King Arthur in school, but the characters maintained vitality and relevance despite rather heavy-handed instruction. It also matters that there is an extraordinary gap between Camelot and the rural Canada of Green Gables. The children must draw on their imagination to negotiate that gap. The story suggests the need to be attentive to the social contexts of cultural consumption. Several years ago, I did a study of a group of kindergarten students who enjoyed a rich and vivid relationship to the television show *Pee Wee's Playhouse*. Their pleasure in Pee Wee's frenetic behavior seemed closely linked to the process of their own adjustment to the institutionalized setting of the schoolroom. Having been raised at home, the children found the regimentation of school life to be a major shock. They contrasted Pee-Wee's crazy behavior to the way they were taught to behave at school. The way the children watched the program was anything but passive. The interactive and discriminating relationship that they had towards the show did not resemble the hypnotic stupor often described by media reformers.

A second point is that Anne of Green Gables' relationship to the text of King Arthur is both imaginative and transforming. She translates what she reads into other kinds of activities. Similarly, an ethnographic study by Shelby Anne Wolf and Shirlly Brice Heath found that two young girls actively appropriated the contents and concepts of a favorite story. They used the story as a basis for home theatrics, art work, and creative writing, and as a tool for understanding other stories. Some educators and reformers try to distinguish between children's literature which they see as inciting youngsters' imaginations and children's television which is seen as destroying creativity. But it is not clear that these distinctions are justified. Ethnographic accounts of children's media consumption and play consistently report creative reworking of television content. For example, children play at being superheroes and act out television shows on the playground, and they use dolls and toys that represent TV characters to role-play situations they face at school.

Third, for Anne reading is a social rather than an isolated act. She shares her reading pleasure with her friends and it becomes the basis of their interactions with each other. The same is the case for contemporary children. Competency in television content facilitates participation within a peer culture. Children do not simply watch television in silence. They talk about it and even parody it. The programs' meanings become their meanings.



Fourth, Anne's play with the text occurs outside adult supervision and also in direct defiance to an adult's efforts to restrict playacting. This push away from parental constraints may further the maturation process and thereby help prepare them, ultimately, for assimilation into the adult world.

I hope this talk has offered a more complex account of children's television viewing, as an active and dynamic process occurring within a larger children's culture which allows children to explore alternative social identities. The conception of television viewing which I proposed here is as active and reactive rather than passive and addictive, as significant and meaningful to children rather than as trivial and meaningless, and as social rather than as isolated.

This more complex and nuanced account of children as media consumers does not mean we should not take seriously the issue of media content. But reforms must be developed with more sympathetic attention to what television narratives mean to our children, rather than as an attempt to impose our own adult tastes and interests onto television. Knee-jerk rejection of the television content that is so central is children's sense of cultural competency is a big mistake. We should not use the classroom to moralize about the horrors of media addiction but to teach children to be skilled readers and creative users of media content. We need to tap into children's dynamic, creative, parodic and sometimes resistant impulses and incite them to play with the materials of their culture and reshape them to better meet their needs. We need to mobilize children's excitement and pleasure in television toward other kinds of learning.

Marsha Kinder (MK): There is much talk about the need for educational programs to teach media literacy to children. I will argue here that there is already a very sophisticated mode of instruction in media literacy taking place right now on children's television. We need to understand what kind of media literacy is already in progress before we can address what kind of media literacy is needed in the schools.

I want to focus on four interrelated operations that are currently being stressed on children's television. These operations comprise a system of how to read television programs against the broader cultural field. This system has cognitive value, but it combines cognitive development with the transmission of ideological values, in particular the values of consumerism and American supremacy within global markets. The four operations that form the system are: cross referencing, serial imitation, morphing, and programming override.

I have obtained these concepts or operations not from theoretical discussion but from actual programs I taped from the Fox Children's Network on a single Saturday morning in September 1994. I chose Fox, first, because it has the top-rated showed in every Saturday morning time slot. Second, its programming includes not only notorious action series like *Power Rangers* and *X-Men* which have been widely criticized for having violent content, but also the universally praised educational show *Where on Earth is Carmen Sandiego?* The four operations I mentioned are found in both kinds of programs. The operations are explicitly named in the dialogue of the shows; they are illustrated in images and sometimes even presented as the moral of the episode.

First I will discuss cross-referencing. This is a method of intertextual reading that encourages children to track words, images, characters, and ideas across individual episodes, series, channels and media as well as across different cultures, and time periods — and to derive pleasure from discovering these associations. Cross-referencing appears most clearly in *Where on Earth is Carmen Sandiego?*, an interactive adventure show designed to teach history and geography by having young players track the mysterious Carmen Sandiego across space and time in order to recover stolen treasures. The PBS series features a pair of young brother and sister detectives. It is therefore attentive to gender issues and it encourages both boys and girls to use computers to master the information superhighway and to discover that learning can be an exciting, empowering adventure.

To succeed at cross-referencing, viewers must watch for repetitions within and across episodes. On *Carmen Sandiego* and *X-Men*, for example, viewers cross-reference the Statue of Liberty, the famous icon of American democracy. This operation of cross-referencing is both blatant and subtle. It is accessible to children at various cognitive levels. It also serves the

commercial interests of television producers and networks because it encourages viewers to track licensed characters from one time slot to another, both in television shows and commercials. Cross referencing helps Fox retain viewers from one show to the next by making them feel empowered by the perception of these connections.

The second operation is serial imitation. This is a chain of simulations performed by characters in the stories, which also extends to viewers who identify with and imitate their favorite TV personalities. Viewers must be able to make a moral distinction between creative and dishonest uses of this operation. Three different shows, for example, featured the clever parody on the one hand and the video pirate or evil twin on the other. Impersonations in the shows are presented as either creative or as dishonest. Serial imitation often involves parody and also teaches mathematical multiplication and creative repetition. It is presented as a cognitive skill that children must master in order to understand their culture.

The third operation, morphing, is a high-tech mode of creative transformation. In contrast to impersonation, it has more to do with empowerment and its effects are longer-lasting. This mode of shape-shifting is based on technological rupture. It is active rather than passive. You do it to something or to yourself, rather than having it done to you. This distinction is linked to the shift in spectator position from passive viewer to active player. Morphing can be seen on *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* in which five high school students are transformed into martial arts superheroes fighting against alien science-fiction villains. Both the visual style and the structure of the show enhance the player's ability to identify interactively across media, to move as fluidly as his heroes from TV images. Morphing also takes places in commercials.

The fourth operation is overriding the programming. This is a subversive form of reading against the grain, or an aggressive form of what Henry Jenkins calls "textual poaching". In most of the Fox shows, we see characters monitoring screens and commenting on and manipulating whatever they see and hear. This "reprogramming" can be found, for example, in the show *X-Men* and Steven Spielberg's *Animaniacs*. The moral of one *Animaniacs* episode recommends a mode of active reading in which young viewers freely override the intended meanings of the text. But the key question is whether this mode of active spectatorship is an illusion, when positioned within an ideological context that emphasizes an individualism not subject to being overridden, and within a commercial context designed to convince young viewers that freedom is best expressed in front of the TV screen and in the marketplace. One episode of *Carmen Sandiego* for example, involves overriding the programming but at the same time it reproduces the traditional view of American history, aggressively defending it and its ideology of individualism against any revisionist override. Although the main characters override the programming, the episode still teaches children the traditional discourse of American national supremacy and its discourse is a colonizing one.

Perhaps the most liberating way to read the episode of *Carmen Sandiego* however, is as a generational discourse in which children outwit their adult adversaries. Ivy and Zack, the young heroes of the show, are also more knowledgeable than adult geniuses and heroes from the past because they come later in history and therefore have access to advanced technology, scientific progress, historical perspective, and a broader frame of linguistic reference. The last fact, that their frame of linguistic reference is broader, serves to empower children and encourages them to watch for verbal puns and to use decoding as a mechanism of power. This skill depends on mastering the broader historical and cultural field against which all specific texts and speech acts must be read. The four operations I have been describing are specific techniques for achieving that mastery.

Beth Rosenson, Rapporteur