Chapter Six

Seducing the Innocent

Childhood and Television in Postwar America

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In August 1991, Pee-wee Herman moved out of his kidvid playhouse into the pornhouse of the nightly news when a mug shot of the children’s idol revealed him to be a fully grown man, a man arrested for exposing himself in an adult movie theater. In true Pee-wee style, the arrest sparked a series of nervous reactions. Psychologists appeared on local newscasts, advising parents on ways to tell children about their TV play-pal, offering tips on how to make youngsters understand the scandal of Pee-wee’s adult desires. All grown up and seemingly all washed up, Pee-wee was axed from the CBS lineup, and Pee-wee dolls and paraphernalia were removed from the shelves of the local Toys R Us.

Pee-wee is a perfect example of what Jacqueline Rose has called the “impossibility” of childhood. As Rose argues in her work on Peter Pan, the child is a cultural construct, a pleasing image that adults need in order to sustain their own identities. Childhood is the difference against which adults define themselves. It is a time of innocence, a time that refers back to a fantasy world where the painful realities and social constraints of adult culture no longer exist. Childhood has less to do with what children experience (since they too are subject to the evils of our social world) than with what adults want to believe. In this regard, the problem with Pee-wee is not so much his indecent exposure, but the fact that he exposes the fantasy of childhood itself. Pee-wee, as a liminal figure somewhere between boy and man, is always on the verge of revealing the fact that children are not the pleasing projection of an adult imagination. He is always threatening to disrupt adult identities by deconstructing the myth of childhood innocence.

The Pee-wee panic is the most recent skirmish in an older battle to define and preserve childhood on television. Since the medium’s rise in the late 1940s, educators, citizen groups, the clergy, and other social organizations have attacked television for its unwelcome effects on children. Graphic violence, suggestive sexuality, and bad behavior of the Bart Simpson kind are continually seen as threats to youngsters, threats that need to be researched and controlled. But, rather than examine television’s effects on children per se, I want to look at the image of the child that television, and the debates around it, have constructed. In order to do so, we need to look at the ways that childhood was first defined in the education reform movement, and then redefined in the postwar period. Critics in the early 1900s looked at television as a threat to child rearing and the family, and thus, other generational roles in the family. To them, television was a form of the literature supporting the psychological thought. Programs that blurred the distinctions between children’s literature and adult television should be considered presenting as much as reading. These programs then served the unmentioned as much as the children.

After World War II, the dominant model of family bliss was all-American suburban family, and it was just that: all-American. The family experienced its first postwar years as a model for the rest of the world, and a model for the “basics” of American life. Women were expected to leave the workforce and stay home with their children, a picture of the ideal family that did not exactly resemble the real families of the postwar period.

The concept of childhood, its symbolic future and its industrialization, has been a concern throughout the history of the country. The agrarian to industrial change in the nineteenth century was a major factor in the industrialization of childhood. This was part of the overall change in the economy, and the change in the family. The idea of childhood as a separate, protected, and ideal time in the life of the individual was a reaction to the harsh realities of industrial society. The idea of childhood as a time of innocence and purity was a way to counteract the harsh realities of industrial society.
order to do so, I will return to the years following World War II, when television was first defined as a "family" medium. In particular, I want to explore the efforts in that period to make distinctions between adult and children's entertainment, and the need, among the adult population, to keep those distinctions intact. Critics in the popular press established a set of taste standards and reception practices for children's programs that were predicated on middle-class ideals for child rearing: ideals that stressed the need to maintain power hierarchies between generations and to keep children innocent of adult secrets. But even if the advice literature suggested such controls and regulations, the actual children's television programs that emerged in this period played with the culturally prescribed distinctions between adults and children. Drawing upon the fantasy figures of children's literature, puppet shows, the circus, movies, and radio programs, these television shows engaged the hearts of children (and often adults as well) by presenting a topsy-turvy world where the lines between young and old were blurred and literally re-presented by clowns, fairies, and cowboys who functioned as modern-day Peter Pans. Indeed, as we shall see, the narrative pleasure these programs offered was based in large part on the transgression of generational roles that were idealized in the child-rearing advice literature of the period.

Presumed Innocent: Childhood and Cultural Power

After World War II, the American public was deluged with images of nuclear family bliss. The ravages of war, it was suggested, could in part be assuaged through the protection of a stable home, a home far removed from the horrors experienced in previous decades. Films such as It's a Wonderful Life (Frank Capra, 1947) showed how family values could insulate individuals from economic hardships and compensate for wartime sacrifices, encouraging Americans to return to the "basics"—Mom, Dad, and the kids. Advertisements for luxury goods told women to leave their wartime jobs and return home, where they could rekindle romance and purchase their share of washing machines and electric blenders. Meanwhile, in social reality, people were marrying at record rates, and the baby boom, which began during the war and lasted through 1964, created a nation of children who became a new symbol of hope. Children, after all, were innocent; they did not know what their parents knew; they hadn't lived through the hardships of the Great Depression and the war, nor did they bear the blame.

The concept of childhood innocence—and the investment in youth as a symbolic future—was, of course, not a new invention. Since the early centuries of industrialization, children have been conceptualized as blank slates upon whom parents "write" their culture. In the American context, this tabula rasa conception of the child gained new force and meanings with the transition from an agrarian to an industrialized society that took place over the course of the nineteenth century. While the agrarian child had been a worker in the farm economy, in the industrial society children were no longer crucial to the family income. This was particularly true for white middle-class households, where the family
income was high enough to sustain a comfortable life without the contribution of a child’s wages. Stripped of immediate ties to the family economy, the white middle-class child emerged as a new sociological category in whom the middle-class adult culture invested new hopes and dreams. By the turn of the century, with falling birthrates and advances in medical science that decreased infant mortality, parents placed increased focus on individual children, regarding them as distinct personalities who needed guidance and moral support. At the same time, the exploitation of child laborers (who came largely from black, immigrant, and working-class families) created a common cause for “child-saving” movements that attempted to combat child abuse by proposing wide-reaching reforms for children of all classes and races.

While this focus on children had humanitarian goals, the particular battles fought over childhood were linked to power struggles in the adult culture. At the core of this concentration on children was a battle between women and men for cultural, social, and political authority. Especially in middle-class households, the focus on children was linked to women’s role in the new economy. Like the child’s, the woman’s place in patriarchal industrial culture was in the home, and her confinement to the domestic sphere was legitimated by the idea that women were morally obliged to be the caretakers and nurturers for their children. The sentimentalization of the mother-child bond worked to secure the middle-class woman’s exclusion from the public sphere. Importantly, however, many women at the time perceived the mother role as an empowering one, and for this reason numerous women turned to mothering as an avenue for increased dominion and prestige.

The “mothers’ movement,” which took institutional form as the National Congress of Mothers in 1897, gave a public voice to women’s issues. Although for some this movement was a complicit embrace of women’s domestic confinement, for others it served as a venue for expressing what we might now call “feminist” values. At a time when “genteel” women were expected to leave matters of civic governance to men, women activists justified their interests in the suffrage struggle and other social reforms by invoking the more acceptable female concerns of motherhood and child welfare. “The Age of Feminism,” one spokeswoman claimed, “is also the age of the child.” As this woman must have understood, the child had become a key to power in the public world. The child, after all, was a link to the future. In a world where Darwin’s theories of evolution were taking hold, the child became a vehicle for changing the course of history, for bettering the world through imparting one’s goals upon a new generation.

Just as women saw the child as a means to their own social power, men began to turn to children as a way to reinvent their authority in the alienating conditions of the industrial world. According to Margaret Marsh, a sentimental vision of childhood was at the core of the “male domesticity” that gained force at the turn of the century. Faced with white-collar desk jobs and increasing feelings of anonymity in the urban world, men were advised to turn toward their homes—and particularly their children—to regain a sense of authority and prestige. Camping trips, family games, and other child-rearing activities promised to re-

fortify fathers, deavor the sins of their parents, and guide their children.

The family was not only a microcosm of society, but also a microcosm of the era’s larger social institutions. The middle-class family of the Gilded Era faced a crisis of generational identity, and as such, the modern family also bore the burden of the administration of the individual and the society of the future.

While in the 1890s efforts to improve the lives of children in the industrial society were focused on low-wage middle-class families, the standards for what constituted a healthy childhood were set for further secularization and materialism of children. The “normal” child, one that fit the middle-class culture, was not the ideal child. What was needed was the child’s proper upbringing. The child was to be educated, as the boys were, for a place in the industrial society, not for a traditional role in a domesticated family.

This redefinition of the child decreased the status of women, though the goals of the scientists and educators were to raise the social standing of men. Through training, women and men were seen as separate, distinct, and institutionalized.

By the turn of the century, the child was the mother; not only was she expected to produce the wisdom of scientific education, but also to develop venues as
fortify men's diminishing power in public life. Again, at the heart of this endeavor was the notion that children were innocent creatures who needed guidance into a world that they would help transform.

This image of children—as both innocents and arbiters of progress—was not only at the center of power struggles at home; it also served to legitimate the institutional power of scientists, policy-makers, and media experts who turned their attention to children's welfare. Policy reform movements of the Progressive Era fashioned an image of the child as the means to modernization: as a new generation, children linked the past with the future, tradition with progress. As such, the child was no longer simply the responsibility of the private family, but also a prime concern of public agencies. In 1912, the federal government gave official credence to this logic by establishing the Children's Bureau as an official administration for overseeing the care of the young. The twentieth century thus emerged as the "century of the child," an era in which children became discrete individuals who, with the proper socialization, would carry the nation into the future?

While social reform and public institutions were based on humanitarian efforts, they often worked to diminish the regional, class, ethnic, and racial diversity of family life by disseminating an American "norm" based largely on white, middle-class values and life experiences. By 1915, the emphasis on creating standards for child rearing changed from reform per se to scientific investigation of what constituted the "normal" child, and such investigations became the basis for further social policy. In both its reform and investigatory modes, the child-saving movement was a bedrock for a new organization of childhood experiences: the rise of public schools and decline of child labor ensured that the "normal" child would be an individual educated according to the standards of the dominant class, race, and sex (that is, according to white, patriarchal, middle-class curricula). In addition, the child-saving movement set out to regulate children's play: the rise of municipal playgrounds and national organizations such as the Boy Scouts (1910) and Girl Scouts (1912) helped institutionalize ideas about what constituted children's appropriate use of leisure time.

This normalization of childhood experience and formation of standards for child development were promoted by a stream of media experts who disseminated professional advice. In their book on the history of expert advice to women, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English have shown how the original goals of the mothers' movement were co-opted by a stream of professional scientists who spoke through the venues of women's media to teach women how to raise their young. Rather than finding increased authority through child rearing, women were repositioned as consumers of information that only scientists and institutions of higher education could produce.

By the 1920s, then, child rearing was no longer seen as a natural instinct of the mother; rather, it was a professional skill that women had to learn by heeding the wisdom of (mostly male) professionals. Women were confronted with a host of scientific advice from "experts" who spoke to them through such popular venues as women's magazines and radio shows. At the heart of this advice was
the idea that children were pliable, innocent creatures who needed to be guided by adults. It was the adult's responsibility to generate moral values in the young by guarding the gates to knowledge. By doing out adult secrets only at the proper stages in child development, parents could ensure that children would carry the torch of progress for future generations. A mistake in this regard, the experts warned, could prove fatal—not only for the individual child, but for the moral character of the entire nation. And it is in the context of this moral discourse on knowledge and cultural power that the debates on television should be viewed.

Television and the Gates to Knowledge

As the above brief sketch suggests, childhood is something that adults attempt to maintain through various systems of governance, surveillance, and prescriptive science. And while the protection of children appears to be a consequence of "natural" instinct, the way in which our social system goes about this task is also a function of particular material conditions, ideological concerns, and struggles over social and political power. Childhood, then, historically has been an unstable category, one that must be regulated and controlled constantly. Childhood—or at least the image of the innocent youth to which this category refers—can exist only through a certain disciplinary power that, as Michel Foucault has shown, operates to regulate knowledge. Adulthood brings with it authority, and even more a civic duty, to control the dissemination of information about the world. And childhood—as a moment of purity and innocence—exists only so long as the young are protected from certain types of knowledge.

Given this, it is not surprising that mass media typically have been viewed with trepidation by the adult culture. Be it the 1920s movie matinee or the contemporary video game, mass media have been seen as a threatening force that circulates forbidden secrets to children, and that does so in ways that parents and even the state cannot fully control. Worse still, parents may not even know how and where their children have acquired this information. With the mass, commercial dissemination of ideas, the parent is, so to speak, left out of the mediation loop, and the child becomes the direct addressee of the message. Perhaps for this reason, the history of children's involvement with mass media has been marked by a deep concern on the part of adult groups to monitor their entertainment and survey their pleasure. From Anthony Comstock's crusade against dime novels to the more liberal approach of matinee mothers who chaperoned children at the movies, the adult culture has continually tried to filter the knowledge that mass media transmit to the young.

After World War II, this legacy of child saving, and the skepticism about mass media that it presupposed, was taken to its logical extreme when local, state, and federal governments focused with unparalleled concern on the figure of the "juvenile delinquent." Although it is by no means certain that actual incidents of juvenile crimes multiplied after the war, it is clear that law enforcement agencies began to organize in earnest for federal funding. Controlled by crimes of violence, television took a prominent role in the new wave of Senatorial hearings in the 1960s. Martin J. Spiegel (in 1946) who, with his two friends, actually decided to create and run a new television show, by reversing this very fact that television was good for children.

Juvenile delinquency—its causes—and the splintering of disciplinary forces that accompanied the behavior. Experiences caused by the threat of violence to the young. The school, the toughness, the mutual respect, the scientific emphasis, the importance of the values of mothers and fathers, the way one spends the free time, the way one is told, the way one is thought to be the turn of the century, the way television provided new positive images of the increasing living standards. As Esquire and other family life magazines turn to the actualities of the A.D. life, the advice was to the young man to assert his independence, Failure to follow the collective.

In the 1960s, a concern as to whether the society that promoted the "American Dream" was often called. One need read no further: "The events on the content on television are no different from South Carolina."

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began to police criminal youth in more rigorous ways. In the late 1940s, the federal government established the Continuing Committee on the Prevention and Control of Delinquency, and law enforcers began to count instances of youth crimes more thoroughly than ever before. It was also at this time that the Senate took a profound interest in juvenile delinquency, and in 1952, under the auspices of Senator Estes Kefauver, began a series of investigations that continued into the 1960s. Meanwhile, women’s magazines and child psychologists such as Dr. Benjamin Spock (whose Common Sense Book of Baby and Childcare was first published in 1946) advised mothers how to prevent their children from becoming antisocial and emotionally impaired. Although it is hard to determine how many parents actually followed the experts’ advice, the popularity of this literature (for example, by 1952 Spock’s book had sold more than four million copies), attests to the fact that people were eager to hear what the experts had to say.

Juvenile delinquency was blamed primarily on two separate but related causes—a bad family life and mass media. According to the popular wisdom, the splintering of families during the war left children vulnerable to outside forces that encouraged the development of immoral habits and criminal behavior. Experts argued that the rise in juvenile crimes during the war was largely caused by working mothers who did not properly devote their energies to their young. Thus, as in the past, the mother-child bond served to justify the idea that women’s place was in the home. Indeed, at a time when the female labor force was being told to relinquish their jobs to returning GIs, the mass media (and the scientific experts who spoke through these venues) promoted a romantic ideal of motherhood that must have helped to encourage middle-class women to spend the lion’s share of their energies on domestic concerns. Then, too, men were told to invest more concern in family life. Like the male domesticity at the turn of the century, this postwar version of the child-centered family provided men with a conduit to power that promised to compensate for their increasing loss of authority in the bureaucratic corporate world. Magazines such as Esquire and Popular Science told men to take renewed interest in all facets of family life, particularly those that involved family fun and leisure (as opposed to the actual work women performed as housekeepers and mothers). Whether the advice was aimed at men or women, the child emerged as a terrain on which to assert adult power, and the parent in turn relied on the experts’ wisdom. Failure to follow this advice could result in “problem” children or, worse still, criminals.

In the advice literature of the period, mass media became a central focus of concern as the experts told parents how to control and regulate media in ways that promoted family values. As a domestic medium that brought the outside world directly into the home, television was at once ally and enemy. Television was often considered to have beneficial effects because it would bring the family together for recreation. In 1952, when the House of Representatives held hearings on the content of radio and television programs, government officials speculated that television was a necessity for family bliss. Representative Joseph Byrson from South Carolina admitted:
My two younger children spent much of their time watching the neighbor's television. In a year or two, when my youngest son had graduated from a local junior high school, he wanted to go away to school. I believe, if I had purchased a television set at that time, he would have finished high school here in Washington.\(^7\)

Similar sentiments were expressed in audience research of the day. In *The Age of Television* (1956), Leo Bogart summarized a wide range of audience studies that showed many Americans believed television would revive domestic life. Drawing upon these findings, Bogart concluded that social scientific surveys "agree completely that television has had the effect of keeping the family at home more than formerly."\(^6\) The respondents in studies around the country testified to the particular ways that television enhanced their family life. In a 1950 study of families from Evanston, Illinois, one parent claimed that television "has given the children a happier home where they can laugh," while another admitted, "My two 16-year-olds like to stay home now. I'm so glad, as I would not know where they were otherwise."\(^7\)

Popular magazines publicized, and perhaps encouraged, such sentiments by advising parents on ways to use television as a tool for family cohesion. In 1948, *Parents Magazine* (which generally took a favorable attitude toward television) published the advice of April Ella Coded, who claimed that television repaired the damage radio had done in her home:

Our family is rather closely knit, anyhow, yet with practically every room having a radio, it was not uncommon for all to scatter to enjoy particular programs. With the one television set, our family is brought together as a unit for a while after dinner.

The following year, another author for *Parents Magazine* claimed, "All the mothers I have talked to are enthusiastic about television for their children. Certainly it has brought back the family circle in the living room." And in 1955 *Better Homes and Gardens* published a readership survey in which parents praised television's ability to unify the family.\(^8\)

Even while critics praised television as a source of domestic unity and benevolent socialization, they also worried about its harmful effects, particularly its dissemination of debased knowledge and its related encouragement of passive minds and bodies. In 1951, *Better Homes and Gardens* complained that the medium's "synthetic entertainment" produced a child who was "glued to television."\(^9\) Worse still, this new addiction would reverse good habits of hygiene, nutrition, and decorum, causing physical, mental, and social disorders. A cartoon in a 1950 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* suggests a typical scenario. The magazine showed a little girl slumped on an ottoman and suffering from a new disease called "telebugeye." According to the caption, the child was a "pale, weak, stupid looking creature" who grew "bugeyed" from sitting and watching television for too long.\(^10\) Perhaps responding to these concerns, advertisements for television sets depicted children spectators in scenes that associated television with the "higher arts," and some even implied that children would cultivate artistic talents by watching television. In 1951, General Electric showed a little girl, dressed in a tutu, imitating an on-screen ballerina, while Truetime showed a little boy

learning to play the piano by television.\(^11\)

As the population grew and television became more widespread, so did the critical research into its effects. The words of literature and popular magazines inject into the television-viewer stories of suicide, murder, and murder-suicide. A teacher with a television set in the classroom, for example, had a student with a passion for the serial *Perry Mason* take her own life using the show's techniques: she hid a knife behind the television set, stashed it in a drawer, and consumed a sedative. The 1950s saw a proliferation of research on children watching television, with the more positive results that research had shown elsewhere in the popular press. The government of the United States saw this as an opportunity to implement a regulation that would prevent children from watching television, but the courts ruled that the regulation would be unconstitutional. The association of television with juvenile delinquency, and the perceived influence of television on the actions of children, has persisted to this day. As one critic wrote, "It is not necessary to have a statistics is necessary to have a statistics survey to prove that as children. How can we help children on viewers' minds.\(^12\)

The anxieties about television are not new. The fears about its potential to produce negative outcomes for children have been raised in public discourse for decades. While television has certainly changed, many of the concerns raised in the 1950s remain relevant today.
learning to play the saxophone by watching a professional horn player on television.\textsuperscript{21}

As the popular wisdom often suggested, the child's passive addiction to television might itself lead to the opposite effect of increased aggression. According to this logic, television decreased children's intellectual abilities, leaving them vulnerable to its unsavory content. The discussions followed in the wake of critical and social scientific theories of the 1930s and 1940s that suggested mass media inject ideas and behavior into passive individuals. The popular press circulated stories about a six-year-old who asked his father for real bullets because his sister didn't die when he shot her with his toy gun, a seven-year-old who put ground glass in the family's lamb stew, a nine-year-old who proposed killing his teacher with a box of poison chocolates, an eleven-year-old who shot his television set with his B.B. gun, a thirteen-year-old who stabbed her mother with a kitchen knife, and a sixteen-year-old babysitter who strangled a sleeping child to death—all, of course, after witnessing similar murders on television.\textsuperscript{22} In reaction to the popular furor, as early as 1950, the Television Broadcasters' Association hired a public relations firm to write pro-television press releases that emphasized the more positive types of programming television had to offer.\textsuperscript{23} But, as I have shown elsewhere, the controversies grew more heated as grass-roots groups and government officials battled to censor the airwaves.\textsuperscript{24} Even after the National Association of Broadcasters adopted its code in 1952 (a code that included a whole section on children), the debates continued.\textsuperscript{25} In that same year, Representative Ezekiel Gathings of Arkansas spearheaded a House investigation of radio and television programs that presented studies demonstrating television's negative influence on youth.\textsuperscript{26} By 1954, Estes Kefauver's Senate subcommittee hearings on juvenile delinquency were investigating television's relationship to the perceived increase in youth crimes, focusing particularly on the "ideas that spring into the living room for the entertainment of the youth of America, which have to do with crime and with horror, sadism, and sex."\textsuperscript{27} In the face of such criticism, parental control over children's use of this new medium and the knowledge it disseminated emerged as a number-one concern.

\textbf{Mastering the Child}

The anxieties about television's effects on youth were connected to more general fears about its disruption of generational roles, particularly with regard to power struggles over what constituted proper children's entertainment. At the 1952 House hearings, for example, government officials expressed their discomfort with programs that they found offensive, but that delighted the hearts of children. When describing You Asked for It (a half-hour variety format premised on viewers' requests to see various acts), Ezekiel Gathings claimed that while most of the program was "wholesome... something like a vaudeville show," he could not abide one act that featured "a grass-skirted young lady and a thinly clad gentleman dancing the hoochie-cocoochie. They danced to a very lively tune
and shook the shimmy... My children saw that, and I could not get it turned off to save my life.” This problem of controlling children’s program choices was voiced more generally by popular critics, who warned that television might disrupt family unity by inverting the power dynamics between children and adults. According to this logic, the television image had usurped the authority previously held by parents. As television critic John Crosby claimed, “You tell little Oscar to trot off to bed, and you will probably find yourself embroiled in argument. But if Milton Berle tells him to go to bed, off he goes.”

Women’s magazines published articles and cartoons showing how parents might lose dominance over TV-addicted children who refused to eat dinner, go to bed, contribute to family conversations, finish their chores, or do their homework. In 1950, New York Times critic Jack Gould wrote, “Mealtime is an event out of the ordinary for the television parent; for the child it may just be out.” In that same year, a cartoon in Better Homes and Gardens showed parents seated at the dining room table while their children sat in the living room, glued to the television set. Speaking from the point of view of the exasperated mother, the caption read, “All right, that does it! Harry, call up the television store and tell them to send a truck right over!”

Television’s potential inversion of power relationships between child and adult gave way to humorous speculations about the ways in which adults themselves were becoming more like children. In numerous popular comedies of the period, parents—especially fathers—were shown to regress to a childish state after watching too much television. In a 1955 episode of The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet titled “The Pajama Game,” Ozzie Nelson and his sons, Ricky and David, are shown seated before the TV set. The boys are able to do complicated algebra formulas while watching television, and they maintain their general capabilities for industrious behavior. Ozzie, on the other hand, becomes mesmerized by television, and after his wife Harriet has already gone to bed, he decides to read a novelization of the movie he has been watching on television most of the night. The next morning, Ozzie is in a stupor, unable to wake up on schedule. The episode thus humorously inverts the popular fear that television would interfere with children’s activities. Now it is the father who is unable to use the new medium in a responsible, adult way.

In 1954, Finsome Theatre, a filmed anthology drama series, evoked a similar theme in an episode titled “The Grass Is Greener.” Based on the simple life of a farm family, the program begins with the purchase of a television set, a purchase that the father, Bruce, adamantly opposes. Going against Bruce’s wishes, his wife, Irene, makes use of the local retailer’s credit plan and has a television set installed in her home. When Bruce returns home for the evening, he finds himself oddly displaced by the new center of interest as his family sits enthralled by a TV western. When he attempts to get their attention, his son hushes him with a dismissive “Shh,” after which the family resumes its fascination with the television program. Not only does Bruce lose control over his youngsters, but in the next scene, he actually regresses to the behavior of his children when he too finds himself entranced with the new technology.

The most popular episode of Finsome Theatre is “The Birth of Captain Video,” in which Norton becomes obsessed with a mindless electronic contraption, Captain Video. In case the episode Allison had wanted to do a little.” Finally, Norton, in for the night, tersely condensed:

While the events of Finsome Theatre have been presented as the television’s inversion of the usual roles of parents and children, never stated are the parents’ destinies and their relations and children’s power of control. The parents’ how the new medium’s discipline.

Indeed, the themes of Finsome Theatre are the context of the parent. However, in minding parents as writers in the media and educators, the evils of the television are minimized.

At the heart of the debate to keep children from TV is the belief that television reveals the family secrets. In many cases, parents. More generally, television’s effects on society are by giving children.”
himself enthralled by a TV western, slumped in an easy chair, passively addicted to the new medium.

The most explicit and humorous case of infantilization took place in the first episode of The Honeymooners, "TV or Not TV" (1955), when Alice and Ralph Kramden chip in with neighbor Ed Norton to buy a television set. Ralph and Norton become classic couch potatoes, sprawled before the set and enthralled by mindless entertainment. Midway into the teleplay, Ralph sits before the TV set with a smorgasbord of snacks, ready to tune in to a movie. But Norton has other ideas; he wants to watch the children's serial Captain Video. Norton takes off his Captain Video helmet and begins reciting the club member pledge, promising Captain Video to obey his mommy and daddy and drink milk after every meal. In case the sense of male regression is not yet clear enough, at the end of the episode Alice scolds the men, saying, "Stop acting like babies and try to grow up a little." Finally, Ralph and Norton fall asleep before the set and Alice kicks them in for the night covering them with a blanket and shaking her head with motherly condescension.

While the infantilized fathers that such television programs portrayed might have been hyperbolic, they spoke to a more general set of anxieties about television's inversion of the power dynamics between adults and children. Summarizing parents' attitudes toward television, Leo Bogart claimed, "There is a feeling, never stated in so many words, that the set had a power of its own to control the destinies and viewing habits of the audience, and that what it 'does' to parents and children alike is somehow beyond the bounds of any individual set-owner's power of control." In this context, popular media offered solace by showing parents how they could reclaim power in their own homes—if not over the medium, then at least over their children. Television opened up a whole array of disciplinary measures that parents might exert over their youngsters.

Indeed, the bulk of discussions about children and television were offered in the context of mastery. If the machine could control the child, then so could the parent. Here, the language of common sense provided some reassurance by reminding parents that it was they, after all, who were in command. As Jack Gould wrote in 1949, "It takes a human hand to turn on a television set."

But for parents who needed a bit more than just the soothing words of a popular sage, the media ushered in specialists from a wide range of fields: child psychologists, educators, psychiatrists, and broadcasters recommended ways to slay off the evils of the new medium.

At the heart of the advice on children and television was a marked desire to keep childhood as a period distinct from adulthood. Critics of the medium feared that television might abolish such distinctions by making children privy to adult secrets. In 1951, television critic Robert Lewis Shuyan claimed, "Television is the shortest cut yet devised, the most accessible backdoor to the grownup world." More generally, the issue of accessibility became the primary cause for alarm. Television's immediate availability in the home threatened to abolish childhood by giving children equal access to the ideas and values circulated in the adult

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culture. In 1950, Phyllis Cerf, the wife of the publisher of *Parent's Magazine*, claimed that “television, like candy, is wonderful, provided you don’t have too much of it. You can run out of candy, or carefully place it out of your children’s reach, but television, once it has come into your home, can go on and on.” If Cerf addressed the problem of accessibility mostly through fears about the quantity of television that children consumed, others also worried about the quality of messages that it distributed to old and young alike. Television, it was often suggested, failed to discriminate among its audiences; it addressed all family members with the same message. As *Parent's Magazine* claimed in 1952:

A large part of what children see and hear is intended mainly for adult eyes and ears. Of the things that are intended for children, many are unsuitable or questionable. Some people see no problems or dangers in this. “TV keeps the children from underfoot,” they say. Or “TV keeps Billy off the streets. It’s a built-in baby sitter.” But other adults are concerned. “It’s not healthy. All day long it’s machine guns, murder and gangsters. You can’t tell me children don’t get dangerous ideas from TV.”

As such statements imply, television increased parental dilemmas because it undermined their dominion over the kinds of knowledge that their children might acquire.

In the wake of such criticism, popular media advised parents how to protect their young by filtering out television’s undesirable elements. One method of purification came in the form of disciplining the child’s use of television by establishing a schedule. Drawing on cognitive and behavioralist theories of childhood that had been popular since the 1920s, and mixing these with the liberal approach of Dr. Spock, the experts recommended ways for parents to instill healthy viewing habits in their children, advising methods of punishment and reward that would reinforce particular viewing routines that adults deemed appropriate for youngsters.

But even if children adopted “healthy” viewing habits and routines, they still might see programs unsuited for innocent eyes, particularly in the early 1950s, when crime, mystery, and sexually suggestive programs often appeared during early prime-time hours. Thus, experts advised parents on how to establish a canon of wholesome programs. A readership survey in *Better Homes and Gardens* indicated that some parents had, in fact, set standards for appropriate and inappropriate entertainment:

Forty percent of all the parents answering do not approve of some of the programs their children would like to see—chiefly crime, violent mystery or horror, western, and "emotional" programs...

About one-fourth of the parents insist on their children viewing special events on TV. In this category they mention parades, children shows, educational programs, great artists, and theater productions.

In many ways this canon of good and bad TV recalled Victorian notions of ideal family recreation. Overly exciting stimuli threatened to corrupt the child, while educational and morally uplifting programs were socially sanctioned. In the years to come, magazines such as *Reader's Digest* and *Saturday Review* inter-
nalized this canon of wholesome and culturally enriching programs, particularly giving their seal of approval to educational fare such as Ding Dong School and Captain Kangaroo. In all cases, critical judgments were based on adult standards. Indeed, this hierarchy of television programs is symptomatic of the more general efforts to establish an economy of pleasure for children spectators that suited adult concepts of appropriate children’s entertainment.

The idea that fun should promote industrious behavior rather than passive reflection was paramount in critical discussions. According to a 1954 article in Parents Magazine, the best shows are “programs designed for children with understanding of their growth and development, and which give, if possible, some opportunity for participation.” With this assumption in mind, Parents Magazine commended programs with drawing and essay contests, claiming that they promoted active forms of play:

The idea of the drawing program—what used to be called “Chalk Talks” in the old Chautauqua days—promises to become very popular on television. WJZ-TV and its affiliates show Cartoon Teledates, with one artist drawing illustrations for stories told by his companion. On WABD New York’s Small Fry Club, and WTMJ Milwaukee’s Children’s Corner, drawings sent in by children are shown on the screen. And on WCBS-TV there is a program which shows real television originality and inspires creative activity by the young audience: Scrapbook, Jr. Edition; among its features is a cartoon strip beginning a new adventure story, and the children are asked to write in their ideas for an ending; then the winning conclusion is drawn by the artist in another cartoon strip show the following week.

Such programs acted as a Band-Aid cure for the deeper political and economic demands of commercial broadcasting’s one-way communication structure. But, while television critics frequently argued that children’s shows should encourage participatory forms of play, they never demanded that adult programming should elicit these active forms of reception. Perhaps in this sense, adults wished to protect their young from the undemocratic aspects of their one-way commercial broadcast system, even while they accepted that system as the dominant forum for communication.

The critical expectations for children’s television voiced in magazines like Parents tell us more about adult taste standards than they do about what children actually found pleasurable. Indeed, adults seem to have watched the shows supposedly aimed at children. Since children’s shows were often scheduled during late afternoon and early evening hours, adults would have ample occasion to view these programs. Kukla, Fran and Ollie, for example, had a strong appeal for grownups, so much so that when NBC attempted to split it into two fifteen-minute shows in 1951, the network was, in the words of one executive, “swamped” with audience mail from angry adults. Robert G. Pilkington, an insurance underwriter, wrote to the network, complaining:

I have read with interest your general letter sent to me among others in answer to the protests regarding Kukla, Fran and Ollie [sic]. . . .

The biggest reason for the change is obviously the greater revenue that can be
derived from two 15-minute shows, combined with the lack of sponsorship on many stations. Which leads me to inquire, what is the matter with your Sales Department? Regardless of the popular conception that radio and television is directed to the 12-year-old mentality, there is a large enough segment of your viewing audience appreciative of the KFO type show and buying its sponsors' products to warrant a sales effort in its direction. After one program, I went out, simply in appreciation, and immediately bought some of the goods advertised.

Who ever got the idea that Kukla, Fran, and Ollie is a juvenile show? It's an adult program, pure and simple, and contains too many subtleties to be successful completely except with that mind. Maybe your salesman and sponsors overlooked that little detail.5

Mr. Pilkington's acknowledgment of his enjoyment of a children's show is vivid testimony to the paradox at the heart of television's attempts to make distinctions between adults' and children's narrative pleasures. While cultural ideals may have dictated that those pleasures be kept apart, in practice the situation was never so clearcut. Adults seemed to enjoy what children should have liked, and children seemed to like the very things that adults deemed inappropriate juvenile entertainment.

Perhaps for this reason, the importation of adult tastes onto children became the number-one goal in the popular media of the time. As Serena Bathrick has argued, Parents Magazine showed mothers how to be "TV guides" who helped their children develop the right sensibilities.42 In 1954, for example, the magazine claimed:

We can only hope to cultivate good taste in our children by developing good taste in ourselves and helping our children to be sure to see the programs that are good programs.... Parents can accomplish a lot by pointing out sequences of bad taste, by recalling themselves to elements of bad taste, by appreciating aloud or indirectly programs which are in good taste.... as one expert put it, "Children cannot be protected, in life, from exposure to unwholesome influences, but they can be taught how to recognize and deal with them when they are exposed."43

Thus, according to the popular wisdom, by elevating children's taste standards, parents could better regulate the undesirable elements of mass culture. Even if they could not control entirely their children's access to the kinds of messages circulated by television, they could, at least, ensure that children internalized their parents' sensibilities toward program content. Revealingly in this regard, an audience study conducted in Columbus, Ohio, reported that parents found it particularly important to regulate the program choices of pre-and grade-schoolers, but high school students received less parental supervision because "their program tastes apparently are considerably closer to those of their parents."44

This preoccupation with the establishment of taste standards reflected a class bias. Summarizing numerous social scientific studies, Leo Bogart claimed that it was mainly the middle class who feared television's influence on children and that while "people of higher social position, income and education are more critical of existing fare in radio, television and the movies... those at the lower end of the scale generally believed that television was the answer to the maladjustments of children... and were quite uninterested in the evidence to contradict this belief.51

If television did not disrupt children's lives, it would not be worth the notice. If television is not seen as a disruptive force, then the notion that it is "good for" a child must be geologically tasteless.

Thus, while parents may have been discriminating about which children's shows they allowed mainly a result of race or social class, they would not have been so if the notion of the "good for" child was geologically tasteless.

For the 1930s public, according to Gathings, television shows were a children's show because the parents themselves had chosen them. Surveys also reveal that parents' acceptance and that television shows reflected their own cultural inclusion. As Vivian Berke observes, Berle added "...in terms of the juvenile audience ended..." for example, the show that finally received a sponsor, ended in the air.

Thus, other shows, shows that were caught in by the parents and announced for primetime, were largely ignored by the parents and children...

If the audience audience for juvenile shows, the audience that was largely all the parents...
end of the social scale are more ready to accept what is available.” But even if he believed that discriminating taste was a function of class difference, Bogart internalized the elitist preoccupation with canon formation, lending professional credence to the idea that adults should restrict their children’s viewing to what they deemed “respectable” culture. As he suggested:

> If television cannot really be blamed for turning children into criminals or neurotics, this does not imply that it is a wholly healthful influence on the growing child. A much more serious charge is that television, in the worst aspects of its content, helps to perpetuate moral, cultural and social values which are not in accord with the highest ideals of an enlightened democracy. The cowboy film, the detective thriller and the soap opera, so often identified by critics as the epitome of American mass culture, probably do not represent the heritage which Americans at large want to transmit to posterity.⁴⁶

Thus, while Bogart noted that working-class parents did not find a need to discriminate among programs, and that the formation of critical standards was mainly a middle-class pursuit, he nevertheless decided that television programs would not please the value systems of “Americans at large.” Here, as elsewhere, the notion of an enlightened democracy served to justify the hegemony or bourgeois tastes and the imparting of those tastes onto children of all classes.

For their part, children often seemed to have different ideas. Like Senator Gathings’s youngsters who wanted to watch dancers do the “bootchie coochie,” children respondents in audience studies often claimed to prefer programs their parents found unwholesome, especially science fiction serials and westerns. Surveys also indicated that children often liked to watch programs aimed at adults and that “‘parents were often reluctant to admit that their children watched adult shows regularly.’”⁴⁷ Milton Berle’s Texaco Star Theater (which was famous for its inclusion of “off-color” cabaret humor) became so popular with children that Berle adopted the persona of Uncle Miltie, pandering to parents by telling his juvenile audience to obey their elders and go straight to bed when the program ended.⁴⁸ But other programs were unable to bridge the generation gap. When, for example, CBS aired the mystery anthology Suspense, affiliates across the country received letters from concerned parents who wanted the program taken off the air. Attempting to please its adult constituency, one Oklahoma station was caught in the cross fire between parents and children. When the station announced it would not air “horror story” programs before the bedtime hour of 9:00 p.m., it received a letter with the words “We protest!” signed by twenty-two children.⁴⁹

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**The Children’s Hour**

If the adult culture attempted to distinguish children’s entertainment from adult shows, the actual children’s programming that emerged in this period was based largely on the dissolution of age categories. Children’s programs were filled with
liminal characters, characters that existed somewhere in between child and adult, as the shows played with the cultural concepts of childhood that circulated at the time. Indeed, the pleasure encouraged by these programs was rooted in the transgression of taboos and regulations found in the advice literature aimed at adults.

In the TV playhouse, adults functioned for the sole purpose of fulfilling the child’s wish. If in everyday life adults represented rules, knowledge, and the threat of punishment, on television they represented mayhem, entertainment, and prizes. On Howdy Doody (1947-60, NBC), host Buffalo Bob was ambiguously a grownup and a cowboy, who, like Peter Pan, had not abandoned the land of make-believe. Indeed, children’s programs had their own never-never lands—impossible places like “Doodyville,” places that mocked the confines of real domestic space. Then, too, children’s shows set aside the mundane nature of real time by presenting children with the marvelous antics of “Howdy Doody time,” a time in which youngsters need not do their homework, go to bed, or wash behind their ears. In fact, Howdy Doody began with a cartoon depiction of a cuckoo clock—literally going cuckoo—as the hands span feverishly around the dial, signaling the temporary abandonment of the normal schedule for the next thirty minutes of fantastic clowns and puppets.

Johnny Jupiter (1953-54, DuMont and NBC) similarly transported children from the confines of their living room into a magical world. Johnny was a puppet who lived on Jupiter with his pals Reject the Robot and Major Domo. At their outer-space television station, Johnny, Reject, and Major Domo were contacted by earthling Ernest Duckweather, a teenage techno-nerd who invented a magic television set on which he spoke with his Jupiterian pals. Ernest was a 1950s Pee-wee, a liminal figure who straddled the categories of child and adult. And like Pee-wee (although without the campy wink), Ernest suffered from a case of arrested sexual development, underscored in numerous episodes by his disinterest in the advances of his boss’s daughter. Johnny, like other children’s hosts, played with the fantasy of childhood itself, presenting himself as a half boy/half man who defended himself against the constraints and cares of the grownup world.

By blurring the boundaries between adult and child identities, such programs presented a ripe environment through which to address children as consumers. As both authority figures and wish fulfillment, the casts of clowns and cowboys promised children a peek at toys and sweets behind their mothers’ backs. The children’s show was a candy store populated by dream parents who pondered forbidden products. Even more important, these programs taught children the art of persuasion, advising them how to tell their parents about the wondrous items advertised on the show. In a 1958 episode of Howdy Doody, for example, Buffalo Bob chats about Hostess Cupcakes with Howdy, who marvels at the delicious creamy centers. Bob then directly addresses the children at home, telling them to “make sure to tell your mom to put a package of Hostess Cupcakes in your lunch box when you go to school, or ask her to buy some as a special reward sometime during the week.” In this imaginary transaction between Buffalo Bob and the child audience, the parent becomes a functionary through which the child accomplishes consumer goals. Children are taught how to influence

their parents, and their parents are inextricably bound to their children.

Wink marketing is the consumer literature of the postmodern age, the process by which characters were used to develop a shared mythology. In the case of children’s television, this mythology was expressed in stories of adventure, heroism, and drawings. Often, a complete family lived in a cardboard box in front of a window. The family, like the children who drew along with their favorite characters, was a family of commodity and of consumer culture. And in Pittsburgh, the city where the shows were recorded, something was going on that would later become known as the birth of the child as a consumer. The children’s shows used crayons and clay to create this new strain, like the child as consumer, which makes it a comforting thought that the consumer culture exists to serve the child as consumer. A child was drawn to the show; the show was designed for the camera.

I tell this story to illustrate the idea that there is something rotten in the state of Dink. For, as I have written, the problem of the postmodern age is that the postmodernist culture is a culture that no longer recognizes itself. It is a culture that has become the commodity, the commodity which becomes the consumer culture.

Thus, the problem of the postmodern age is the problem of the postmodern consumer culture. Where is the Dink? His article is a metafictional exploration of the postmodern consumer culture. Where is the Dink? His article is a metafictional exploration of the postmodern consumer culture.
their parents’ product choices, and in the process the child’s narrative pleasure is inextricably intertwined with the pleasure of consumption.

Winky Dink and You, (1953–57, CBS), a cult classic of 1950s TV, took this consumer logic to its extreme by making the program completely dependent upon the product it advertised. Winky was a flatty drawn Tinkerbell-like cartoon character who cohosted the show with the real-life Jack Barry. Although by current standards extremely low-tech in nature, the program was premised on an interactive use of television technology. Winky Dink offered children the possibility of drawing on the television set through the purchase of a special Winky Dink kit, complete with rub-off crayons, an erasing cloth, and the all-important “magic window,” a piece of tinted plastic that, when sufficiently rubbed by the child’s hands, stuck to the television screen. With this apparatus in place, the child could draw alongside the animation on the screen, perhaps filling in features on cartoon characters’ faces or creating story narratives by drawing in the necessary scenery and props. In a 1953 episode, Jack Barry showed children how the whole thing worked by picking up a remote feed from the home of Helen, a little girl in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Helen demonstrated how the kit worked, and Barry reminded children (and no doubt their parents as well) of the prosocial skills that would be learned on the show. After Helen erected her plastic screen, Barry told the children at home to “share your Winky Dink kits” by evenly dividing the crayons. And, at a time when television was considered a major cause of eyestrain, Barry told the audience to “notice how that plastic is lightly tinted. That makes it much easier to watch our television show, even for your parents.”

The consumer message of the show was thus tempered with the rhetoric of public service. In the middle commercial, this mixture of commercialism and goodwill was drawn out in a long speech delivered by Barry, who looked directly into the camera to address the children at home:

I tell you what, if you had your Winky Dink kits and played along with us, well, there’s no reason for any of us to miss all the fun. It’s so easy to get your Winky Dink kits. And, you know something, the fun starts as soon as you get your kit. Of course, you can watch the program without a kit, but you can’t really be a part of the program without ’em. And you can’t have the fun that the other boys and girls who have their Winky Dink kits do have. Now, I know you’re just used to watching television shows and you just sit back and watch all the other shows, but not this show. This show you really get a chance to be a part of ‘cause it’s different. You get a chance at home to play right along with us, and what you at home draw actually becomes part of the program. But to be a part of the show, you must have one of our Winky Dink kits [Barry holds up the kit and describes its contents].

Thus, the product pitch worked by drawing on the popular fears that television made children passive. Like the “chalk talks” applauded by Parents Magazine, Winky Dink encouraged participation from children, but participation came at a price. Buying the Winky Dink kit, the ad suggested, would ensure that children took an active part in the communication process, and with this prosocial message intact, Barry went on to pander to the child audience in the most crass and unabashed way. Still holding up the kit, he exclaimed:
Now boys and girls you must have this kit, and here's how you get it. Mark down the address, will you? To get this Winky Dink kit for yourself or for your friends, you send fifty cents [Barry holds up a sign with fifty cents boldly printed on it]. Boys and girls, send fifty cents, got that? Fifty cents, with your name and address [Barry holds up a sign that says to print your name and address] and send it to Winky Dink, Box 5, New York 19, New York [Barry holds up a sign with the address]. Now, I do hope you'll all get your Winky Dink kit right away because you really can't have as much fun as if you have a kit.

Programs such as Howdy Doody and Winky Dink were products of a world in which the age limits of consumption were shifting, a world in which parents had less and less control over the kinds of objects children would desire and potentially own. Just as Jack Barry saw little need to worry where children would possibly get the fifty cents needed to purchase his kit, other industrialists were increasingly appealing directly to children, assuming that they would either buy products on their own or use their powers of persuasion to coax parents into purchasing them. In the postwar years, teenagers, who often held after school jobs, became a viable market for low-ticket consumer items such as clothing, makeup, and records. And even in the case of high-ticket items—especially household commodities—advertisers discovered that tapping into the new consumer power of children and teens was also a way to urge adults to buy more. An editor of Home Furnishings (the furniture retailers' trade journal) claimed, “The younger generation from one to twenty influences the entire home furnishings industry.”

Children especially were considered to have “nagging” power in family purchases of television sets. Surveys indicated that families with children tended to buy televisions more than childless couples did. Television manufacturers quickly assimilated the new findings into their sales techniques. As early as 1948, the industry trade journal Advertising and Selling reported that the manager of public relations and advertising at the manufacturing company Stromberg-Carlson, “quoted a survey... indicating that children not only exert a tremendous amount of influence in the selection and purchase of television receivers but that they are, in fact, television’s most enthusiastic audience.” Basing their advertisements on such surveys, manufacturers and retailers formulated strategies by which to convince parents to buy products for the sake of their children. In 1950, the American Television Dealers and Manufacturers ran nationwide newspaper advertisements that played on parental guilt. The first ad in the series had a headline that read, “Your daughter won’t ever tell you the humiliation she’s felt in begging those precious hours of television from a neighbor.” Forlorn children were pictured on top of the layout, and parents were shown how television could raise their youngsters’ spirits. This particular case is especially interesting because it shows that there are indeed limits to which advertisers can go before a certain degree of sales resistance takes place. Outraged by the advertisement, parents, educators, and clergymen complained to their newspapers about its manipulative tone. In addition, the Family Service Association of America
called it a “cruel pressure to apply against millions of parents” who could not afford television sets.  

Not surprisingly, the area of consumerism remains one of the most heatedly debated in the discourse on television and youth. Commercials induct the child into the market, and market values appear to be in direct opposition to conceptions of childhood innocence. Yet, once again, while adults historically have argued against the commercialization of children’s television, they too have been seduced by its consumer fantasies. Indeed, since the 1950s, children’s programs have found ways to draw adults into the joys of spending money by offering them a ticket to a nostalgic return to a childhood dreamland of make-believe.

The appearance of The Mickey Mouse Club in the 1955 fall season is an emblematic example. This show and its 1954 predecessor, Disneyland, were created as one big advertisement for Walt Disney’s theme park in Anaheim, California. Despite the blatant commercialism of Disneyland, it won a Peabody Award for its educational value and an Emmy for best adventure series, and was among the top ten programs in the ratings. Not surprisingly, the program’s success paved the way for a new surge of sponsor interest in other children’s fare. In its first season, The Mickey Mouse Club was similarly successful, although some television critics were initially wary of its Disney product endorsements and its over-abundance of commercials (critic Jack Gould was outraged that the premier episode had about twenty ads, one of which cut off a Pluto cartoon). Still, its syrupy dose of prosocial themes—respect for elders, family values, courage—must have tempered adult fears about the commercial aspects of the show.

Like other children’s programs, The Mickey Mouse Club contained a set of liminal characters that played with culturally prescribed generational roles. The opening credits began with Mickey Mouse himself, who then introduced the Mouseketeers, an odd blend of children—from toddlers to teens—and grown-ups Roy and Jimmy, who dressed just like the children in mouse ears and T-shirts. And like Howdy Doody, The Mickey Mouse Club existed in a kind of never-never land. But it took the concept one step further by promising children that its never-never land could in fact become a virtual reality, a real place where children might venture—that is, if they could persuade their parents to take them to Southern California. Of course, as with other Disney products, the theme park was predicated on the pleasure of playing with the culturally prescribed distinctions between child and adult. Disneyland was a place where adults could rediscover the joys of youth in fantasy replicas of narrative spaces (like Frontierland, Fantasyland, and Tomorrowland), which they once traversed in storybooks and movies. The roller coasters and teacup rides offered adults the chance to shake up their conceptions of normal time and space, to look at the world from the perspective of childhood exhilaration and curiosity. Indeed, the fact that Disneyland was promoted as a place of family amusement reminds us that the liminality of children’s entertainment is often just as appealing to adults as it is to children. Moreover, as the biggest tourist attraction of the 1950s, Disneyland
was dramatic proof that despite the arguments against it, children's commercial entertainment could be marketed as wholesome fun for the entire family.57

The End of the Innocence?

The controversy that surrounded children's television in the 1950s, and the assumption that children's viewing pleasures should be monitored by adults, continued into the next decades with increased force. In 1961, one of the first and most influential book-length studies of the subject, *Television in the Lives of Our Children*, reported that by the sixth grade children spent almost as much time watching television as they did in school. Moreover, authors Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B. Parker speculated that television might contribute to "premature aging" by encouraging American youth to grow up too fast. The boundaries between children and adults might blur, particularly because, as the authors noted, children often watched programs that were made for an adult audience.58

As the 1960s came to a close, critics who grew up in the turmoil of the new youth movement began to blame television for the perceived generation gap between themselves and their parents. In his 1973 book *No Peace, No Place: Excavations along the Generational Fault*, Jeff Greenfield claimed that television threatened to abolish childhood innocence because it allowed youngsters to "eavesdrop" on adult secrets. Similarly, in *Looking Back: A Chronicle of Growing Old in the Sixties*, Joyce Maynard said that television played a major role in her premature sophistication.59 And more recently, in *No Sense of Place*, Joshua Meyrowitz has claimed that television contributes to a "blurring of childhood and adulthood." According to Meyrowitz, television not only exposes "many adult secrets to children," it also "reveals the 'secret of secrecy.'" For example, Meyrowitz argues that by broadcasting warnings about programs that children are not supposed to see, television lets young viewers know exactly what is being forbidden. Television, in other words, makes children privy to the fact that adults are hiding knowledge from them.60

While debates about children and television continue to base themselves around the ideal of childhood innocence, the industrial producers of children's culture have learned more sophisticated ways to tap into children's enjoyment of entertainment that adults deem inappropriate. The 1950s debates over comics and television did not destroy the popularity of magazines such as *Mad*, nor did they diminish the next generation's penchant for the perverse pleasures of Ugly Stickers and Wacky Packs. The recent merchandising of "Toxic High" stickers, a set of Topps trading cards based on the perverse, violent, and authority-buckling antics at a typical high school, is a case in point. Cartoonist Mark Newgarden (also the brains behind the popular Garbage Pail Kids) admits gleefully, "We did a focus test where we showed it to kids behind one of those two-way mirrors, and the kids went wild for it. And then we showed it to their mothers, and their mothers were aghast."61 As this "tasteless test" suggests, the strength of a piece of entertainment only grows out of its expected disappearance.

But why is this case? Why is it that television has always been perceived as something that accords with adulthood? According to Mannheim, these conventions have their origins in the VCR. "The VCR's inventiveness in meaningful such use, if not invention itself, is shown in its inherent ability to distance the viewer from the original. Its generation as a reproduction is shown as a re-generation with an apparent shift in the linear causation of the viewer's path of meaning. It can't just be the same thing."62

Like the VCR, television is about reconstruction, about making sense of what is the original source. But, instead of being a story of one generation to the next, the process of reconstruction is controlled. Television not only makes basic changes in the meaning of the event (without ever losing the sense of the event as a whole), it has a potential to reconstruct it. Instead of being perceived as a "lost alibi," the broadcast becomes an implicit chronology. The experience of television, thus, is often a sense of reconstruction, of a "re-generating piece of work."

of a child’s toy is now predictable in part by the degree to which the parent disapproves.

Broadcast television has emerged, perhaps, as a more “protected” arena. At the time of this writing, the reform group Action for Children’s Television (ACT) has discontinued its two-decade attempt to raise children’s program standards. According to the organization’s founder, Peggy Charin, ACT’s work has been accomplished with the recent passing of the Children’s Television Act, which mandates broadcasters’ responsibility to young viewers. Ironically, however, these gains come at a time when more and more children are finding their entertainment outside the auspices of broadcast television. Now, cable television, VCRs, and Nintendo games offer youngsters alternative venues for pleasure, venues about which critics are more and more anxious. And, as in the 1950s, such anxieties revolve around the central problem of keeping childhood separate from adulthood. In an episode of The Simpsons, for example, precocious son Bart is shown charging his school pals twenty-five cents to watch the Playboy channel on cable TV, while in another episode he beats his father Homer at a video game, to the degree that Homer is reduced to a child, yelling and screaming because he can’t score points.

Like the child-saving movement in the early part of this century, the anxieties about children as victims of television and the urge to reform the commercial nature and degrading content of electronic media often have humanitarian goals. But, as in the past, this humanitarian urge is no more than a Band-Aid cure for the public’s larger disempowerment and alienation from the channels of expression in our country. In fact, since the inception of television as a privately controlled commercial medium, the American public has rarely argued against its basic corporate structure. Little was said about the fact that television technology (with its inherent capability for two-way communication) was being developed as a one-way medium used mostly for the financial gain of major corporations. Instead, the only widespread challenge to commercialization of the airwaves has taken place in the name of the child. The child in this configuration becomes an alibi and a conduit for larger issues regarding the commercialization of communication and the price tags attached to free speech on our country’s mass media. The discourse of victimization that surrounds the child viewer might, in this sense, usefully be renamed and reinvestigated as a discourse of power through which adults express their own disenfranchisement from our nation’s dominant mode of communication.

NOTES


2. It should be noted that many films of this period—particularly film noir and family melodrama—depicted dysfunctional families, showing, for instance, how infidelity, missing parents, overprotective mothers, or henpecked fathers could cause destruction for
child and parent alike. See, for example, Rebel without a Cause (Nicholas Raye, 1955) or Mildred Pierce (Michael Curtiz, 1945).

3. In the early 1920s, the median marriage age ranged between twenty and twenty-one; the average family started having children in the beginning of the second year of marriage and had three to four children. For birrates, see Rochelle Gatlin, American Women since 1945 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 51, 55, 61; Susan M. Hartmann, American Women in the 1940s: The Home Front and Beyond (Boston: Twayne, 1992), 25, 91, 170, 213; Glenna Matthews, "Just a Housewife": The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 265; Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 7, 136–37. On marriage and divorce rates, see Hartmann, American Women in the 1940s, 163–65; Gatlin, American Women since 1945, 51; and Tyler May, Homeward Bound, 6–8, 21, 59, 117, 185.


5. Beatrice Hale, cited in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1978), 194. Also see Ehrenreich and English’s description of the mothers’ movement, 192–96.


7. The phrase “century of the child” was used to describe the twentieth century’s child-centeredness in Arthur W. Calhoun, Social History of the American Family, vol. 3: Since the Civil War (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1939), 131.


9. Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 183–211.

10. The links between power and the regularization of knowledge through discourse runs throughout Foucault’s body of research and methodological works. For a series of interviews with Foucault about these broad interests, see Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

11. For more on this, see Mark West, Children, Culture and Controversy (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1988); Richard deCordova, “Ethnography and Exhibition: The Child Audience, the Hays Office and Saturday Matinees,” Camera Obscura 23 (May 1990): 91–107.

12. For more on this and other aspects of the public concern over juvenile delinquents, see James Gilbert, A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Gilbert shows that while public officials, educators, psychologists, and other “experts” increasingly focused on criminal youth, “the incidence of juvenile crime does not appear to have increased enormously during this period.” Gilbert goes on to show that crime statistics were imprecise and, since the definition of juvenile crime and the policing of it had changed over the course of the century, it is difficult to prove that the postwar period actually witnessed a substantial rise in teenage crimes. Given this, Gilbert argues that the perception of juvenile delinquency in the 1950s was based less on reality than on the way crime was labeled and reported, as well as the general worries about the future direction of American society (pp. 66–71).
13. For more on Spock's popularity and influence, see Charles E. Strickland and Andrew M. Ambrose, "The Changing Worlds of Children, 1945-1963," in American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook, ed. Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Finler (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1985), 538-44. Strickland and Ambrose also point out that while it is impossible to say exactly how many parents actually practiced Spock's teachings, anthropological and psychological studies conducted during the period suggest that many parents, particularly of the middle class, did opt for the more permissive methods of child rearing that Spock advised.

14. For more on how juvenile delinquency was blamed on mass media (especially music and film), see Gilbert, A Cycle of Outrage, 143-95.


16. Leo Bogart, The Age of Television: A Study of Viewing Habits and the Impact of Television on American Life (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1958[1966]), 101. As a cautionary note, I would suggest that in his attempt to present a global, synthetic picture of the television audience, Bogart smooths over the contradictions in the studies he presents. This attempt at global synthesis goes hand in hand with Bogart's view that television audience is a homogenous mass that television programming further erases distinctions. He writes, 'The levelling of social differences is part of the standardization of tastes and interests to which the mass media give expression, and to which they also contribute. The ubiquitous TV antenna is a symbol of people seeking—and getting—the identical message' (p. 7). Through this logic of mass mentalities, Bogart often comes to conclusions that oversimplify the heterogeneity of audience responses in the studies he presents.


19. William Porter, "Is Your Child Glued to TV, Radio, Movies, or Comics?" Better Homes and Gardens, October 1951, 125.


24. For more on early censorship campaigns, see Lynn Spigel, Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

25. The networks also tried to police themselves. As early as 1948, NBC executives considered problems of standards and practices in television. NBC Standards and Practices Bulletin — No. 7: A Report on Television Program Editing and Policy Control, November 1948, NBC Records, Box 157, Folder 7, Wisconsin Center Historical Archives, State Historical Society, Madison. In 1951, NBC became the first network to establish standards for chil-
dren's shows, crime shows, mention of sex on programs, proper costuming, and so on. See NBC Code, 1951. NBC Records, Box 163, Folder 1, Wisconsin Center Historical Archives, State Historical Society, Madison. For a general explanation of the code, see "Catholic Council Plans TV Legion." 63.


30. As Ellen Wartella and Sharon Mazzarella have observed, early social scientific studies suggested that children were not simply using television in place of other media; instead, television was colonizing children’s leisure time more than any other mass cultural form ever had. Social scientists found this "reorganization hypothesis" to be particularly important because it meant that television was changing the nature of children's lives, taking them away from schoolwork, household duties, family conversations, and creative play. Ellen Wartella and Sharon Mazzarella, "A Historical Comparison of Children's Use of Leisure Time," in For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption, ed. Richard Butsch (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 183–85. This reorganization hypothesis was also at the core of early studies conducted by school boards around the country, which showed that television was reducing the amount of time children spent on homework. For early school board activities, see, for example, "TV Also Alarms Cleve. Educators;" Variety, March 22, 1950, 29: "Students Read, Sleep Less;" Variety, April 5, 1950, 38.


33. In the context of Dr. Spock’s popularity, discipline was often a tricky matter. One of the central themes in that book was that parents should avoid conflict to ensure that their home created a democratic environment where children felt they too had a say in family matters. In this regard, much of the disciplinary advice centered on finding ways for different family members to coexist harmoniously with television—even in the face of family squabbles over program choices and viewing duration. As I detail elsewhere, much of the expert advice on television focused on ways to avoid conflict. For example, home magazines showed women how to divide domestic space so that family members of all sexes and generations could watch television separately, without interfering with the activities of others. See chapter 2 in my book, Make Room for TV, and my article, "Television in the Family Circle."
34. Jack Gould, "What Is Television Doing to Us?" New York Times Magazine, June 12, 1949. 7. Popular Science, March 1955, took the logic of human agency to its literal extreme, presenting a "lock-and-key" TV that "won't work until Mama sees fit and turns it on with her key" (p. 110).


41. Robert G. Pillsington, letter to Sylvester L. Weaver, December 17, 1951. NBC Records, Wisconsin Center Historical Archives, State Historical Society, Madison.


43. Goldenson, "Television and Our Children," 78.

44. Freda Postle Koch, Children's Television Habits in the Columbus, Ohio, Area, Television Committee, Franklin County, Ohio Section, White House Conference on Children and Youth, 1952, cited and summarized in Bogart, The Age of Television, 262. Specifically, the study reported that 42 percent of kindergartners to second graders, 47 percent of fourth through eighth graders, and 26 percent of high school students said that they disagreed with parents on program choices. According to Bogart, however, the bulk of children in this study said that parents primarily established schedules for children, rather than restricting content per se (p. 263).

45. Bogart, The Age of Television, 289. In the 1954 Kefauver hearings, similar findings about the relationship between social class and parents' attitudes toward television were made part of the official record. See Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, Hearings, 21-23.

46. The Reverend Everett C. Parker, summarizing findings from the Information Service, Central Department of Research and Survey, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, Parents, Children, and Television: The First Television Generation (New York: n.p., 1954) reprinted and summarized in Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, Hearings, 28. The surveys included in Bogart's account include a 1955 study from the New York Herald Tribune that studied 1,200 schoolchildren; a 1952 and 1955 study by the American Research Bureau of children ages six to sixteen; H. H. Remmers, R. E. Horton and R. E. Maliner, Attitudes of High School Students toward Certain Aspects of Television (Indiana: Purdue University, 1953). These are all summarized in Bogart, The Age of Television, 252-56. Also see the Better Homes and Gardens survey cited above and also summarized in Bogart.

47. For example, in 1952, the American Research Bureau observed that by the age of seven, one child in four had stayed up to watch Berle. Bogart, The Age of Television, 254.


49. In his ethnographic study of children who watch Peacock's Playhouse, Henry Jenkins shows how similar aspects of contemporary programming might appeal to child viewers.
He claims that the ambiguity about Pee-wee's status as boy and man as well as the program's disruption of rule-governed behavior allow young viewers to work through anxieties about the day-to-day power hierarchies between children and adults as well as their own anxieties about becoming adults. See Henry Jenkins, "'Going Bonkers': Children, Play, and Pee-wee," Camera Obscura 17 (May 1988): 269-93.


55. For a discussion of the success of Disneyland, see William Melody, Children's Television: The Economics of Exploitation (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973), 41; for a discussion of critical responses to the premiere episode, including Gould's, see Jerry Bowles, Forever Hold Your Banner High! The Story of the Mickey Mouse Club and What Happened to the Mouseketeers (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973), 16-17. The Mickey Mouse Club went off the air in 1957 and returned in syndication in 1962. Although its ratings did fall in 1966, its cancellation probably had more to do with disputes between Disney and ABC. See Bowles, 23-24.

56. In Forever Hold Your Banner High, Jerry Bowles claims that "part of the show's impact had to do with its really not being a children's show at all but, rather, a show that featured children playing roles of little adults. All the values the show taught—reliability, reverence, bravery, loyalty, good behavior, the icky-sticky grown-up stuff of romantic love—are things adults think kids like to be taught" (p. 21).

57. Disney's success with targeting a dual audience of children and adults was to become major marketing strategy by the next decade. Prime-time programs such as The Flintstones and Batman self-consciously aimed to attract different age levels by building in a range of interpretive possibilities. Batman, for example, was targeted to appeal as "camp" for adults and as action-adventure fantasy for children. For more on this, see Lynn Spigel and Henry Jenkins, "Same Bat Channel/Different Bat Times: Mass Culture and Popular Memory," in The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media, ed. William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 117-48.

58. Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B. Parker, Television in the Lives of Our Children (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), 150. The authors based this speculation on numerous social scientific studies that also suggested television was making children grow up too fast.


62. A 1988 Nickelodian press release, "Kids Spend $15.8 Billion Annually," underscores the popularity of new technologies such as cable, VCRs, and personal computers with the younger generation. Some 72 percent of American children say they will subscribe to cable TV as adults, and among those already receiving cable in their homes, 85 percent say they will subscribe as adults. Among the 73 percent of American children in households that own VCRs, almost half (43 percent) report watching videotapes "every day or almost every day." And the press release reported that 24 percent of the nation's children own personal computers. These data were compiled by the Nickelodian/Yankelovich Youth Monitor. See the Children's Television clipping file, Doheny Cinema-Television Library, University of Southern California. In his recent book on video games, Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., reports that video games took off in the late 1980s. For example, two years after its introduction in 1986, Nintendo had sold about 11 million units, and in 1990 alone it sold 7.2 million units. More generally, by February 1989, "16 of the top selling toys in the country were video games or video-game related." See Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., *Video Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 8, 12. For more recent analysis of video games and children, see Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power: In Movies, Television and Video Games* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). For a general discussion of the children's marketplace in contemporary culture, see Kline; "Limits to the Imagination."

63. Although television's corporate structure was not heavily contested, there were heated debates about the commercial uses of radio broadcasting in the 1920s, and there were also alternative visions. See Robert W. McChesney, "Conflict, not consensus: The Debate over Broadcast Communication Policy, 1930-1935" in Robert W. McChesney (ed.) *Ratless Criticism* (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 22-258.