

# Seeing Childhood in Art Education

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Art education theory and practice sees children as constructivist learners, but postmodern theory teaches us to see children with multiple and fragmented identities. Postmodern theory is used to examine childhood as a site of divergent discourses concerned with persistent adult attempts to control both actual children and the concept of childhood. Many alternative conceptions find pictorial form in the mass media, from abused child to nightmarish threat. This paper focuses on the idea of children as rabid consumers. It examines television advertisements aimed at children, especially by *McDonald's*, *Mattel* and *Cap Toys*. Implications for the classroom as well as art education as a field of study are outlined.

In his book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985), the

neurologist, Oliver Sacks, describes a man who, while normal in most other ways, suffered from a peculiar kind of blindness: He was blind to human faces. Happily for Sack's patient, the man was totally unaware of this striking deficit and was therefore not in the least concerned about it. Others suffered unhappy consequences, notably his wife, but he was himself literally blind to his blindness. I want to suggest a connection here between Sack's patient who was ignorant of his blindness, and the possibility that as teachers and parents we not only routinely fail to see children in all their complexity but are unaware of our failure to see. Our interactions with children, as parents and teachers, are often so routinized and institutionalized that we may fail to see them outside the ideological parameters established by our routines and institutionalized settings. It is not as if children are unimportant to us, or that they are not always before us. It is both precisely because we have such powerful investments in children and the fact they are always in sight that we may fail to see them clearly. Sacks cites a passage from Wittgenstein which elegantly makes this point: "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes)" (p. 42).

In this paper, I argue that mass media images of children present us with challenges to conceptions of childhood we may hold as a result of our roles of parents, teachers, and caregivers. Specifically, I will examine television advertisements aimed at children. If we are blind to children we are like Sack's unfortunate patient, happy in our ignorance, but, also, like those who suffered the consequences of his blindness, children undoubtedly suffer the consequences of our blindness towards them.

A common conception of childhood is that it is a time of happy innocence (James & Prout, 1990). This view is perhaps most succinctly and oft expressed in the heartfelt comment, "to let children to be children," as if anything other than happy, innocent, exploratory play is antithetical to the singular nature of childhood. According to this view, childhood is innocence, and any other conception is a corruption of childhood and evidence of social pathology (Holland, 1992; Spence & Holland, 1991).

The view of happy innocence is complementary to the preoccupation we have of children as educators, that of students engaged in learning. We have changed our views about how children

learn (Wilson, B., Hurwitz, A., & Wilson, M., 1987), seeing children as constructivist learners rather than creative artists, but we tend to see them almost exclusively as students. Understanding children as learners, we view them as needing correction, instruction, and opportunities to explore. This is a dominant, modernist conception of children: happy learners, greedy only for knowledge (Cunningham, 1995).

By contrast, postmodern theory conceives childhood, like adulthood, as comprised of multiple identities in relation to different social worlds (James & Prout, 1990). Rather than being seen as a whole, centred, stable and rational, an autonomous and complete self, childhood is conceptualized as fragmented and incomplete (Jenks, 1996). Postmodern theory suggests that each disparate fragment of childhood, however unpleasant, is an undeniable part of childhood. Postmodern theory broadens our conceptions of what is to count as childhood. It challenges us to rethink childhood and our relationship as adults to children.

## The Symbolic Significance of Childhood

Postmodern theorizing has only recently turned the same critical eye towards childhood that it has towards gender and race. This is not because the concept of childhood has less symbolic value in our society. It is precisely because childhood is of immense symbolic significance that it has tended to resist critical analysis (Jenks, 1996); and to understand why postmodern constructions of childhood are so challenging to us as parents and teachers it is necessary to grasp the depth of its significance.

Childhood as a time of happy innocence and openness to learning about the world is an idea of longstanding (Cunningham, 1995), but it became a central metaphor of the Enlightenment Project, the critical text of which was Rousseau's *Emile* (1948/1762). Rousseau's ideal society was pictured through the story of an ideal education based on the inherent goodness of childhood. The child Emile is predisposed to love and to learn, and he is equipped with the characteristics necessary to become a good spouse, parent and citizen. As Jenks (1996) writes, "Such an ideal child, the very image of modernity's child, is a stranger to avarice and imbued with natural altruism and kindness" (p. 99). Childhood embodied a promise of future possibilities that worked as

a hedge against the as yet incomplete plans of adults. Fuelled by the goodness and promise of children, the best days always lay ahead. The future of society was founded on the promise childhood represented.

Even now when under contemporary, postmodern conditions, hope in the future has been replaced by disenchantment; childhood has retained a profound symbolic value. A sense of progress has given way to merely keeping pace. Horizons now seem limited. Yet, as Jenks (1996) argues, rather than abandoning the child who embodied Modernism, Postmodernism has reinvested the child with an equally powerful symbolic role. The child has come to embody fond memories of past times. Childhood has been adopted, not for the better world it promises in the future, but the better world it evokes from days now gone. There is now what Kitzinger (1990) calls a “fetishistic glorification” of childhood (p. 160). The child as future hope offered a goal towards which to work. The child as nostalgia offers a sense of continuity with the past. It offers the starting point of a narrative that signifies our lives and our society. And a starting point and a present imply at least an uncertain future. Thus the child continues to embody the kind of optimism necessary to underpin social goodwill and cohesion. Indeed, the felt disorientation and dislocation of postmodern times finds a ready source of comfort in the image of the child. The trust and love that was previously invested in marriage, partnerships, friendships, class solidity and other affiliations are now invested in childhood. Where society is unstable, childhood appears to offer unconditional love. Whereas we once sought to love and protect children, children are now more than ever seen as a source of unconditional love that protects society from an unstable and disorienting reality (Jenks, 1996). The concept of childhood has become, in a postmodern society, crucial as a bulwark against uncertainty and alienation. Where traditional sources of emotional comfort have broken down, such as class solidity and marriage, children have become a major source of comfort and, consequently, they have been invested with a new and profound significance. Jenks (1996) writes that the end of the 20th century has “readopted the child . . . [as] a site for the relocation of discourses concerning stability, integration and the social bond” (p. 106). It is against the idea of the child as benign learner that many alternatives are cast, and it is only against the backdrop of this powerful idea that it is possible to understand the social outcry, often mounting to moral panic, that accompanies reports where the ideal of innocence is violated.

## **Alternative Conceptions of Childhood**

There are many violations, and each finds pictorial form in the mass media. These include clinical images of children's abused bodies (Holland, 1992) that have arisen from the historically recent concern with abuse which, in turn, reflects an increased surveillance of children and sensitivity to their life circumstances (Jenks, 1996). They include children who are dressed as adults and made to perform adult song and dance routines, victims of unfulfilled adult dreams. They include photographs of children as victims of war and famine, and work slaves (Amnesty International, 1995), victims of international trade. They include photographs of child soldiers, which are part of the historically recent concern for child rights (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994). Included are the most common images of the entire third world, that of children (Holland, 1992). They include images of child-by-child murderers and their victims (Duncum, 1998), and images of pre-pubescent children campaigning for social causes. They include highly aestheticized children nowadays to be found on cards, calendars, posters, coffee mugs and so on that are treasured by so many but equally can be seen as a manifestation of adult pathology (Duncum, 1997). They include photographic images of eroticized children by celebrated art photographers like Sally Mann (1992) and Jock Sturges (1991) that raise disturbing questions about the exploitation of children in an art context. The images include those of children as sexually precocious (Holland, 1992), as well as child pornography which are clearly exploitive (Davidson & Loken, 1987). From a modernist perspective that sees children as curious, innocent learners, the children in these images are seen as "other." They are not fully children. But from a postmodern perspective, they are each an aspect of a multifaceted and fragmented conception of childhood.

## **The Ravidly Consuming Child**

Due to an article's space limitations, I will examine only one media construction of childhood, that of children as rabid consumers. The images of children as avaricious run counter to the Rouseauian ideal of children as essentially good. Greed is, after all, one of the seven deadly sins. I focus on these images for several reasons. They are very common and children themselves are frequently exposed to them. They do not involve the same level of social controversy that some other images involve, which means that, unlike some other images, they can be dealt

with directly within the classroom. Also, such images lie at the heart of the socioeconomic structure of capitalist societies. Images of children as consumers are a constitutive part of the social structure, even of the global economy.

I examine advertising which is aimed exclusively at children, especially television advertising.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, I will refer to advertisements by *McDonald's* and toy manufactures *Mattel* and *Cap Toys*. *McDonald's* and *Mattel* are the leading brand names in their respective fields of burgers and toys (read *Barbie*), and their success is at least partly attributable to their use of television (Jackson, 1994; Kincheloe, 1996). When portrayed as consumers, children's happiness depends upon consumption and material possession, not knowledge or skills. Succeeding in selling products to children means offering a view of childhood that children themselves are happy to embrace (Kincheloe, 1996). From the late 1960s commercial television advertising has been based on the premise that children should be addressed as kids, using visuals and language that appeal especially to children. Advertisements to children appeal, typically, through fun, happiness, sensory gratification --"tastes good, feels good"--and affiliation, the sense of being part of a group (Guber & Berry, 1993, p. 137).

In formal terms the commercials typically appear to adults to be anarchic and hyperactive. Colours are plentiful and bright, music is upbeat, editing is fast paced, and movement is incessant. Moving from one style to another and back again is common. Animation, real life, and morphing follow one another in quick succession. Advertisements for boy's toys are punctuated with cartoon style "Kazoom's" and "Boom's." Well known cartoon characters behave with childlike anarchy, and beaming, ecstatic children scramble to devour the latest product. In advertisements for dolls, young girls hold up the doll to the camera, their faces the embodiment of blissful completeness. The faces signal the joy and satisfaction the toy can bring to the viewer.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Ms. Deborah Jimenez for collecting the advertisements mentioned in this paper that are not otherwise referenced. They were collected from the major United States networks on Saturday mornings during October 1996.

*Mattel's* advertisements typically show several children enjoying a range of similar toys (Jackson, 1994). The strategy is twofold. *Mattel* demonstrates that its toys come in several versions and each is equally desirable. Also, toy ownership is shown to be a social activity by which children establish identity, including position in a social hierarchy among one's friends. Multiple versions is the hallmark of contemporary toys. To stay successful in a competitive yet finite market means selling the idea that a purchase of one product leads to the purchase of many others by the same manufacturer. After the first *Barbie*, others will follow. In this regard, the marketing of toys parallels what has happened in marketing in general. There has been an increasing turnover of new models, a proliferation of models and accessories, and an ever sharper focus on smaller niches. What was once a *Barbie Doll* now comes in many versions, with different coloured hair, and different lengths and styles of hair. *Barbie* is available with different clothes, accessories and skin colour. Since the introduction of a younger version of *Barbie*, even her notorious proportions vary. Each advertisements for each new version features eager youngsters at home in a world of their own.

These techniques are exemplified by *Cap Toys'* television advertisement for *The Melanie Mall*. It offers four singing and dancing girls extolling the virtues of purchasing a whole series of *Melanie* dolls each complete with her own store that together go to make up an entire shopping mall. A voice-over suggests that girls should add as many stores as they like. Stores include two levels, revolving doors, and an elevator. With candy colours, bright lights, and fast editing, viewers are offered *Melanie* at the *Make Up Shop*, the *Ballet Studio*, the *Fancy Gown Shop*, the *Beauty Salon*, the *Surf Shop* and the *Music Store*. *Melanie* is dressed appropriately for each store and comes with a range of accessories. The song sung by the four girls reinforces the social nature of consumption:

Melanie, new friends and you  
 Having fun doing what most girls do  
 At the magic mall you'll see it true  
 Its cool at the mall

A voice-over further entices girls to "have fun with friends and shop for everything." The girls in the advertisement are dressed in the same colours as *Melanie Dolls* and the stores of *Melanie's Mall*. It is as if by the possession of *Cap Toy* products girls can transport themselves

inside the fantasy of the *Mall*. While singing and dancing, the girls are in full control of their own world and fully self-possessed. At the very last moment the girls giggle with childlike glee. The delighted exuberance seems quintessentially childlike, but in this context it can be seen as having been appropriated for the sake of consumption.

The world of television commercials which children inhabit is the product of market researchers. The world created for children to dream within sidelines normal adult authority and substitutes the authority of the advertisers. For example, in an advertisement in which an off-camera mother insists that a cupboard overflowing with clothes be tidied, the children drop into *Burger King* instead. The move is justified by a voice-over as having fun.

Advertising aimed directly at children rarely features adults. Children are presented in a world of their own where the dominant activity is consuming the advertised product. Where adults are referenced, they are sidelined as negative influences, ineffectual, or just silly, and they are often treated by the children with a sense of amused superiority that underscores the alienation of children from adults.

Kincheloe (1996) argues that a major reason children embrace the advertisements so readily is their parent's passionate dislike of them. Children systematically resist attempts by their parents to impose adult expectations of normative behaviour, and television commercials for children reinforce this resistance. Advertisers often work not to overcome adult resistance, but to underscore it. Drawing upon resistant nature of childhood culture, advertisements work to identify their products in the minds of children as signs of resistance. Commercials show children who, in pursuit of consumption, throw off all restraint, reject discipline, and who are not only seen but continually heard. Whereas educationalists view children as earnest, incomplete adults in need of knowledge and skills, commercials show children as needy and incomplete only in terms of the advertiser's product.

The subversive nature of children's culture is perennial (Opie & Opie, 1969). In the past, however, it was propagated in playgrounds and schools through face-to-face interaction between children and passed down from one generation of children to another. Today, children's culture is still created by children but now it is created from the bric-



a-brac of cultural forms produced by adults (McDonnell, 1994). What was previously untouched by commercialism has now been harnessed in the pursuit of profits.

A tightrope is walked by advertisers, however, between subverting yet not directly offending adult authority. For this purpose, commercials are often double coded. Kincheloe (1996) describes a series of commercials where *McDonalds* used a so-called slice-of-life, documentary style of presentation. A group of children engage in a supposedly authentic conversation around a *McDonalds's* table covered with *McDonald's* products. The children use the latest slang to describe various toys in McDonald's promotions, and they discuss the problems of being children. Adults are made the butt of jokes, and Kincheloe (1996) argues they are in-jokes of childhood that adults do not readily comprehend. I suspect, however, that most adults do realize they are the target of jokes but do not know how to counter them.

Many advertisements place children in a highly dependent position that mirrors paternal authority and dependent child. Characters like Ronald McDonald arrive to help get children out of scrapes, and the narratives often have a mythical dimension (Guber & Berry, 1993). In one advertisement, which evokes children's perennial questions about origins, children ask Ronald where *McDonald's* hamburgers come from. "Ronald saves the day" is the chorus line of other advertisements in which the *McDonald's* hero parent rescues children from minor threats. In one advertisement *McDonald's* "Chicken Nuggets" are threatened by a huge dog, but Ronald is on hand to save the children from even the momentary loss of the *McDonald's* product. As surrogate parent, Ronald's benevolence is solely directed to facilitate consumption.

Advertisers have effectively colonized children's culture. The world that is created for children to resist adults is created by adults and is devoted solely to consumption. The authority normally exercised by adults has been substituted for the authority of the advertisers. Children appear in control only because they have been so positioned by adults for the purpose of selling them products.

## Consumption and Capitalism

Images of consuming children cannot be fully understood without

reference to the economic arrangements of which they are a constitutive part. The prevalence of images of children as sites of consumption lies in the nature of capitalist economies which are based on production, exchange, and consumption. This is especially significant given recent economic developments which see the commodification of areas of everyday life which were previously untouched by commercial interests (Harvey, 1989; Ritzer, 1993). The proliferation of fast food chains is one example where the consumption of food, previously a domestic affair, has become a huge industry. Moreover, the speed of production, exchange and consumption has been increasingly accelerated and now seems to operate at a dizzying speed. Capital has become ever more rapacious (Morley & Chen, 1996). Markets have spread more and more and turnover time has increasingly been shortened. To mobilise the ever greater turnover in production, exchange and consumption, there is a need for ever more advertising, including at children. Cultural forms such as television, newspapers and magazines mobilize needs and wants, desires and fantasies as par of the economic imperative to maintain buoyancy of demand and keep capitalist production profitable. Advertising is designed to fast track consumption.

Cultural critics (Featherstone, 1991; Castells, 1997) argue that with the proliferation of goods and services adults increasingly identify themselves not so much as workers or producers as consumers. Instead of seeing ourselves as a benefactor to a capitalist economy, we view ourselves as beneficiaries. In place of the Protestant work ethic that underpinned one's identity as hard working and frugal, increasingly we have come to see our primary role as consumer. The point is made eloquently by the title of Barbara Kruger's artwork, *I Shop Therefore I Am* (Kruger, 1993). In advertising aimed at children, children are asked to think of themselves foremost as consumers, consumers in training (Kincheloe, 1996). In such advertisements, the point of life offered to children is not consuming knowledge but consuming manufactures' products. Advertisements provide models for children. They show children how to behave, provide materials from which children can establish their identities, and the recourses from which to derive a sense of efficacy; and all through the consumption of advertised products.

The dilemma that images of children as rapid consumers present us as educators is that they are tied to the economic arrangements which sustain our economic well being, adults and children alike, yet they present to adults images of avariciousness that is at odds with a deeply seated cultural view of children as happy innocence and a professional

preoccupation with children as thirsty only for knowledge. Also, they provide children with pleasures and sources of identity, through both advertising and the products advertised, that adults also use as sources of pleasure and identity formation. Images of rabid consumption among children are no more or less than images of adult society. The fact that such images draw so easily on the quality of avariciousness is evidence that our socioeconomic structure is dependent upon it.

### **Implications for Education**

Nevertheless, images of children as rabid consumers challenge deeply held assumptions about the nature of childhood and our relationship to children as parents and teachers. The boundaries that have long separated childhood from adulthood are now blurred. Images of rabidly consuming children signpost, at best, part of a new multifaceted view of childhood and, at worst, deep confusion about childhood and society.

Images of rabidly consuming demand that we reconsider our own adult views about children. So routinized are our responses to children, so internalized are the values and beliefs of the institutions we work within, that we may need to stand back and take a critical perspective on our habitual ways of thinking about what is so familiar to us. It can be a sobering experience because it involves dealing with our most intimate selves as adults.

Within the classroom, images of children provide rich resources for discussing with children how they see themselves positioned and the extent to which they accept, negotiate or resist media portrayals. Feldman (1973) long ago advocated the comparative study of children as one of the major themes in the history of art. By comparing images of children from the past, the special character of recent images and the social conditions of which they are a part are highlighted. For example, the rabid nature of consuming children can be compared to 18th century aristocratic children who are entirely at home with their possessions (Stewart, 1995). While social prestige is similarly established through material objects, the attitude towards possession is altogether different; rapacious on the one hand, outwardly at ease on the other. The nature of two very different economic and social arrangements are thereby highlighted and children's position within contemporary society made

the more clear. The children of one society assume inherited wealth and privilege; the children of the other assume that material possessions must be sought out, even fought for.

Of advertisements aimed at children we might ask children to reflect on how they are being pictured and whether they feel advertisers capture a real aspect of their nature. How do children see themselves? Given the opportunity, do children picture their relationship to material possessions in the way advertisers do? What techniques of advertising are routinely used to elicit the particular interests of children? Do children see that adults are asking them to buy products to say who they are? Do they understand that figures like Ronald McDonald are carefully constructed to appeal to them? How are such figures constructed? What aspects of childhood interests are drawn upon in the pursuit of creating profits? Do children view advertisers seen as benign or avaricious? What pleasures do children derive from the advertisements? Do they see that their identities as children are limited by advertisers for the purpose of selling products? Do they feel they have identities beyond the advertiser's images? From where else do they construct their identities? From what other sources might they construct their sense of self?

Of course this is a long way from what Feldman envisaged by studying the theme of childhood. He mostly had in mind fine art images where, typically, artists celebrate the innocence of children. The material discussed in this paper may seem to extend beyond the concerns of art education; it is a far cry from texts like Picasso's world of children (Spies, 1994). However, they are a common part of media studies in Australia, Canada and Britain (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). In addition, for art educators who adopt a visual culture definition of art for education (e.g., Duncum, 1993; Mullens, 1989; Tavin, 1998), what is central is not whether the images studied are derived from the academy but what meanings are brought to and taken from images by students and teachers. Images are signs of attitudes and values, so any of the images examined here are mere grist for the mill.

Finally, some images suggest that art educators should adopt a broader public role than their traditional concern with classroom curricula. It is our professional responsibility to be concerned with children and knowledgeable about the subtleties of image production and reception. Knowledge of imagery is at the core of any claim we

make to professional expertise. It is not ours exclusively, but it lies at the heart of the art educational enterprise. Where we who are both expert in images and charged with a responsibility for the well being of children, there exists for us a professional obligation to speak out about images that we see as dehumanising to children. Art educators tend to adopt a public role only in defending the perilous position of the fine arts and their education, but once we step outside the academy and deal with the image practices of the mass media, it becomes necessary to engage with a broader range of issues, none of which could be more central to our task as visual educators than the way children are visually represented. The first step we need to take however, possibly the most difficult, is to see children in art education in a new light, as fragmented and fluid identities.

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