EDUCATION AND THE MEDIA

'NOT SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN': YOUNG MALTESE CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF ADULTHOOD AND ADULT-RATED TV PROGRAMMES

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Abstract – *This paper joins the educational debate on the role of the media in the lives and socialisation of young people by considering how young children's experiences of watching television form an integral part of their emerging sense of identity. The focus is on how children talk about and perceive 'adult-rated' material on television, and how this relates to their understanding of how 'adulthood' is distinguished from 'childhood.' It contends that younger children's understanding of the 'adult' is often pieced together from disjointed and commodified fragments, and that this fragmentation also informs children's performative attempts to distance themselves from the 'childish' in order to build their own 'adult' subjectivities. The evidence is drawn mainly from a series of thirty focus-group interviews with 164 children aged between five and ten, and coming from different socio-economic backgrounds in the Mediterranean island state of Malta.[1] The interviews were conducted in 1998 and 1999, and formed part of a larger project which also included a comparable number of interviews with older children (aged 11 to 14) as well as with parents and teachers.[2]*

Preamble

*O*ne aspect of the study of child development which has long played a key role in both the training of teachers as well as in educational research has been that of understanding the patterns in which cognitive and emotional growth are inseparably entwined with the contours of children's cultural experiences. If culture is 'the systematic way of construing reality that a people acquires as a consequence of living in a group' (Real, 1996: 2), then one quality which increasingly appears to unite radically diverse cultures in the globalised landscapes of the early twenty-first century is the fact that most of us live and grow in media cultures dominated by the demands of commerce and mass entertainment. Young people in the Mediterranean region grow in contexts which are at least as media-saturated as other parts of this global landscape, and most of the television programmes which they spend so much of their time watching look

increasingly indistinguishable from those watched and enjoyed in many other parts of the globe. It is considerations like these which continue to make the study of media practices and influences a crucial concern in both academic educational studies and pedagogical practice.

Within the contours of this broader debate, this paper directs itself to a consideration of how children's contact with the world of adults is often either first experienced through, or is at least significantly inflected by, the media of film and television. The main focus is on the role of these experiences in the development of children's sense of their own identity.

Corruption of the innocent?

In an article appearing in *The Malta Independent* on 6 May 1999, and headlined 'Girl, 9, made up indecent assault allegations,' it was reported that a 49 year-old man had just been acquitted of corrupting a nine-year-old girl 'after she admitted to police that she had been lying about accusations she made against him' (Carabott, 1999). The girl had originally told the court that the accused, a close friend of the family, used to engage in sexual activities with her on a bed. 'We used to do what men and women do,' she said. When asked by the court as to whether she knew what they do, the girl replied: 'Of course, I see them do it on the television.' The article reports that the girl changed her story after she had been asked repeatedly by the prosecution officer if she was telling the truth:

> 'The inspector said that on 27 November 1997, she again asked the girl if her allegations were true. She said that the girl looked as if she was going to cry and said: 'No, it's not true.'
>
> The girl was again put on oath, but this time said that all allegations she had made against [the accused] were totally unfounded and untrue. She said: 'I saw these things on television.'

> (Carabott, 1999).

What are we to make of this girl's claims and counter-claims? Who is the victim and who is the villain? Whatever the truth of the case may have been, there is clearly inscribed in the report, and in the court case as a whole, an assumption that the boundaries between 'childhood' and 'adulthood' had been transgressed. The girl's confusion about how to deal with a world of adult sexuality into which she has been thrown prematurely also speaks of her difficulty in knowing how to locate herself appropriately within received notions of childhood and adulthood. Irrespective of whether we take the girl to be an ingenuous victim of abuse, a desperate exploiter of adult concerns, or even a precocious Lolita, she still comes

across as a child who has been robbed of her 'childhood,' and betrayed by the adults who should have been protecting her innocence. Even in the version of the events in which the girl said that she had made up the allegations, she still comes across as a victim, not because of any specific evidence refuting other interpretations but because she is seen as a child. If she is not a victim of the older man, then she is a victim of television, which allegedly filled her mind with images and ideas which she was ill-equipped to understand and cope with.

The fact that the girl in this case identified television as the source of her apparently precocious knowledge of adult sexual behaviour raises serious questions about how young children are coping with the type of knowledge and information to which they are daily exposed by the media. According to some writers, television has become an important sex educator for two major reasons: (i) its portrayals of sexuality are frequent, consistent, and they are usually assumed to be realistic by young people; (ii) there is a lack of alternative sources for learning about sexual behaviour (see Strasburger, 1995: 38-45; and Roberts, 1982). As one group of US researchers put it, 'depictions of human sexuality are being consumed in reasonably large quantities [...] but useful and informative messages are not being conveyed to many young people' (Buerkel-Rothfuss *et al.*, 1993:113). This has become more marked at a time when the boundaries of what is acceptable television fare have been pushed back considerably.

A number of TV content analyses indicate that this pushing of boundaries is indeed incremental. The 1997 annual Monitoring Report published by the British Broadcasting Standards Commission noted that there had been an increase in the inclusion of sexual scenes in 'soaps', confirming the continuation of a trend in popular TV programmes which had been identified in earlier studies. One such study, for instance, had analysed portrayals of sexual behaviours on prime time television programmes in the US in 1987, and compared these with findings from an identical study in 1979, and found a generally higher rate of sexual behaviours per hour in 1987 (Lowry and Toules, 1988). That study had also found that over the period under scrutiny there had been a substantial increase in the portrayal of sex between unmarried persons, with few attendant consequences. According to Gunter (1995: 105), television provides young viewers with frequent lessons on how to look and act 'sexy,' while 'prime time dramas and movies feature explicit portrayals of sex; magazine and talk shows feature intimate conversations about impotence and orgasms; situation comedies are filled with sexual innuendo and suggestiveness.' As a result, and in the absence of alternative sources of information, 'the sexual lessons young viewers derive from television foster an inaccurate image of sex that can lead to unrealistic expectations, frustration and dissatisfaction' (Gunter, 1995: 111, citing studies by Baran, 1976a, 1976b, and by Fernandez-Collado *et al.*, 1978).

Gunter's account, like many discussions of children and the media, reflects more fundamental assumptions about the nature of childhood, which often appear to incorporate an image of 'the child' as somehow antedating the arrival of (or exposure to) television. But the definition of what it means to be a child has been subject to a considerable amount of social and historical variation (see Ariès, 1960; James, 1993). Indeed, it can be argued that the fifty-odd years of concern about television's effects on children have helped to give rise to new variations in the definition of childhood — variations which exist only in the abstract or which only find embodiment as the perennially 'childish' other.

Locating the research tradition

One of the main contributions of ethnographic audience research since the 1970s has been its demonstration that media consumption is embedded in the routines, rituals and institutions of everyday life. Several studies have shown how the meanings of the media are inseparable from and negotiated within these public and domestic contexts. Talking about television and the media more generally, therefore, inevitably also involves a social process of defining or positioning oneself and others, and such positioning is part of ongoing definitions and redefinitions of power and social identity. Trying to make sense of how children talk about their experiences of television thus also involves trying to understand how they define themselves and their social relations. Perceptions of and attitudes to differences in social class, gender, age, as well as regional and ethnic identity play a significant role in how children talk about their likes and dislikes, or even what they are willing to own up to when talking about television.

The questions of how children perceive, interact with, and are influenced by television, radio and the media more generally have been hot topics of debate for a very long time. These are questions which usually arouse many strongly held views, emotions and preconceptions. The preconceptions are likely to be deeply ingrained, and often not necessarily thought out logically. Television is so familiar to all of us: we not only all watch it, but most of us have also watched children watch it and noticed its effects on them (or what we have assumed to be its effects) with varying degrees of concern and condescension. We have also all heard the many stories (usually avidly reported by the media themselves) about 'copy-cat' crimes and other appalling things happening while children, young adults and immature moral defectives were allegedly under the influence of the demon tube (see Murdoch, 1997; Petley, 1997; Hill, 1997).

Popular notions of how screen portrayals of sex or violence might influence or affect viewers assume that the medium (television, most often) has the power

to change young people's attitudes, perceptions, moods, inhibitions or feelings, and in some cases even to trigger or stimulate violent action or action which imitates what is seen. For all their insistence on the primacy of common sense in this sphere, many of these assertions about the power of example and imitation are backed by a large array of data and reports of experimental studies conducted by adherents of various factions of learning and social learning theory in the social sciences. These were studies which set out to empirically test cause and effect connections between viewing and behaviour or attitudes (most notably in relation to violence and advertising), and which variously claimed to prove such connections through a range of processes — including arousal, imitation, desensitisation, disinhibition, 'mainstreaming', distorting views about conflict resolution (see Lowery and DeFleur, 1995; Newton, 1996). Over recent years, a lot of doubt has been shed on the reliability of most of these studies, particularly in terms of (i) whether their findings could be claimed to apply beyond the specific conditions in which they had been conducted, and, more importantly, (ii) in terms of what have come to be recognised as the theoretically blinkered (positivist) methodologies and assumptions on which many of them were based (see Gunter, 1985; Grixti, 1989). As Graham Murdock (1997:69) uncompromisingly puts it, there was a

> 'circular relationship between empiricist science and common sense thinking [which] was built into academic work on media 'effects' from the outset. The dominant research tradition adopted the definition of the 'problem' already established in popular and political commentary. The result was banal science, which failed to ask awkward questions, to pursue other possible lines of inquiry or to place 'effects' in their social contexts.'

The most influential studies of media audiences developed in recent years have placed their major emphasis on audiences as active interpreters and judges of media products, and on seeking to identify how viewers themselves define and make sense of what they watch. What unites this work is a view of children, not as passive recipients of television messages, but as active interpreters and processors of meaning. This emphasis has led to a movement away from research that concentrates upon whether or not the mass media confirm or disrupt the status quo, and towards a more concerted effort to take account of the symbolic nature of cultural meanings and communication. As Virginia Nightingale (1996: ix) puts it, '[i]nstead of measuring the effects of the media on people's behaviour, the effects were proposed to lie in people's lived relationship with popular texts.'

One key influence in this approach was the social anthropologist Clifford Geertz, particularly his insistence that what we call culture is the web of signification that has been spun by meaningful actions. The analysis of culture,

Geertz insisted, is 'not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (Geertz, 1973: 5). Researchers have thus become more concerned with asking how different types of representations are perceived and interpreted, and how viewer responses relate to the cultural contexts in which they are produced. As Buckingham (1998: 142) puts it, 'viewers are seen here not as unique and coherent individuals, but as sites of conflict, 'points of intersection' between a variety of potentially conflicting discourses, which in turn derive from different social locations and experiences (for example, in terms of social class, gender and ethnicity).' The emphasis, then, is on trying to identify how meaning is constructed through social processes, and this inevitably involves taking account of the power-relationships which characterise them (see Hodge and Tripp, 1986).

To ask and answer questions about the effects of television, we therefore have to see it as part of all the experiences and meaning-making activities of everyday life which we take for granted. Television has become an integral part of family life. It can no longer be thought of as an external or intrusive force which (as one dark version has it) acts as an outside threat to family values, or (in the more optimistic account) has the potential of enhancing those values like a benevolent outsider. The extent to which television has become an inseparable component of family living is reflected in its positioning in the living, eating and sleeping areas of our homes; and in the fact that it is so often on when the family is doing other things. It has become part of the meanings and associations of those areas and activities. To quote Buckingham (1993: 103) again, '[t]elevision is not merely part of the mess of family life, or simply an appliance like a dishwasher or a vacuum cleaner. In considering 'family viewing' we are inevitably considering the operation of social power, both within and beyond the family itself.'

One important methodological implication of this theoretical work is that what young people say when talking about the media cannot be taken at face value. This is so not only because there may be unconscious factors influencing what one is or is not aware of in patterns of media consumption, but also, and just as importantly, because 'media tastes do not simply reflect identity, but are actually constitutive of it' (Seiter, 1999:29).

TV talk as self-defining performance

In a series of publications based on extensive focus-group interviews with British children and their parents, David Buckingham (1993, 1996, 1998) has variously argued that debates about what is or is not appropriate for children to watch on television are often more helpfully understood as debates about exactly how childhood is different from adulthood:

'In all societies, children's lives are largely bounded by the constraints imposed by adults — yet these constraints exist not merely in order to sustain adult power, but also in the name of protecting and preserving a particular definition of childhood. It is perhaps not too surprising, therefore, that the discourses which serve to define and construct 'the child' should be subject to such intense and often contradictory negotiations.' (Buckingham, 1996: 92)

Such negotiations are of course not limited to adults. Children usually see themselves as fitting somewhere along an imagined continuum from infancy to adulthood — as is evidenced by their preoccupation with the definition of what is 'childish' or 'adult,' not least in their discussions of television. Conflicts between parents and children about the appropriateness of watching particular films or programmes can thus be seen as disagreements about where on the continuum the child really belongs. Children's methods of distancing themselves from 'immaturity' and 'childishness' often take the form of claiming that while 'others' fall into such categories and should thus be shielded from exposure to 'adult' TV content, they themselves are more 'mature'. They thus often construct their self-images in opposition to this childish other. It serves as a measure of a perennially less mature stage of development against which they can distance themselves.

Because of this concern, children's talk about adult-oriented material in films and TV often also takes on carnivalesque dimensions. The word 'carnivalesque' is used here in the sense suggested by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1968), in order to draw attention to similarities with situations in which normal behavioural rules and expectations are loosened (as traditionally happens during the days of carnival), giving rise to dramatic changes in behaviour and discursive conventions. What is said and done in carnivalesque situations is largely inspired by the desire to test out how far boundaries can be pushed. Conventional behaviour and habitual social relations are typically reversed: servants take on the role of masters, for instance, or men dress as women; but these unwonted roles are assumed in a manner which is conspicuously exaggerated. What is said and done in such situations thus becomes primarily a self-conscious and deliberate performance — one which while being entertaining and pleasurable, also allows those taking part a chance to experiment with roles which would normally be prohibited. The incongruity and absurdity of the switching of habitual roles are highlighted and underlined, partly to encourage laughter and ridicule, but also (paradoxically) to reinforce the idea that this is only a temporary and outrageous reversal of what the participants and spectators assume to be the 'natural order'.

As indeed is the case with most adults, children and teenagers perceive the watching of television as a relaxing and recreational activity.[3] Because of this, children often approach the watching of television as one area of experience where they can try out roles which they associate with being adult in a relatively safe and 'carnivalesque' fashion. It is not that they believe themselves to be adults, but that, for the purposes of the recreational activity of watching television, they believe themselves to be capable of displaying the characteristics of 'maturity' and lack of 'childishness' which distinguish adults from children. This carnivalesque element is also particularly apparent in the way children talk about adult (and especially sexual) TV content in the presence of peers and adults. It becomes more pronounced in interview situations like those undertaken for this project because the children are being encouraged to speak openly about matters which are not usually considered strictly appropriate in a school setting, and they are being encouraged to do so by an adult figure of authority (the interviewer) who is obviously not enforcing normal restrictions on what can and cannot be said.

Interpreting what children say in this type of context therefore needs to take serious account of the fact that when they speak about a subject like TV and sex, many children frequently slip into performance modes. Their performances can be a form of what looks like frivolous entertainment (involving pleasurable daring or teasing); but they can also assume more earnest and serious dimensions. In the latter case, the aim appears to be that of projecting a preferred image of themselves as a 'non-childish' person who has not been unduly shocked or 'badly influenced' by the experience of watching such fare. It is worth stressing that the term 'performance' is used analogically here, and not in any negative sense. It is certainly not being suggested that children deliberately set out to deceive or to pretend to be something which they know to be untrue. Rather, what they are engaged in is trying to locate themselves within what they perceive as a desirable stage of growth and social relations, and testing out what being in such a location feels like. Thinking of their talk about sex and its representations in the media as a type of performance can help us get a bit closer to identifying what assumptions they make about the 'natural order' when they shape their particular 'performance'.[4]

Children's perceptions of 'adult' ratings

How then do younger children know when a particular programme is inappropriate for them to watch? And what do they take 'suitable for adults only' to mean? The simple answer, of course, is that they know they are not supposed to watch specific programmes or scenes because adults tell them — as when parents block them from watching, or when the television stations issue warnings

or classification guides.[5] When the latter come with an explanation as to why the programme is unsuitable for children (e.g. violence, sexual scenes, offensive language, etc), children might be assumed to take this to mean that it is material so described which constitutes 'adult fare.' One possible consequence of this cognitive ascription of meanings and values might be that a precocious child wanting to act and sound 'adult' might well choose to watch and/or speak about such material in order to gain peer status, or even to outrage adults. Buckingham found this pattern in his interviews with children in Britain — a pattern which he interprets as forming part of ongoing definitions and redefinitions of power and social identity (1993: 75).

Virtually all the children I interviewed in Malta were well aware of the signposting conventions used on television to indicate programme classifications (AO, PG, etc). They were very prompt to describe and explain the signposting systems used by various television networks, and most of the younger children claimed that they usually followed these. When they were asked how they knew whether a programme was suitable for them to watch in situations when signposts were not available, the children often said that they know they shouldn't be watching when there is too much fighting, when it gets too scary, or when there are too many 'rude bits.' What they meant by 'rude bits' often varied in detail, but the term was frequently used to describe portrayals of sexual activity (ranging from couples kissing to intercourse), as well as of nudity or near-nudity. The fact that many of the children knew so much about such programmes, and the ways in which they spoke about them, suggests that in many cases classification guidelines, and children's own realisation that they should not be watching, do not in fact stop them from watching. When this was pointed out to them, they usually gave what they considered logical reasons for not following the guidelines — the ratings are not always reliable, it's OK to watch with your parents, films are not so scary if you watch them during the day and on video, and so on.

This inconsistency is partly attributable to lack of consistency in parental guidance. In my interviews, there were many stories told of one parent finding a programme unsuitable for children to watch, while the other made it obvious that he or she did not; of children hearing teachers condemning material which their parents regularly watched with them; or of children being allowed to watch programmes clearly vetoed by their parents when they stayed with their grandparents or with other relatives or friends. Children often also reported staying up with their parents to watch programmes or films which were clearly designated as adult-rated. More importantly, the fact that most of the children said that they have more than one TV set at home, and that a significant number of them also have their own set in their bedroom, suggests that in many cases parental controls are as difficult to enforce as they are erratic and ill defined.[6]

Many children were clearly curious about adult-rated material, perhaps because of the adult classification, which could also be seen as a signpost demarcating where the realms of 'adulthood' begin and those of childhood and the childish end. A number of older children pointed out that they often watched 'grown-up' programmes and could not see why they were rated 'adults only' — 'they weren't all that violent or scary,' they often insisted. Older children (i.e. ten to fourteen) often also argued that they should be allowed to watch adult-rated material dealing with sex-related issues because such material deals with 'real life' and they need to be prepared for this. They also appeared to get pleasure from watching material which they felt was providing them with information about adult behaviour and themes which might normally be hidden from them. Ironically, the types of programmes which the children I interviewed identified most frequently as fitting this category included soap operas and scandal-mongering chat shows like *Jerry Springer.*

There was also a marked contrast between the idealised images of responsible adulthood which many parents appeared to want their children to become familiar with, and the types of images of less-than-perfect adults which characterise many of the television programmes which were more popular with children. One of the mothers I interviewed said that she does not allow her children to watch *The Simpsons* because it is 'unnatural.' When I asked her to explain, she referred to what she considered bad behaviour by the characters, the fact that they are always arguing, and that they use language which is both reprehensible and grammatically incorrect. Similar sentiments were expressed by a young father who said that he objected to the cartoon programme *Cow and Chicken* because the family situations depicted in it were not ideal and hence gave children 'the wrong ideas' about what family life should be like. A lot of the evidence from what children themselves say suggests that they like such programmes precisely because they break conventions and undermine the idealised world which children often see adults as trying to gull them into believing to be reality. In other words, children like such programmes partly because they assume them to be telling them more about life than their parents are willing to tell. Thus, for a child, being a child means being shielded.

Joshua Meyrowitz has argued that children may love television precisely 'because it extends their horizons of experience, because it expands their awareness of adult behavior and adult roles, and because it keeps them abreast of the latest adult attempts to control them' (1995:45). In his book *No Sense of Place,* Meyrowitz (1985) ascribed this phenomenon to the fact that new media change patterns of access to information. What a young child knew about the world was once determined primarily by where he or she lived and was allowed to go. Parents could mould their young children's upbringing by speaking and reading to them

only about those things they wished them to be exposed to. By making it possible for children to have access to images and ideas over which their parents have little direct control, television has radically changed the patterns in which this happens. In this manner, Meyrowitz argues, television's visual nature and universal presence have broken down many traditional distinctions between adult and child. By exposing children to the very topics that adults are trying to keep from them, television dilutes the authority of grown-ups and limits traditional systems of adult control. It even lets children in on the biggest secret of all, the secret of secrecy: that adults are conspiring to censor their knowledge.

Forceful as Meyrowitz's argument is, it might be more accurate to say that, in a global media context dominated by commercial interests and the demands of advertising, television is not so much expanding children's understanding of adult behaviour and roles as introducing them to a complex and often confusing bricolage of images whose main unifying force is the fact that they are consumption-driven. In contexts where television has become 'primarily a vehicle for broadcasters to sell people to advertisers' (Allen 1992: 18), both programme content and audiences become commodified. Children may assume that programmes are more 'truthful' when they are different from the idealised world which their parents would like them to take on board, and because adults designate such material as 'not suitable for children.' But the fact that the programmes contain material which subverts this ideal does not necessarily mean that they are more realistic, or that they give a more accurate picture of what adult life is all about. Further, as Judith Van Evra (1998: 45) points out, if the increased access to information which television makes possible is coupled with children's greater likelihood of decoding in ways which are different from those used by adults, the potential for misinterpretation is greater. In effect, they are seeing, and trying to interpret, the adult world through children's eyes and with children's cognitive capacities.

Makings childish sense of adult issues

Young children frequently choose not to watch adult-rated material (even when their parents do not actively stop them) because they simply are not interested in it. But this does not mean that they have no access to information about 'adult' issues. In my interviews I came across several instances of younger children piecing information together from fragments culled and integrated from different popular media, and then basing their claim to 'adult' knowledge on this piecemeal information. Here is how one eight-year-old girl responded to my question as to whether she likes listening to radio:

'Sometimes, when the weather is on, I listen to it. And when there's songs, I listen to it, and there's my mother's favourite one. It's about.. it's... well... she.. it's ... drums a lot. And at the end of it, she asks a man or whatever, I don't know what, and she asks, and she asks her, him: 'Will you sleep with me?' At the end... It's like on *In and Out*. They're getting married and he says 'She's gay!' because this man kissed that man.*[Interruptions]* Wait! He was a video man. He, umm, like there's a video man, he takes a video of us... and, and one day, when he was going to get married, he kissed him! The man kissed Kevin Kline!'

This girl is making sense of the words of her mother's favourite pop song through her understanding of another unusual situation which she saw (and apparently found strange enough to remember vividly) in a popular movie. This apparently has been her introduction to the notion and existence of homosexuality. Intertextuality, and an ability to negotiate meanings through cross referencing discrete items from different entertainment-oriented media has become this girl's source of knowledge about this 'adult' subject.

Even when they don't watch the adult-rated programmes themselves, younger children often see trailers or promotional spots for them which frequently contain glimpses of scenes and details calculated to whet the appetite of older viewers. In one interview, a seven-year-old boy gave a very graphic description of scenes which he found very frightening and which came from a film which had been advertised as adult-rated. When I asked him whether he had seen the film, he replied emphatically that he had not, but he had seen 'a piece when they were telling when it would be.' Similarly, a group of eight-year-old girls gave graphic accounts of scenes or issues raised in the *Jerry Springer Show* and other scandal-focussed chat shows which they insisted they had seen 'on adverts' (i.e. promotional slots), rather than watching the whole programme.

This viewing of decontextualised snippets might well be more confusing or upsetting for children precisely because such snippets are by their nature calculated to arouse interest and curiosity. Their aim is frequently to titillate, tantalise or shock. They follow many of the attention-grabbing conventions of advertising, and like adverts they are usually short, sharp and bitsy. They glamorise and sensationalise the everyday and the banal in order to attract viewers and sell products. In cases when the publicity spots are also for programmes clearly marked as unsuitable for children, such advertising conventions may well be encouraging children to develop ideas and images of 'adult' interests and tastes which are at best limited and at worst bizarre. Here is an eight-year-old boy's version of his parents' viewing habits and his reactions to them. He made this

statement as a way of 'showing up' or teasing another boy in his focus group who couldn't think of anything to say when I asked him which TV programmes he disliked:

> 'This one likes to watch those films where they keep kissing *[laughter from other boys]* and where they keep undressing *[laughs]* ... Like my dad! My dad *[laughter from others]* is really into it! .... *[laughter]*. And then my mum keeps watching men undressing ... That's what she likes ... And I no one. I only like to watch *Play Station* and cartoons. I play *Play Station* and watch cartoons....'

Another five-year-old boy described how he usually leaves the room when his parents watch 'adult' films and programmes:

> 'My mother used to watch a lot of films, and my father, but I don't like them, because daddy used to watch war films and things which don't like me, and sometimes he keeps switching [channels] all the time. So I just get up and leave him. And mummy sometimes watches *Jerry Springer*, but I don't like that one. I like Mowgli. I don't know what it's called — those which are scared of animals and everything.'

Some children described how their parents often instruct them to cover their eyes during scenes which they do not wish them to see. A seven-year-old boy delightedly described how he had peeked through his fingers anyway when his father instructed him to do this during the scene in *Titanic* when Leonardo Di Caprio draws Kate Winslett in the nude. An eleven-year-old girl described how when she was younger, her older sister used to cover her (the girl's) eyes whenever there were any 'rude bits'. But most children frequently insisted that they themselves know and can judge for themselves whether something is suitable to watch or not — both for themselves and for younger children. A number in fact also told of how they regulate their younger siblings' viewing because they are anxious for them not to be badly influenced. Here is a seven-year-old girl's description of how she monitors what her four-year-old brother is watching, even when her mother is apparently negligent (according to the girl's criteria, anyway):

> 'My young brother, sometimes, umm, he watches... umm.. bad films, or he likes violent films, and when I come in the room and I see him watching them, I change the channel *[laughs]* to something like... he likes it, girl things.... 'Cause like, my mother was watching something violent, and she went to do something, and she left it on,

and my brother was in the room, playing. Then he saw what's on the telly... I would come in, if I had, and really quick change the channel, 'cause I don't want my brother to start fighting with all his other friends and fight me!'

In the course of another interview with a mixed gender group of five year olds, Dustin and Samantha[7] got into an extended debate with each other about the details of adult scenarios involving marital infidelity or domestic violence as they had seen them portrayed in the Maltese soap opera *Ipokriti*. Both were particularly keen on showing that they had a clear understanding of the issues involved, and their way of talking about these quickly developed into a kind of competition as to who had the better (and hence more 'mature') understanding. Here is a translation of some of the things they said:

> *Dustin:* Me, about *Ipokriti,* well, there was one gir... woman, and the woman, there was a man, her boyfriend... and this one was like a bit cruel, because he used to steal, that was his job. Well, she wore something, and they played a game [.....]
>
> *Samantha:* No. That was a girl, and then there was.... [......]
>
> *Dustin:* Yeah. But there was another woman who wanted to marry him. But he, he told some lie, and instead he married the other one. And then she started to get angry with him, because he didn't marry her.
>
> *Samantha:* He did marry her!
>
> *Dustin:* But, no, but, he told her 'all right', but that was a lie. So then she.. he goes out with another woman...
>
> *Samantha:* No! He didn't marry anyone! That one, she... She was, she was already married. But he, her husband, did not love her. He used to beat her [....]
>
> *Dustin:* And he started hitting her. And so, then, she got him a black eye ... The gir... I mean the woman, had a black eye, her husband had hit her.....
>
> *James:* She had a blow here, didn't she? An then a blow here...
>
> *Samantha:* No, she started... she grabbed a gun and wanted to shoot him. Every day she wanted to shoot him. And then he gave her another beating and then she was going to shoot him again.... and she didn't find him...

As already suggested, one striking aspect is the children's determination to show that they individually understand what is happening in the programme they describe. In this sense, their debate takes on the characteristics of a performative

display of cultural capital, and hence of 'adult status'. In line with Meyrowitz's argument about the blurring of distinctions between adults and children, what these children are engaged in can be read as a claim to an 'adult' role based on their access to and assumed understanding of adult information. There is, of course, something both incongruous and bizarre (carnivalesque) about the fact that these five year-old children are childishly arguing about the details of television portrayals of marital infidelity and domestic violence in order to prove that they are not 'childish'. The incongruity is well captured in Dustin's attempts to sound 'adult' by describing adult themes in childish language (as in his reference to the 'job' of being a thief, or in his allusions to the 'game' played by the characters). That incongruity became more marked in the interview when the other five year-old children in the group (who were not regular watchers of the soap opera) insisted on giving examples of their own 'grown up' tastes and lack of 'childishness'. One described how he used to enjoy *Teletubbies* but is now off it because he doesn't like hearing them talk like babies all the time; another announced that she had seen two scary films (one about dinosaurs, the other about James Bond) but that they weren't scary for her; and a third suddenly announced that her family was going to have a baby!

These children had been told repeatedly that this programme was meant for adult viewing. Their response to this is to talk extensively about its 'adult' aspects in order to show that they have a clear understanding of why it is not suitable for children. Indeed, when I pointed out to them that some teachers had told me that the serial should not be watched by children, they did not challenge this but said they agreed because of all the fighting which it contained. What these and other children who watched the programme regularly appeared to be doing was putting themselves on the side of responsible adults (the teachers) by drawing attention to the parts which they assumed were not good for children, but at the same time somehow exempting themselves from that classification by also proving that they are not themselves 'childish'. The performance in this case involves a more deliberate attempt to take on what the children think of as a 'grown-up' role. They are taking on the role of responsible adults, but their understanding of what this involves is limited and fragmented.

As is the case with adults, children often believe that TV can indeed harm children, but only those who are younger than themselves. Whenever I asked children of different ages whether they thought television could be harmful to children, I was either told that yes it would, if you sat too close to the set, or else that *younger* children than themselves (even the five year olds) were likely to be affected badly because they would want to imitate what they saw. Over and over again I was told the story (or variations of it) of the small boy who tried to imitate Superman by jumping out of the window to his death. Many had stories to tell

about neighbours' children (usually boys) or cousins, or other boys in the school, who were very badly behaved or were always fighting and copying all the violence they saw on TV. There were also frequent tales told of children in other countries (especially Britain and the US) being so badly influenced that they even started killing.

Interestingly, whenever I asked the children I interviewed if they thought that they themselves had ever been influenced in these ways, they always said that they had not. In one interview, I told a group of 5-6 year-olds that older children had told me that children of their age were likely to imitate what they saw on television, especially fighting. Was this true? They all chanted 'No!' What about the stories about children of their age thinking they were Superman and jumping out of the window, then? Was this true? Again they said 'no', and one of them explained that those who say this might get the wrong idea because they see them *playing* at this. Another group of six year-old boys with whom I had just been watching an episode of the cartoon *Spiderman* told me that they enjoy playing at superheroes and wearing Batman and Superman costumes. When I asked whether they had ever thought of 'flying' out of a window on such occasions, they all laughed and said that they wouldn't want to end up in hospital or in a coffin![8]

For these children then, as for their parents, the child who is negatively influenced by television is always 'other.' Because children regularly see themselves excluded from watching particular types of programmes because of their 'child' designation, it is perhaps not surprising that this is one designation which they learn quickly to deflect away from themselves. According to Ellen Seiter (1999: 130), 'people always compare their own television viewing to that of the imagined mass audience, one that is more interested, more duped, more entertained, more gullible than they themselves.' This is a frequently repeated claim (cf. Barker and Petley, 1997). But when the children I interviewed were asked to describe *specific* instances involving 'negative' influence, they did so in ways which indicated that they thought that it was this more vulnerable and more gullible 'other' which was the minority, and that they themselves were really part of a more enlightened mass. They usually assumed that their peers and most children of their age and gender normally shared their advanced stage of enlightenment. In cases when they defended their rights to watch adult-rated programmes, for instance, this was usually done in the form of an assertion of their age group's maturity and ability to deal with such material — not as one individual's claim to being more 'adult' than his peers.

When children rationalise their behaviour in watching programmes which they know to be designated as 'not suitable for children,' it is not so much the designation itself which they contest, but their own ability to judge for themselves

— an ability which they want to be recognised as an indication of their more 'adult' status. As we have seen, they also take on 'adult' roles by shielding their younger siblings from watching material which they themselves designate as 'not suitable for children.' This is their way of lifting themselves up the 'maturity' scale and distancing themselves from 'childishness.' In doing this, they are also helping to perpetuate established assumptions about the parameters distinguishing childhood from adulthood.

Conclusion

I started with an account of how a nine year-old girl's claim that she was sexually abused was allegedly based on what she had seen on television. Can we draw any links between that story and the different ways in which various groups of children have been quoted as talking about adult-oriented material on television and films? One clear similarity lies in the fact that all appear to be examples of children trying to deal with apparently precocious 'adult' knowledge by taking on 'adult' roles in ways which look premature. It is clear that young children are being introduced to some forms of adult-oriented and sexually explicit material at a very early age. It is also clear that, however vigilant many parents are trying to be in order to protect their children from exposure to such fare, the reality is that children will almost inevitably come across at least glimpses or snatches of such material while watching television — e.g. during promotional spots or advertising breaks. For some children, these glimpses can become the building blocks out of which they construct their own bricolage of 'knowledge' about adult themes.

What is also clear is that, partly because the reactions of adults to such fare are often inconsistent, embarrassed or evasive, some children come to use talk about it as a form of cultural capital. They use such talk as a way of being outrageous, or as a way of showing that they are not 'childish'. What they appear to be saying is: 'I know this programme is 'not suitable for children' for the following reasons, and my ability to understand this proves my exemption from that classification!' This is not unlike the comment made by a number of children in relation to scary material when they say: 'it was a scary film, but I wasn't scared!' Another way in which children use talk about sexually related material is as part of what I have described as carnivalesque performances. This is also part of children's way of experimenting with what types of roles they can assume in different social settings, and of testing out the extents to which they will be allowed to assume 'adult' roles and 'adult' social relations. In this sense, children's talk about the adult material they encounter on television can be read as a testing of boundaries,

and an exploration of what types of impact they can have on adults, siblings and peers. This is why they often try to prove that they are not 'childish' by talking about such material in one of several modes — outrageously, carnivalesquely, earnestly.

Buckingham (1996: 80) has suggested that what lies at the root of much popular as well as academic concern about the negative effects of the media on children are dominant constructions of childhood which define children largely in terms of what they lack. This lack manifests itself in 'negative' qualities (vulnerability, ignorance, irrationality) which are also seen as an inability (or unwillingness) to conform to adult norms. By implication, children wanting to distance themselves from the 'childish' therefore stress that they do not share this lack. But the defining of subjectivities through the negation of lack is likely to lead to confusion when adequate alternative concepts of 'adult' remain so fragmented. It is precisely through a willingness and even eagerness to appropriate norms which they understand to be 'adult' that children usually distance themselves from the 'lack' which characterises the 'childish' and 'immature.' As I have suggested, one problem with the ways in which this appropriation takes place in contemporary media cultures is that younger children's understanding of the 'adult' world which they assume their parents to be shielding them from is often pieced together from disjointed glimpses of sensationalised and consumption-oriented material. In this sense, it is on fragmented and disjointed notions of what it means to be an adult that these children are building their own 'adult' subjectivities.

Notes

[1] The Maltese broadcasting landscape is a complex mixture of staunch insularity and 'global village' orientations. Malta's 380,000 inhabitants are keen watchers of television, through which they have access to a increasingly broad range of both local and foreign transmissions. Access to Italian television transmissions has been available in Malta since these were started in the 1950s. A local state owned television station was set up in 1961, and this has been transmitting locally produced programmes in Maltese as well as a large proportion of programmes imported from Britain and the US since then (cf. Barnouw et al. 1989: 226). With the official introduction of pluralism in broadcasting in the early 1990s, the number of local free-to-air television stations has grown from one to five (two stations are owned and run by the two major political parties). This remains complemented by access to a broad range of stations broadcasting from Italy, including the three state run RAI stations, Silvio Berlusconi's three commercial channels, as well as a number of other private or regional networks. A local cable television network has been in operation for about six years, offering up to fifty-two channels from different parts of Europe (including the local and Italian free-to-air channels), but dominated mainly by British and American offerings. A considerable number of people have also invested in satellite dishes which allow them potential access to an even larger range of TV channels from all over the world.

² The project was commissioned by Malta Broadcasting Authority. The book version of the full report (currently in press) is entitled *Young People and the Broadcasting Media: The Maltese Experience* (Grixti, 2000).

³ A 1995 report published by the Department of Canadian Heritage argues that it is common for young children to watch television for relaxation, amusement or just to pass the time, while for adolescents 'watching television is a passive, relaxing activity requiring low concentration, and they are most likely to do it when they are bored or lonely (much the same way adults do)' (Josephson 1995: 17, 27). Similar patterns were recorded in Malta (Grixti, 2000).

⁴ The notion that identity and subjectivity are performative concepts has been extensively theorised by Judith Butler (1990, 1993), who argues that different kinds of performances of masculinity and femininity tend to find legitimation in different cultural contexts. For Butler 'sexuality' and sexual identity are a 'performance' of gender, in that they are based on repeated performances of bodily genres. Gendered bodies, she argues, 'are so many 'styles of the flesh'', and gender is 'both intentional and performative, where *'performative'* suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning' (1990: 139).

⁵ How these guidelines are understood and interpreted by children need not coincide with what is intended by those who issue them of course. The notion that groups or individual viewers decode and restructure meanings in ways which may not be parallel with those intended by the programme's producers lies behind a lot of research into 'the active audience' conducted since the 1980s, and largely inspired by Stuart Hall's 'encoding/decoding' model (Hall, 1980). Interesting applications of this notion can be found in David Morley's 'Nationwide' studies (1980), in Henry Jenkins's account of science fiction fans as 'textual poachers' (Jenkins, 1992), and in the different accounts given by John Fiske (1989) and bell hooks (1992) of the meanings which the pop star Madonna has for her fans.

⁶ 78% of all the children surveyed in Malta said that they have more than one TV set at home. The most likely locations are the living room, parents' bedrooms and children's own or their siblings' bedrooms. Those who said that they regularly watch TV in their own bedrooms tended to belong to the older age groups (10 years and over), and they were also a minority (15% of the total sample). For most, the 'family set' is where they do most of their watching.

⁷ Names have been changed to protect confidentiality. In this interview, Dustin and Samantha described their fathers' occupations as motor mechanic and soldier, and the mothers' as seamstress and cleaner. The other children in the group had described their parents' occupation as nurse, 'computing', and housewife. One child did not know.

⁸ For discussions of children's understanding of distinctions between reality and fantasy see Davies (1997), Hodge and Tripp (1986), Grixti (1998, 2000).

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