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Contextualizing Corporate Kids: Kinderculture as Cultural Pedagogy

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Abstract

Consumer culture has an overwhelming impact on the young consumer generation. International corporations often focus on children and youth for a major part of their income generation. This focus is a component of the changing nature of society. Instead of consumers discovering their own wants and needs, corporations create and dictate exactly what people want. This article discusses how media and corporation-generated consumption have helped to form what I call the new childhood. My analysis investigates the footprints of power created by the corporate producers of kinderculture and the effects on the psyches of our children and youth. The understanding of kinderculture can create democratic pedagogies for cultural, personal, and school levels of society.

Keywords: Kinderculture, Cultural Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, Corporate control of Childhood, Media and Youth.

Contextualización de las empresas dirigidas a la infancia: cultura infantil como Pedagogía Cultural

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Resumen

La cultura de consumo tiene un abrumador impacto en la generación de jóvenes consumidores. Las empresas internacionales a menudo se centran en los niños y en los jóvenes para una parte importante de su generación de ingresos. Este enfoque es un componente de la naturaleza cambiante de la sociedad. En lugar de que los consumidores descubran sus propios deseos y necesidades, las empresas crean y dictan exactamente lo que quiere la gente. Este artículo trata sobre cómo los medios de comunicación y el consumo generado por la empresa, han contribuido a formar lo que yo llamo la nueva infancia. Mi análisis investiga las huellas de poder creado por los productores corporativos de cultura infantil y los efectos sobre la psique de nuestros niños y jóvenes. La comprensión de la cultura infantil puede crear pedagogías democráticas para los niveles personales, culturales y escolares de la sociedad.

Palabras clave: Kinderculture, Pedagogía Cultural, Estudios Culturales, Control Empresarial de la Infancia, Medios de Comunicación y Juventud.



With our crashing tidal waves of war, politics, religious influences, struggles, and advancing web 3.0 globalization comes an incredible phenomenon, *kinderculture*. Joe Kincheloe and I introduced this phenomenon in 1997 (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997) as a socio-theoretical conversation about (and with) the children and youth of the late twentieth century. Our points were underpinned by the notion that kids were being infantilized by a corporate/media agenda from popular culture, schools, and adults. Yet, while being considered "too" young for almost anything, at the same time, these young consumers were being marketed to as seasoned adults. Almost twenty years later, the result is a consumer public of little girls, for example, who wear chastity rings and hip-clinging jogging pants with "Kiss My Booty" in glitter on the backside. With one voice, adults tell kids to stay clean, avoid sex and drugs, go to Disneyland, and make vows of celibacy... with another other voice, the corporate side markets booty clothing, faux bling, and sexualized images of twelve-year-olds. After three editions of *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood* (2011), this article adds to kinderculture by continuing to insist that new times have created a new childhood. However, paradoxically the current new times are conservative and liberal, sexual and celibate, and innocent and seasoned. Evidence of this dramatic cultural change surrounds each of us, but without a cultural lens, it is easy to ignore. In the mid-90s many people who made their living studying or caring for children had not recognized this phenomenon. However, the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, more and more people had begun to understand this historic change, and other child professionals remained oblivious to these social and cultural alterations. Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the notions of childhood and youth are more complex, more pathologized, and more alien to adults who educate and parent.

In the domains of psychology, education, and to a lesser degree sociology, few observers have seriously studied the ways that the information explosion so characteristic of our contemporary era has operated to undermine traditional notions of childhood. Those who have shaped, directed, and used contemporary information technology have played an exaggerated role in the reformulation of childhood. *Kinderculture* analyzes these changes in childhood, including the role that information technology

and media has played in this process. To say that technology and media had created an entirely new childhood would be simplistic; numerous social, political, and economic factors have operated to produce such changes. My focus here is not to cover all issues but to question the ways media, in particular, have helped construct what I will continue to call *the new childhood*. Childhood is a social and historical artifact-not simply a biological entity. Many argue that childhood is a natural phase of growing up, of becoming an adult. The cardinal concept here involves the format of this human phase that has been produced by social, cultural, political, and economic forces operating upon it.

Childhood is a creation of society that is subject to change whenever major social transformations take place. What is labeled as "traditional childhood" is only about 150 years old. The concept of *children* as a particular classification of human beings demanding special treatment differing from adults had not yet developed as a social construct until the twentieth century. From the 1600s, children were considered mini-adults, a chronological definition, which didn't define their social or labor status. In the Middle Ages, for example, children participated daily in the adult world, gaining knowledge of vocational and life skills, working as young as 7 or 8. The zenith of the traditional childhood lasted from about 1850 to 1950. Protected from the dangers of the adult world, many children (up until the twentieth century, boys) during this period were removed from factories and placed into schools.

As the prototype of the modern family developed in the late nineteenth century, "proper" parental behavior toward children coalesced around notions of tenderness and adult account ability for children's welfare. By 1900 many believed that childhood was a birthright-a perspective that eventuated in a biological, not a cultural, definition of childhood. Emerging in this era of the protected child, modern child psychology was inadvertently constructed by the tacit assumptions of the period. The great child psychologists, from Erik Erikson to Arnold Gesell to Jean Piaget, viewed child development as shaped by biological forces.

Piaget's brilliance was constrained by his non-historical, socially decontextualized scientific approach. What he observed as the genetic expression of child behavior in the early twentieth century he generalized to all cultures and historical eras-an error that holds serious consequences for

those concerned with children. Considering biological stages of child development fixed and unchangeable, teachers, psychologists, parents, welfare workers, and the community at large view and judge children along a fictional taxonomy of development. Those children who didn't measure up would be relegated to low and self-fulfilling expectations. Those who made the grade would find that their racial and economic privilege are confused with ability (Polakow, 1992; Postman, 1994). *Kinderculture* joins the emerging body of literature that questions the biological assumptions of "classical" child psychology (Kincheloe, 2002).

Living in a historical period of great change and social upheaval, critical observers are just beginning to notice changing social and cultural conditions in relation to this view of childhood. Categories of child development appropriated from modernist psychology may hold little relevance for raising and educating contemporary children. In the 1950s, 80 percent of all children lived in homes where their two biological parents were married to each other (Lipsky & Abrams, 1994). No one has to be told that the family unit has changed in the past sixty years. Volumes have been written specifying the scope and causes of the social transformation.

Before the 1980s ended, children who lived with their two biological parents had fallen to merely 12%. Children of divorced parents (a group made up of more than half of the North American population) are almost three times as likely as children raised in two-parent homes to suffer emotional and behavioral difficulties...maybe more the result of parental conflict than the actual divorce (Mason & Steadman, 1997). Despite such understandings, social institutions have been slow to recognize different, nontraditional family configurations and the special needs they encounter. Without support, the contemporary "postmodern" family, with its plethora of working and single mothers and deadbeat dads, is beset with problems emanating from the feminization of poverty and the vulnerable position of women in both the public and private spaces (Polakow, 1992).

Positivist Notions of Children

It is important to place *Kinderculture* in paradigmatic context, to understand what I am discussing in relation to other scholarship on childhood studies and childhood education. *Kinderculture* directly challenges the positivist

view of children promoted in mainstream articulations of psychology, sociology, education, and anthropology. Positivism is an epistemological position maintaining that all knowledge of worth is produced by the traditional scientific method. All scientific knowledge constructed in this context is thus proclaimed neutral and objective. Critics of positivism (see Kincheloe, [2002](#), [2003](#), [2004](#)) argue that because of the narrow nature of what positivist research studies (what it *can* study given its rules of analysis), it often overlooks powerful normative and ideological assumptions built into its research design. In this naïve context positivists often seek empirical proof of what are normative and/or political assertions that *adults always know better* when it comes to issues involving children.

A key goal of critics of positivism involves bringing these normative and ideological assumptions to the surface so observers can gain a much more textured perspective of what research involves and indicates. Indeed, critics of positivism insist that one dimension of research involves the researcher's analysis of his or her own assumptions, ideologies, and values, and how they shape the knowledge produced. In such a spirit, I openly admit my anti-positivist, hermeneutic epistemological orientations. Concurrently, I admit my critical democratic values, my vision of race, class, gender, and sexual equality, and the necessity of exposing the effects of power in shaping individual identity and political/educational purpose. This is not an act of politicization of research; research has always been politicized. Instead, I am attempting to understand and act ethically in light of such politicization.

In the positivist perspective, children are assumed to be subservient and dependent on adults as part of the order of the cosmos. In this context, adults are seen as having a "natural" prerogative to hold power over children. Positivists turn to biology to justify such assumptions, contending that the physical immaturity of children is manifested in other domains as inferiority, an absence of development, incompleteness, and weakness. One does not have to probe deeply into these biological assumptions to discern similarities between the positivist hierarchy of adults and children and the one subordinating *emotional* women to *rational* men. In my challenge to the positivist view of children, I focus on age and generation to depict children as different from adults but not inferior to them. Children are not merely entities on their way to adulthood; they are individuals intrinsically valuable for who they presently are. When positivists view children as lesser than

adults, they consistently ignore the way power operates to oppress children around the axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. The positivist construction of the "vulnerable" child in this context actually becomes more vulnerable as real and specific threats are overlooked because childhood is viewed as a naturally vulnerable state. The threats of different social, economic, political, and cultural "childhoods" are erased (Mason & Steadman, 1997).

The positivist view of childhood has been firmly grounded on developmental psychology's universal rules of child development. Regardless of historical or social context, these rules lay out the proper development of *normal* children. This mythos of the universal innocent and developing child transforms cultural dimensions of childhood into something produced by nature. By the second decade of the twentieth century, this universal norm for the developing child had been established on the basis of scientific authority, drawn almost exclusively from North American white, middle-class norms and experiences. Schools fell into line, developing a white, middle-class, patriarchal curriculum that reflected the norms of proper development. Reformers, blessed with the imprimatur of science, based their efforts to regulate play on the principles of developmental psychology. Advocates of municipal playgrounds, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts worked to make sure that children made *appropriate* use of leisure time (Spigel, 1998).

The decontextualized aspect of the positivist view of childhood shapes numerous problems for those who don't fit into the dominant cultural bases of the proper development of normal children. In failing to understand the impact of race, class, gender, linguistics, national origin, etc., positivism fails to understand the nature of, and the reasons for differences between children. Positivism is often drawn by the obsession with standards, standardization, and testing... wherein differences are viewed as deficiencies. In this positivist regime, children from lower socioeconomic, nonwhite, or immigrant backgrounds are relegated to the lower rungs of the developmental ladder. The idea that life experiences and contextual factors might affect development is not considered in the positivist paradigm because it does not account for such social and cultural dynamics (Mason & Steadman, 1997).

As positivism came to delineate the scientific dimensions of child

development, male psychologists replaced mothers as child-rearing experts. In the early part of the twentieth century, the psychologist took on a socially important role. Many people believed that if scientific principles were not followed, innocent, malleable children would be led en masse into immorality and weakness. A significant feature of these scientific principles involved exposing children only to developmentally appropriate adult knowledge. The secret knowledge of adulthood, the positivist psychologists believed, should only be delivered to children at appropriate times in their development. One can understand the impact TV made on nations that bought into major dimensions of the positivist mythos. TV became a window to adult knowledge that could undermine the nation's strength and moral fiber. The positivist view of childhood could be maintained only through constant social regulation and surveillance of the young. Since childhood is vulnerable and socially unstable, the control of knowledge becomes especially important in the maintenance of its innocent format. In positivism, childhood no longer exists if the young gain access to certain forms of adult knowledge. No wonder the last half of the twentieth century witnessed so many claims that after TV and other electronic media, childhood was dead. The positivist position has been deemed by many as an elitist perspective, as adults are deemed the guardians under the bridge of childhood. Adults decide what children should know and how they should be socialized. The idea that children should be participants in making decisions about their own lives is irrelevant. In the positivist paradigm children are passive entities who must be made to submit to adult decisions about their lives (Spigel, 1998).

Naming a New Paradigm for Childhood

With the advent of a plethora of socioeconomic changes, technological developments, globalization, and the perceived inadequacy of the old paradigm, Western societies and increasingly other parts of the world have entered into a transitional phase of childhood. This transitional phase has been accompanied by a paradigm shift in the study of childhood, and situate it within social, cultural, political, and economic relations. This scholarly shift takes direct exception to the positivist view of childhood and its

expression of a universal, uniformly developmentalist conception of the normal child. This conception of the child as a passive receiver of adult input and socialization strategies has been replaced by a view of the child as an active agent capable of contributing to the construction of his or her own subjectivity. For those operating in the parameters of the new paradigm, the purpose of studying and working with children is not to break the borders between childhood and adulthood but to gain a thicker, more compelling picture of the complexity of the culture, politics, and psychology of childhood.

With its penchant for decontextualization and inability to account for contemporary social, cultural, political, economic, and epistemological changes, the positivist paradigm is not adequate for this task (Cannella, 1997; Hengst, 2001; Cannella & Kincheloe, 2002; Cannella, 2002; Cook, 2004; Hammer & Kellner, 2009; Steinberg, 2010, 2011). Insisting that children existed outside society and could be brought in from the cold only by adult socialization that led to development, the positivist view constructed research and childhood professional practices that routinely excluded children's voices. Advocates of this new paradigm have maintained time and again that such positivist silencing and general disempowerment is not in the best interests of children. In the name of child protection, advocates have argued, children are often rendered powerless and vulnerable in their everyday lives. As they construct their view of children as active constructors of their own worlds, proponents of the new paradigm work hard to emphasize the personhood of children. The children of the new paradigm both construct their worlds and are constructed by them. In ethnographic and other forms of new paradigm childhood study, children, like adults, are positioned as co-participants in research-not as mere objects to be observed and categorized. Advocates of the new paradigm operating in the domain of social and educational policy-making contend such activity must take into account the perspectives of children to inform their understanding of particular situations (Mason & Steadman, 1997; Cook, 2004; Steinberg, 2010b). Central to the new paradigm is the effort to make sure children are *intimately involved* in shaping their social, psychological, and educational lives. Unfortunately, child-empowerment advocacy is represented by media and psychologists as a permissive relinquishment of adult power over impudent and disrespectful children

(Mason & Steadman, 1997; Ottosen, 2003).

Undoubtedly, it will be a difficult struggle to reposition the child in twenty-first-century social relationships. In this context, Henry Jenkins (2002) argues, as an advocate of the new paradigm, that his work seeks to provide children with tools that facilitate children's efforts to achieve their own political goals and help them construct their own culture. In rejecting the positivist paradigm of childhood passivity and innocence.

I am not contending that there is no time when children need adult protection—that would be a silly assertion. Children, like human beings in general, often find themselves victimized by abuse, neglect, racism, class bias, and sexism. The salient point is that instead of further infantilizing children and rendering them more passive, critical scholars try to employ their perspectives in solving their problems (Mason & Steadman, 1997). Transformative researchers and child professionals, work to help children develop a critical political consciousness as they protect their access to diverse knowledge and technologies. Using a critical lens, I argue that children in social, cultural, psychological, and pedagogical contexts need help in developing the ability to analyze, critique, and improve their position in the world...to employ an understanding of kinderculture.

It is also essential to involve the explicit rejection of positivism's universalist conception of childhood and child development. When we enter diverse class and racial/ethnic cultures, we find childhoods that look quite different from the white, middle- and upper-middle-class, English-speaking one presented by positivism. In these particularistic childhoods researchers find great complexity and diversity within these categories. The social, cultural, and political structures that shape these childhoods and the children who inhabit them are engaged in profoundly different ways, depending on specific circumstances. Such structures never determine *who* children are, no matter how much consistency in macrostructures may exist. The particular and the general, the micro and the macro, agency and structure always interact in unpredictable ways to shape the everyday life of children. A central theme of the new paradigm reemerges: *children shape and are shaped by the world around them.*

Kinderculture maintains that the delicate and complex balance between these constructive forces must be carefully studied and maintained. If we move too far in our emphasis of structure over agency, we lapse into a

structural determinism that undermines the prerogative of individuals-thus, there is nothing a child can do to escape the ravages of poverty. If we move too far in our emphasis of agency, we often lose sight of how dominant power operates to undermine children's role in shaping their own lives and constructing their own subjectivities. The overemphasis of particularism and agency will often obscure just how powerless children can be. To develop our thicker and more complex view of childhood, we must constantly work to integrate the micro and the macro, to discern new cultural and political economic contexts in which to view and make sense of child behavior (Garey & Arendell, 1999; Ottosen, 2003). In this context, new paradigmatic researchers must not only nurture these macro (social, political economic), meso (institutional, e.g., school, media, religious institution, welfare agency), and micro (individuals) interactions, but attend to the ways such levels connect to one another.

Some scholars of childhood make distinctions between proponents of the new paradigm who emphasize structural issues and those who stress the agency of individual children. In this dichotomy scholars who emphasize the importance of commercial relations and corporate marketing in shaping children's culture have been relegated to the "structuralist" camp. Structuralists are represented in this configuration as emphasizing the corporate invasion of childhood and its resulting exploitation. Structuralists are said to view such exploitation as similar in nature to the exploitation of women. The agential perspective often focuses not on the exploitative but the *empowering* dimensions of children's participation in commercial culture.

By arguing that children construct their own lives, such agential scholars maintain that children are capable of avoiding the manipulations of corporate advertising and making positive use of the consumptive act and consumer products. Illustrating the divergence of the agential and structuralist positions, those labeled structuralists contend that while such creative appropriation certainly does take place, it often does nothing to subvert the ideological meanings inscribed on corporate constructions. When children appropriate toys and media productions, they often make meanings that subvert ideological inscriptions, while at other times their appropriations operate to validate the status quo. Such appropriations are complex and must be studied on a case-by-case basis. Kinderculture is

dedicated to the notion that often the separation of structural and agential interpretations creates a false binarism. Indeed, in every situation we study (see Joe Kincheloe's *Sign of the Burger: McDonald's and the Culture of Power* for an expansion of these ideas) we discern both structural and agential dimensions at work. A child, like an adult, can concurrently be exploited and possess agency. Whenever individuals deal with hegemonic and ideological productions, they deal with these competing dynamics (Mason & Steadman, 1997; Ottosen, 2003; Cook, 2004).

As in any sociopolitical situation with the potential for hegemonic and ideological exploitation, one can learn to be more sensitive to the ways exploitation takes place while developing strategies for avoiding it. And, as in any pedagogical situation, we can develop these strategies on their own or, in a Vygotskian sense, in cooperation with teachers who provide a new zone of proximal development that allows for a deeper understanding of the way power operates. This, of course, is the basis of critical media literacy of kinderculture (Steinberg, 2007).

David Buckingham (2003) dismisses the value of structuralist concerns with exploitation and argues that pedagogies of empowerment such as an understanding of kinderculture, have "increasingly been seen to amount to little more than rhetoric." By denying the possibility of a media literacy of power, Buckingham lapses into a pedagogy of nihilism that provides need for scholarly activity in the area of children's culture. Power and exploitation are erased in Buckingham's articulation, as is any effort to alert children to the ways the social, cultural, political, and economic domains operate to harm both them and other individuals is represented as a misguided form of "salvationism." Buckingham equates this so-called salvationism with right-wing attempts to protect childhood innocence via forms of censorship and moralistic regulation.

Most discussions between the agential and structuralist positions in the new paradigm of child studies should be this contentious. It is important to specify kinderculture's location in this conceptual matrix. The notion of kinderculture represents the critical theoretical new paradigm in childhood studies and childhood education. Criticality indicates a concern with power structures and their influence in everyday life. In the case of contemporary children, the sociopolitical and economic structures shaped by corporate power buoyed by the logic of capital as well as patriarchal structures, with

their oppressive positioning of women and children, are central concerns of the critical paradigm (Garey & Arendell, 1999; Scott, 2002). Using the production of pleasure as its ultimate weapon, 'the corporate children's consumer culture labeled kinderculture commodifies cultural objects and turns them into things to purchase rather than objects to contemplate. Kinderculture is subversive but challenges authority in its effort to maintain, rather than transform the status quo. It appeals to the agential child and agential child advocates as it offers children identities that Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen (2001) label as autonomous, rational, and hedonistic.

Kinderculture is produced by aggressive marketers who possess profound insights into the lives, desires, and cultural context of contemporary children. Such marketers know how to cultivate intense affect among children and use such emotion to elicit particular consumptive and, in turn, ideological reactions. A key dimension of this consumptive-ideological dimension of kinderculture involves the marketers' understanding that children, particularly middle-class children, are especially interested in TV; movies, Internet, toys, and even foods (Kincheloe, 2002) that transgress parental norms of "good taste," social status, and educational development. This ideology of opposition is central in many cases to what separates contemporary children from their parents and other adults. Such oppositionality operates to subvert the bourgeois educational project of modernity-rational child development based on the achievement of universal stages of reason reflecting adult behavior and ways of being. As it commodifies and lures children into this oppositional conspiracy, it meshes consumption, education, information, knowledge, cultural capital, emotional bonding, entertainment, and advertising (Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Hengst, 2001; Steinberg, 2007). As an advocate of the critical new paradigm of childhood studies, I argue that kinderculture can no longer be ignored in the effort to understand the social, psychological, and educational dimensions of children. Corporate children's culture has replaced schooling as the producer of the central curriculum of childhood.

Is Childhood in Crisis?

Changing economic realities coupled with children's access to information

about the adult world have drastically changed childhood. Recent writing about childhood in both the popular and scholarly presses speaks of the lost childhood, children growing up too fast, and fragmented homes. Images of mothers killing children, babysitters torturing infants, kids pushing kids out of fourteen-story windows, and trick-or-treat razor blades in apples saturate the contemporary conversation about children. Popular culture/kinderculture provides haunting images of this crisis of childhood that terrify and engage our worst fears. The film *Halloween*, for example, is at one level a story of the postmodern childhood-fear in isolation. The isolation referenced here involves separation from both absent parents and a nonexistent community. No one is there to help; on the once-festive Halloween night, children are not present.

Even in "safe" suburbia, the community has fragmented to the point that the safety of children trick-or-treating cannot be guaranteed (Ferguson, 1994). The crisis of contemporary childhood can be signified in many ways, all of which involve at some level the horror of danger faced in solitude.

This crisis of childhood is part imagination, part reality. While children are vulnerable to social ills and the manipulations of unscrupulous adults and power wielders, there is a degree of moral panic and general hyperbole in the view that children are facing threats from predators unlike anything they have experienced in the historical past. While certainly not dismissing everyday threats to childhood in the twenty-first century, we should be careful not to let hysterics from diverse ideological perspectives paint a fear-driven portrait of the social landscape. A balanced view would demand that we position the crisis of childhood within the twenty-first-century social, cultural, and economic context. There is no doubt that childhood in Western societies is affected by the decline of industrialized economic arrangements.

In such industrialized societies labor was the most important social force for social integration. In a post-industrial condition people make life meanings outside the boundaries of their work lives. The labor process in this new context plays less and less of a role in shaping identity and constructing life experiences. As industrial jobs that lasted a lifetime with pensions and social benefits decline, more women have entered the workforce. More mothers have sought work outside the home, subsequently placing more pressure on their partners or babysitters to participate in child-rearing activities. In such contexts children learn to cope with busy and often

preoccupied parents. Consequently, they become more self-reliant than children from previous generations earlier in the twentieth century.

The changing role of women profoundly changes the role of children in contemporary Western societies. Even though women work outside the home, this does not lead to an equal sharing of domestic work: women work both in the home and out of the home (du Bois-Reymond, Suenker & Kruger, 2001). Increasing numbers of single poor women combine both paid labor and childcare without the help of a partner and with little or no assistance from the state. Without economic or social support, women and children in these categories have experienced increasingly harsh conditions and no hope for upward mobility. For middle- and upper-middle-class children, these social, economic, and cultural trends have sometimes provided them more independence and influence in the family. In lower socioeconomic circumstances, the trends exacerbate the effects of poverty and some times lead to more neglect and alienation.

In many middle- and lower-class homes, these larger socioeconomic trends operate to make children *more useful* than they had been throughout much of the twentieth century. As women become embedded in the workplace, traditional role expectations continue to erode. In order to adjust to these modified familial relationships, children and youth have taken on more responsibilities for caring not just for themselves but for their parents as well. Studies (Hengst, 2001) illustrate that children buy the food family food. Indeed, the home appliance industry, understanding this trend, is directing more and more of its advertising budget toward children and youth magazines. Industry demographics tell them that a growing segment of those who buy food, microwaves, and other kitchen appliances are youth (du Bois-Reymond, Suenker & Kruger, 2001). This represents a profound change in the way children are positioned in the social order and it holds dramatic implications for the education of children. As age boundaries blur, age becomes less important in shaping human abilities and role expectations, the crisis of childhood becomes the crisis of education. Children emerging in the new social conditions no longer reflect the expectations for childhood embedded in the structures and organization of schools. *New children* who experience more adult-like roles in other phases of their lives may not react positively to being treated like "children" in the classroom. Teachers voice complaints about children who talk like adults and have little or no respect

for their demands. What teachers sometimes perceive as impudence and a lack of respect is often a reflection of independent, self-sufficient children reacting to forms of regulation that they experience in no other aspect of their lives. This redirection of anger with adults is found in many media representations of children and youth. A savvy kid is often in complete control of not only her or his own destiny but that of a family or possibly the school or entire community. The knowing *kindercultured* kid of the new millennium balances complexity as the naive being promoted by caregivers and teachers, and as the in-control leader of the tacit life of a kid in today's society.

In this changing social context many scholars (Hengst, 2001) are making the argument that children are far more cognitively capable than traditionally maintained by developmental psychology. The world of technology and media, along with these changing notions of the social role of the child, has expanded what Lev Vygotsky referred to as the ZPD (zone of proximal development: the context that facilitates the learning process- of contemporary children). In the ZPD, individuals learn to take part in social and cultural activities that catalyze their intellectual development. In the media-created electronic ZPD, with its social media, TV; computers, video games, Internet, popular music, and virtual realities, children learn to use the tools of culture, (language, mathematics, reasoning, etc.) effortlessly.

When sociologists, psychologists, and cultural scholars examine what children and youth are able to construct employing the symbols and tools of mediated culture, it is clear how sophisticated and intellectually advanced children's abilities can become in this new ZPD. Kinderculture has quickly become a new culture of childhood learning. The space within which many contemporary children play is the same domain in which their parents work. Children access national and international information networks using the same tools as their parents. In this domain of learning, many children free themselves from the educational project of modern Western societies; they are not learning by preplanned program lesson plans taught by deskilled teachers.

Childhood is perceived in crisis because it resembles no thing most people have ever seen before. The corporate production of popular kinderculture and its impact on children is serious. The discussion falls under cultural pedagogy, which refers to the idea that education takes place

in a variety of social sites including but not limited to schooling. Pedagogical sites are those places where power is organized and deployed including music, social networking, TV; movies, newspapers, magazines, toys, advertisements, video games, comics, sports, etc. This work demands that we examine both school and cultural pedagogy if we are to make sense of the educational process (Giroux, 1994). Operating on the assumption that profound learning changes one's identity, we see the pedagogical process as one that engages our desire, captures our imagination, and constructs our consciousness. The emergence of cultural studies (Grossberg, 1995) has facilitated our effort to examine the cultural practices through which individuals come to understand themselves and the world that surrounds them (Steinberg, 2007). Supported by the insights of cultural studies, we are better equipped to examine the effects of cultural pedagogy, with its identity formation and its production and legitimation of knowledge: the cultural curriculum (Kasturi, 2002).

The organizations that create this cultural curriculum are not educational agencies but rather commercial concerns that operate not for the social good but for individual gain. Cultural pedagogy is structured by commercial dynamics, forces that impose themselves into all aspects of our own and our children's private lives (Giroux, 1994). Patterns of consumption shaped by corporate advertising empower commercial institutions as the teachers of the contemporary era. Corporate cultural pedagogy has produced educational forms that are wildly successful when judged on the basis of their capitalist intent. Replacing traditional classroom lectures and seatwork with magic kingdoms, animated fantasies, interactive video games, virtual realities, kickboxing TV heroes, action figures (complete with their own recorded "history"), and an entire array of entertainment forms produced ostensibly for adults but eagerly consumed by children, corporate America has helped revolutionize childhood. Using fantasy and desire, corporate functionaries have created a perspective on the world that melds with business ideologies and free-market values. The worldviews produced by corporate advertisers to some degree always let children know that the most exciting things life can provide are produced by their friends in corporate America.

We have become seasoned in the corporate interventions by brands like Pizza Hut (reading program), McDonald's (A students), and Nike (most school sports teams). It is also a time when publishing companies create

curriculum for students, with little or no educational or academic input. New curricula is a reflection of the agenda created By McGraw-Hill in the 1990s. Pearson Publishing retained to redesign the New York State primary curriculum in the early 2002, without one academic or schoolteacher on the design team. In less than a decade, Person now has complete economic access to the Common Core through texts and tests created to meet the Pearson curriculum. Up until this point, Disney has always had a hegemonic hold on children's culture through the participation of both families and teachers. It has never been unusual to walk into a primary school, really anywhere in the world, and spy bulletin boards, reading charts, and classroom assignment ledgers thematically displayed by Mickey, Donald, or a princess. In schools that claim a diverse and multicultural view, one will see representations of *Mulan*, *Pocahontas*, and *Aladdin* proclaiming that "It's a small world after all." Disney has recently taken the grandiose step of creating *Disney English Schools*. Disney claims an expertise in English, as it has been writing children's books for more than three-quarters of a century. These "qualifications" opened a market in Asia for English-language teaching. Disney English is a billion-dollar enterprise that has blurred the boundaries of education and corporate book-making.

One of the most profound events of the last century in world history in general and certainly in the history of childhood involves the successful commodification of childhood. Not only did corporate marketers open a new market but they helped generate a body of meanings, cultural practices, and ideological understandings that continues to shape our world and children around the planet (Cook, 2004). By gaining access to children, advertisers found out early in the twentieth century not only that they could induce children to buy more but that they could get children to nag their parents to consume more (Spigel, 1998). Though many argue to the contrary, it seems increasingly obvious that a large percentage of children and young people in the twenty-first century are enthusiastic participants in consumer society. In recent polls they express the belief that having more money would most improve their lives. Concurrently, they express great faith in the American economic system. Increasing numbers of children and young people own more than one credit card, and many own stocks. It is not uncommon for a ten year old to find a pre-paid Visa or Master Card in a gift card.

Corporate power wielders have worked hard to win such perspectives

and orientations among the young. Indeed consumer capitalism has succeeded in ways unimagined by previous advocates, as more and more children and young people come to hold the values and ideological dispositions that serve the best interests of corporate leaders (Spigel, 1998; Allen, 2003). In an interesting and insidious way, the marketers and children enter into an unspoken alliance that helps children escape both the control and the educational-developmental agenda of middle- and upper-middle-class parents. Social media and technology help create a personal, secluded domain for children free from direct parental regulation. Of course, many parents find such independence frightening, and many understandably worry about children becoming targets for advertising and marketing. While many concerned individuals have expressed anxiety over what they thought was corporate advertising's violation of the social contract protecting the sanctity of childhood, others such as David Buckingham have argued that such fears are overblown. Children, Buckingham maintains, possess the ability to discern advertising strategies early in their lives and can thus protect themselves from corporate exploitation. Moreover, Buckingham posits, there is no evidence that indicates that advertising makes children more materialistic than they would have been otherwise. In an empirical research context Buckingham's assertion is a safe one. Since no one knows how children would have been otherwise, it is empirically impossible to prove such an assertion either true or false. I could not disagree more.

The arguments I make for kinderculture maintain that it is our parental, civic, and professional responsibility to study the corporate curriculum and its social and political effects. Indeed, we maintain that as parents, citizens, and teachers we must hold corporations accountable for the pedagogical features of their activities, for the kinderculture they produce. We must intervene in the cozy relationship between popular culture and pedagogy that shapes our identities. In the interest of both our children and the larger society, we must exercise our personal and collective power to transform the variety of ways corporate power (gained via its access to media) oppresses and dominates us. We must cultivate an awareness of the ways cultural pedagogy operates so that we can scold when appropriate and rewrite popular texts when the opportunity presents itself. Kinderculture is primarily a pedagogy of pleasure, and as such it cannot be countered merely by ostracizing ourselves and our children from it. Strategies of resistance must

be formulated that understand the relationship between pedagogy, knowledge production, identity formation, and desire. In this article, I attempt to open a public conversation about the effect of kinderculture as the central curriculum of contemporary childhood.

Culturally Studying Kinderculture

Questions concerning kinderculture and its relationship to cultural pedagogy can be clarified and discussed within the academic field of cultural studies. Kinderculture resides at the intersection of educational childhood studies and cultural studies. Attempts to define cultural studies are delicate operations in that the field has consciously operated in a manner that avoids traditional academic disciplinary definitions. Nevertheless, cultural studies has something to do with the effort to produce an interdisciplinary (or counterdisciplinary) way of studying, interpreting, and often evaluating cultural practices in historical, social, and theoretical contexts. Refusing to equate "culture" with high culture, cultural studies attempts to examine the diversity of a society's artistic, institutional, and communicative expressions and practices. Because it examines cultural expressions ignored by the traditional social sciences, cultural studies is often equated with the study of popular culture. Such an equation is misleading; while popular culture is addressed by cultural studies, it is not the exclusive concern. Indeed, the interests of cultural studies are much broader, including the "rules" of academic study itself: the discursive practices (tacit regulations that define what can and cannot be said, who speaks and who must listen, and whose constructions of reality are valid and whose are unlearned and unimportant) that guide scholarly endeavor.

Thus, cultural studies holds exciting possibilities for new ways of studying Education: specifically childhood education, with its attention to the discursive dynamics of the field. How do children embody kinderculture? How do the power dynamics embedded in kinderculture produce pleasure and pain in the daily lives of children? How do critically grounded parents, teachers, child psychologists, and childhood professionals in general gain a view of children that accounts for the effects of popular culture in their self-images and worldviews? Such questions open new

domains of analysis in childhood studies, as they seek out previously marginalized voices and the vantage points they bring to both the scholarly and practitioner-based conversation (Grossberg, 1995; Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992). While we are enthused by the benefits of cultural studies of childhood, we are simultaneously critical of expressions of elitism within the discourse of cultural studies itself—a recognition made more disturbing by cultural studies' claim to the moral high ground of a politics of inclusivity. Unfortunately, the study of children has traditionally been regarded as a low-status exercise in the culture of academia. The field of cultural studies has reproduced this power/status dynamic in its neglect of childhood study. Indeed, few students of cultural studies have targeted children as the subjects of their scholarship. *Kinderculture* attempts to address this absence and promote new literature and research focus.

Popular Culture as a Serious Discipline

The study of traditional forms of kinderculture, for instance fairy tales, has granted scholars insights into hard-to-reach domains of child consciousness.

Moreover, the more disturbing and violent the fairy tale, some would argue, the more insight into the "primitive" feelings that arise and shape us in early childhood and, in turn, in adulthood. The connection between kinderculture and childhood desires and feelings blows the rational cultural fuse, thus connecting adults to childrens' *lebenswelt* and granting them better access to childhood perceptions. Not only does the study of children's popular culture grant insights into childhood consciousness; it also provides new pictures of culture in general. Kinderculture, in this context, inadvertently reveals at a very basic level what is disturbing us in our everyday lives, what irritants reside at the level of our individual and collective subconsciousness.

Exposing Power

My objective is to promote understandings of kinderculture that lead to smart and democratic pedagogies for childhood at the cultural, familial, and

school levels. Cultural studies connected to a democratic pedagogy for children involves investigations of how children's consciousness is produced around issues of cultural expectations for children, social justice, and egalitarian power relations. An analyses must focus on exposing the footprints of power left by the corporate producers of kinderculture and their effects on the psyches of our children. Appreciating the ambiguity and complexity of power, our democratic pedagogy for children is committed to challenging ideologically manipulative and racist, sexist, and class-biased entertainment for children. It is equally opposed to other manifestations of kinderculture that promote violence and social and psychological pathologies. Children's entertainment, like other social spheres, is a contested public space where different social, economic, and political interests compete for control.

Unfortunately, many are uncomfortable with overt discussions of power. Such unease allows power wielders to hide in the recesses of the cultural and political landscape all the while shaping cultural expression and public policy in their own interests-interests that may conflict with those of less powerful social groups such as children. We are not good students of power. All too often references to power are vague to the point of meaninglessness in the worst literature produced by critical scholars. For the purpose of clarification, when we refer to power-wielders, we are not merely referencing a social class or a category of human beings. Picking up on John Fiske's (1993) use of the term, *power bloc*, we are referring to particular social formations designated by race, class, gender, and ethnicity that hold special access to various resources (e.g., money, information, cultural capital, media, etc.) that can be used for economic or political gain. Power, as we use the term, involves a panoply of operations that work to maintain the status quo and keep it running with as little friction (social conflict) as possible.

It is beneficial to those individuals and groups that profit most from existing power relations to protect them from pests like us. When studying this power bloc, we employ Fiske's notion that it can be better understood by "what it does than what it is" (p. 11). Our use of the concept of the power bloc in the production of kinderculture is-not meant to imply some conspiracy of diabolical corporate and political kingpins churning out material to harm our children. Rather, our notion of the power bloc revolves

around alliances of interests that may never involve individual relationships between representatives of the interests or organizations in question. Power bloc alliances, we believe, are often temporary, coming together around particular issues but falling apart when the issue is no longer pertinent. Those who perceive power to be a complex issue will encounter little disagreement from us. Power and power bloc alliances are nothing if not complex and ambiguous. But because of the power bloc's contradictions and ephemerality, it is never able to dominate in some incontestable manner. Along the lines of its contradictions may exist points of contestation that open possibilities of democratic change. Larry Grossberg (1995) contends that since power never gets all it wants, there are always opportunities to challenge its authority. In this context we begin our study of the corporate production of kinderculture, analyzing the ways power represses the production of democratic artifacts and produces pleasure for children. If power was always expressed by *just saying no* to children's desires, it would gain little authority in their eyes.

The power of Disney, Microsoft, Apple, Dreamworks, Pixar, and McDonald's is never greater than when it produces pleasure among consumers. Recent cultural studies of consumption link it to the identity formation of the consumer (Warde, 1994; Kincheloe, 2002), meaning that to some degree we are what we consume. Status in one's subculture, individual creations of style, knowledge of cultural texts, role in the community of consumers, emulation of fictional characters, internalization of values promoted by popular cultural expressions- all contribute to our personal identities. Popular culture provides children with intense emotional experiences often unmatched in any other phase of their lives. It is not surprising that such energy and intensity exert powerful influences on self-definition, on the ways children choose to organize their lives. Obviously, power mixed with desire produces an explosive cocktail; the colonization of desire, however, is not the end of the story. Power enfolds into consciousness and unconsciousness in a way that evokes desire, no doubt, but also guilt and anxiety. The intensity of the guilt and anxiety a child may experience as a result of her brush with power is inseparable from the cultural context in which she lives. Desire in many cases may take a back seat to the repression of desire in the construction of child consciousness/unconsciousness and the production of identity (Donald,

1993). The cocktail's effects may be longer-lasting than first assumed, as expression of the repression may reveal itself in bizarre and unpredictable ways. To make this observation about the relationship among power, desire, and the way that the repression of desire expresses itself at the psychological level is not to deny human agency (self-direction). While the power bloc has successfully commodified kinderculture, both adults and children can successfully deflect its repressive elements. The role of the critical childhood professional involves helping children develop what Fiske (1993) calls the affective moments of power evasion. Using their abilities to re-read Disney films along fault lines of gender or to re-encode Barbie and Ken in a satirical mode, children take their first steps toward self-assertion and power resistance. Such affective moments of power evasion certainly do not constitute the ultimate expression of resistance, but they do provide a space around which more significant forms of critical consciousness and civic action can be developed (Steinberg, 2007).

Critical Literacies

The information explosion—the media saturation of contemporary Western societies, with its access to private realms of human consciousness has created a social vertigo. This social condition, labeled by Baudrillard as hyperreality, exaggerates the importance of power wielders in all phases of human experience. Hyperreality's flood of signifiers in everything from megabytes to TV advertising diminishes our ability to either find meaning or engender passion for commitment. With so much power-generated information bombarding our senses, adults and children lose the faith that we can make sense of anything. Thus, the existence of hyperreality forces us to rethink our conversation about literacy. Children, who have been educated by popular culture, approach literacy from a very different angle. Media literacy becomes not some rarefied add-on to a traditional curriculum but a basic skill necessary to negotiating one's identity, values, and well-being in power-soaked hyperreality. In many schools such ideas have never been considered, not to mention seriously discussed. Media literacy, like power, is not viewed in mainstream circles as a topic for children (or even adults). The same educators who reject the study of media literacy or kinderculture are

the ones who have to cope with its effects.

As I contend in *Media Literacy: A Reader* (Steinberg, 2007), a critical understanding of media culture requires students not simply to develop the ability to interpret media meanings but to understand the ways they consume and affectively invest in media. Such an attempt encourages both critical thinking and self-analysis, as students begin to realize that everyday decisions are not necessarily made freely and rationally. Rather, they are encoded and inscribed by emotional and bodily commitments relating to the production of desire and mood, all of which leads, in Noam Chomsky's famous phrase, to the "manufacture of consent." These are complex pedagogical and ideological issues, and they demand rigorous skills of questioning, analyzing, interpreting, and meaning making. Contrary to the decontextualized pronouncements of developmental psychology, relatively young children are capable of engaging in these cognitive activities (Nations, 2001). Of course, in the contemporary right-wing, test-driven educational context, such abilities are not emphasized, as memorization for standards tests becomes more and more the order of the school day.

The political dimension of our critical pedagogy of childhood requires developing and teaching this media literacy. Such a literacy respects children's intellectual ability to deal with the complexities of power, oppression, and exploitation, as it refuses to position them as innocent, passive, and helpless victims. In an era when children can instantaneously access diverse types of information, they need the ability to traverse this knowledge terrain in savvy and well-informed ways. A critical pedagogy of childhood finds this approach much more helpful than pietistic right-wing efforts to censor potentially offensive data from innocent childhood eyes. In their effort to perpetuate the discourse of childhood innocence, right-wing child advocates maintain a positivist developmentalist view that media literacy is irrelevant because children do not have the intellectual and emotional maturity to understand TV advertising or subtle marketing appeals (Cassell & Jenkins, 2002). As much as the advocates of childhood innocence might wish for it, children in the twenty-first century are not going to return to the mythical secret garden of innocence. For better and worse children now live in a wider, information-saturated adult world. I believe that the best thing we can do in this circumstance is to prepare children to cope with it, make sense of it, and participate in it in ways that

benefit everyone.

Notes

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