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Writing the Child in Media Theory

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Contemporary mass media are perceived by programme-makers, politicians, and the public to have a particularly crucial role in childhood culture, development, and behaviour. For each of these groups, and for children themselves, film, television, and video are often regarded as overlapping media. Films are shown on television and are available on video for watching on domestic television equipment. Each medium overlaps in both children's and parents' discourse about media effects and children's responses to media. While there are significant methodological issues that can be raised about the specificity of different media, this essay follows the contours of existing debate by focusing mainly on television, including film and video which is watched on television.[1] The concern for how adults should respond to children's interactions with media is both quotidian and real, and can be addressed in two interrelated ways. Children's interaction with media is on one hand a question of discourse, which focuses on how the terms of the issue are posed and how it is addressed. Secondly, the relations between children and media are a matter of action, including the procedures for parents' control and prohibition of media use, legal regulation and censorship, and policy debate. But action takes place on the basis of discursive assumptions about both children and media, where the legitimacy of law, policy, and parental control rests on stated or unstated theories of childhood and media culture. Both discourse and action are conducted by adults, so that any discussion of children's interaction with media must first recognize a certain virtuality of the object it addresses. While the figure of the child is massively present in discourses around the mass media, the child as a subject who might participate in these discourses remains largely silent.

Therefore, the primary task in discussing children and media is to determine the ways in which the figure of the child, and the functions, effects, and cultural meaning of the media, are posed as discursive objects. This focus on the forms taken by discourse needs to extend from relatively unelaborated theories of childhood and media, such as those evident in the discourses of concerned adults or the press, to discourses that claim expertise, such as those produced by broadcasters and media theorists. Although a meta-analysis of these discourses, like the one attempted very briefly in this essay, can illuminate significant concerns and problems, it is important to

[1] An influential account of differences between media is given in John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1984).

recognize that the fundamental indeterminacy of the child barred from participating in the critical project will circumscribe its claims to truth. Thus it is not a matter of choosing between, for example, an understanding of the child as a vulnerable being who must be protected from media influence and an understanding of the child as an adult-in-process with opinions, fears, and desires of his or her own, with a right to a range of media experiences. While these divergent conceptions are contradictory, their co-presence shows that children's interactions with media are a set of relations with other social and cultural assumptions. Models of what childhood is, and the models of how the media relate to this in terms of positive or negative effects and affects, have changed historically in an uneven relationship with changes in media culture. In this sense the relationship between childhood and media is a particular form of the relationship between media and culture in general, but is particularly interesting because of the continuing force of cultural concerns around childhood.[2]

Before moving to specific examples of how the child is constructed in discourses that address children's interactions with media, a usefully broader frame can be introduced by noting how a notion of the child has been deployed theoretically to critique television in general. The important media theorist John Hartley introduced the term *paedocracy* in the mid-1980s in order to describe a struggle for control over television audiences, imagined as vulnerable, unruly, and driven by excessive urges: 'There's a struggle between what are presumed to be *paedocratic* audience practices on the one hand (governed *by* childlike qualities), and *pedagogic* discourses on the other (government *over* childish tendencies).'[3] Hartley's notion of paedocracy is that in the absence of other interlocutive forms, such as addresses to the audience as citizens, workers, or members of ethnic, gendered, or class groups, an address to the audience as childlike suits the regime of pleasure in which television is discursively constructed. Since television in the capitalist world is primarily made and marketed as entertainment, the address to the audience is primarily oriented around the production of pleasure. There are programme genres (such as news) that address the audience in terms of information, with the objective in part of constituting a public sphere. There are also programme genres (such as some children's television) that address the audience in terms of education. However, the majority of programming is entertainment, and the majority of informational or educational television uses entertainment forms and audience address in order to attract viewers, retain them, and encourage future viewing. For Hartley, broadcasters 'appeal to the playful, imaginative, fantasy, irresponsible aspects of adult behaviour. They seek the common personal ground that unites diverse and often directly antagonistic groupings in a given population. What better,

[2] I discuss relationships between childhood and theories of contemporary media in *Postmodern Media Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

[3] *Tele-ology: Studies in Television* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 17.

then, than a fictional version of everyone's supposed childlike tendencies which might be understood as predating such social groupings?' (p. 111). In this formulation, the paedocratization of the audience is a strategy of control based on the audience's presumed desire to regress. While Hartley's use of childlikeness enables him to establish a critique of television in capitalist societies, it also rests on the stigmatization of childhood as an other to the rational political empowerment he would like to claim for the audience.

What Hartley describes as pedagogic strategies, on the other hand, include the promotion, trailing, and reviewing of television, which instruct the audience about what they might watch, and how they might watch it. Further pedagogic strategies include the attempts to censor, control, or stigmatize programmes or viewing practices in governmental, educational, and press contexts. Hartley points out that even though the television audience is perpetually subject to these attempts to control it across a wide range of discourses, the audience is granted an ultimate sovereign power. This power is not only the power to switch the television on or off, but also to function as the legitimating instance in whose name television is made, and to be the economic force which ultimately underwrites the television industry and the television market. The audience is never present to itself, never able to exercise a collective power as a community of subjects that recognizes itself as such, but nevertheless the audience is addressed on the assumption that it potentially does have this identity and coherent authority. As Hartley points out, 'The industry and its regulatory bodies are obliged not only to speak *about* an audience but — crucially, for them — to talk *to* one as well: they need not only to *represent* audiences but also to enter into *relations* with them' (p. 108). Hartley's argument is not about television for children, or the ways in which children watch television. Instead, it adopts the child as a figure for the othering process through which television institutions and the institutions that represent television (the press, or government) announce the simultaneous disempowerment of the audience, and at the same time the value of the audience. The audience is in the position of the child as a valued but unruly being, both in the control of the institution (as the child is in the care of a parent) but also perpetually at risk of evading this control. Paedocratic and pedagogic strategies, therefore, enable television institutions to address an audience on which they depend, but which they also patronize and demean. Michael Kozoll (co-creator of the successful and academically lauded US police series *Hill Street Blues*), for example, is reported as saying: 'Doing episodic television [. . .] is like raising a retarded child. By which he meant that there are only so many things it will ever learn to do, no matter how much you love the child, no matter how much effort and care and intelligence you lavish upon it. It will never shine. One could add: its little accomplishments are also miraculous.'[4] However, Hartley's analytical use of the figure

[4] Quoted by Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), p. 324, cited in Hartley, p. 109.

of the child as a way of caricaturing television's manipulation and anxiety around its audience risks repeating the denigration he laments. For the role of Hartley's media theory is also to regard the audience as, like the child, a subject as yet unaware of its own powers.

Despite these questions about the status of Hartley's critique, it does illuminate the dependence of official discourse on the figure of the child as the legitimator of intervention into television broadcasting. Hartley notes that the Annan Report on Broadcasting in Britain stated a child-centred view of television viewing, in which the identities of viewers are those of family members, defined in terms of their relation to children: 'The audience for a programme may total millions: but people watch and listen in the family circle, in their homes, so that violations of the taboos of language and behaviour, which exist in every society, are witnessed by the whole family — parents, children and grandparents — in each other's presence.'[5] The logical steps in this argument are that television addresses and represents society; society consists of families; families are defined as child-rearing institutions; television must be suitable for children. There are a number of practical objections to this discourse, which are stated in Hartley's discussion of this issue, such as that television viewing does not often happen in family groups (if it ever did), that three-generation families are now very rare, that there are no universal taboos, that the private context of viewing might suggest that decisions about taste and morality should also be private, that state regulation of broadcasting is at least divisive and unsuccessful, if not wrong in principle, and that violations of taboos might be more embarrassing to parents than children. However, at the level of theoretical discourse, the essential point is that the figure of the child occupies the position of a legitimating instance for regulatory regimes, and bolsters the claims of the state to intervene in the affairs of television in parallel to its claims to intervene in society. The underlying logic of this legitimacy is that television and society are equivalent in significant ways, and that both television and society must prioritize the needs of children. The consequence of such a discursive construction is not only that both children and television audiences are valuable, but also that they are feared because they are potentially unruly and ungovernable.

Theoretical discourses about children's interactions with media share some of this polarization, in the sense that their concerns are either to regard the child as an object constructed by media, or as a subject empowered to interact actively with media. Media theories can be positioned along a spectrum, whose poles are either considering the child as passive, positioned and interpellated by the media text, or on the other hand regarding the child as an active appropriator of media amid a complex social and cultural

[5] Annan Committee, *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting* (London: HMSO, 1977), p. 25, quoted in Hartley, p. 112.

context that permeates both children and the media. The first of these positions derives from a broadly textual or 'literary' approach, while the second arises from the concerns of contemporary Cultural Studies. However, as Valerie Walkerdine has argued, the textual tradition, which constructs the child as a passive object interpellated by media texts, inherits the concerns of the social theory of the late nineteenth century.[6] The social psychology of that period sought to understand the crowd as a social force, institutionalizing the earlier middle-class and governmental fears of the mob or the working class as irrational, illiterate, immoral, and violent. The figure of the child in social and media theory inherited this position of the Other, regarded as immoral and suggestible. The result of positioning the child discursively in this way is the force of such notions as media addiction and imitative violence. Frankfurt School theories of the manipulation of masses by modern mechanical and technological media support this set of notions which repudiate 'popular' mass entertainment and its consumers, and provide them with further academic legitimacy. From this perspective, as Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, 'Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part'.[7] The fact of the mediated mass dissemination of culture determines the media audience as a mass, and deprives the audience of both 'authentic' cultural experience and the ability to participate actively in cultural production. The specifics of audience decoding strategies, audience pleasures, differentiations between media and between textualities in the same medium, are each relegated to local variations in a monolithic imposition of pre-digested culture from above. Like the notion of children as a suggestible, univalent, and homogenous group, the media audience as crowd or mass is the discursive tool that permits blanket denigration of the media.

The suggestibility of children has been a persistent concern throughout the history of the mass media. A brief historical detour into the beginnings of regulation of children's viewing of cinema shows how the terms of debate were established, and indicates the relative consistency of regulatory approaches into the newer media of television and video. While film shows in Britain specifically for a child audience are often dated from 5.30 pm on Tuesday 7 February 1900, when a travelling Bioscope show was put on in the Infant Schoolroom in Mickleover, Derbyshire, this is simply the first evidence for a children's film show (a publicity poster) that has survived.[8] Bioscope films were fifty-second shorts, with such subjects as Music Hall acts, slapstick comedy, and character sketches, and the child audience would have seen the same film programme, supported by the same Magic Lantern

[6] 'Children in Cyberspace: A New Frontier', in *Children in Culture: Approaches to Childhood*, ed. by Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 231–47.

[7] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), p. 120.

[8] See Terry Staples, *All Pals Together: The Story of Childrens Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 1–3.

Show, as adults. Children were admitted for one penny, and adults for threepence, though again this did not denote a difference in attitude to the child audience, but merely that children, being smaller, could be squeezed in greater numbers onto the benches inside the hall. Regulation of films for children began with the concern that overcrowding could be dangerous, when in 1908 in Barnsley, sixteen children ranging in age from four to eight were suffocated in a crowd trying to get into a film show. The Cinematograph Act of 1909 was concerned with safety in auditoria, but pressure from local authorities extended the Act to include threats to moral safety, especially for children. As a result, for example, Walsall council was able to object to a screening of a 1910 American boxing match in which a black contender, Jack Johnson, defeated a white man, Jim Jeffries, on the grounds that the film 'tended to demoralise and brutalise the minds of young people especially' (Staples, pp. 9–10). In response to such criticisms, the film industry set up a self-regulatory body in 1913, the British Board of Film Censors, which introduced U (universal) and A (adult) certificates for all films, thus introducing the principle that children would be the measure of moral acceptability.

An investigation into the effects of films on children was initiated in 1917 at the request of the film industry, in an attempt to anticipate and forestall legislation, through the National Council for Public Morality. This was a voluntary body consisting of representatives from, among other groups, the Sunday School Union, the YMCA, the National Union of Teachers, and the Ragged School Union. Prominent members of the Council included Sir Robert Baden Powell (soldier and founder of the Boy Scout Movement), the Bishop of Birmingham, and the eugenicist and promoter of family planning Marie Stopes. Among the professionals and public officials who presented evidence to the Commission were nine unidentified children, and the questions put to them, and the children's answers, provide insights into the concerns of adults and children then and since:

Chairman: Do you like seeing people breaking into rooms and taking things?
Girl: Not very much.
Chairman: It never gives you any idea that you want to go and do it yourself?
Girl: No. [. . .]
Chairman: What sort of picture do the children like best?
Girl: When the cowboys and Indians come on they clap very loudly.
Chairman: Do you like films of flowers?
Girl: No, not very much.
Chairman: What about films about birds' nests?
Girl: No, they don't like those.
Chairman: Charlie Chaplin?
Girl: Yes, they like those.[9]

[9] The exchange reproduced here is one of the condensed extracts from the transcript of the commission's investigation: National Council for Public Morality, *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1917), reproduced in Staples, pp. 11–20 (p. 13).

The Commission produced a 400-page report in 1917, which rejected most of the criticism levelled against cinema as a corrupting influence, but recommended that educational content should be married with entertainment (for example in film adaptations of literature) as a way of improving the young. By 1923, legal enforcement of BBFC certificates by local authorities was widespread, and in Britain as in America the regime of censorship and regulation based around the division of child from adult content, and child from adult audience, was in place and remains so today. As the brief extract from the transcript of the Commission's hearings shows, the possible imitation of anti-social behaviour was a chief concern. In conjunction with this, efforts to interest children in improving and educational subjects were a priority. It is clearly methodologically dubious to draw precise parallels between 1917 and today, and between cinema and television or video. But at least this demonstrates that recent high-profile incidents of alleged media influence are by no means new. In fact, it was the relative newness of the cinema as a mass medium that enabled the public concern with its effects to register on the nation's consciousness, and each new communication medium has given rise to similar moral panics. The figure of the child occupies a crucial place in the discursive elaboration of these crises, and in the public and political responses to them.

The most celebrated case in recent British culture of this phenomenon was the James Bulger case, in which two boys were tried and convicted of the murder of the eponymous two-year-old. Two ten-year-old boys, playing truant from school, led James out of a shopping centre in Bootle, near Liverpool, and walked two miles with him before killing him on a railway line, apparently by throwing bricks and other objects at him.[10] After the two boys' arrest, the Prime Minister and Home Secretary claimed that violence on television must be contributory to violence of this kind and should be curbed, and the British Board of Film Classification investigated young offenders' film and television viewing. In particular, violence in rental videos was cited as a possible cause for the crime, though no evidence to support this was brought forward in the trial. Although one of the boys' fathers, Neil Venables, had rented the film *Child's Play 3*, and newspapers claimed similarities between events in the film and the crime, ten-year-old Jon Venables did not live with his father, had not seen *Child's Play 3*, and explained how upset he became when watching violence in video films. Without any evidence of a connection between videos and the crime, *The Sun* newspaper's front page on the day after the trial (26 November 1993) carried the headline 'For the sake of ALL our kids, BURN YOUR VIDEO NASTY'. Broadsheet newspapers took a less extreme line, but *The Times* (26 November 1993) also claimed: 'There is now a widespread addiction to

[10] The case and its implications for studies of children and media are discussed in David Buckingham, *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 19–55.

viewing monstrous horror— often misogynistic and sexually degrading — which is presented so naturalistically that, to the impressionable, it has become part of the furniture of reality.'

Moral panics about media influence are very often predicated on the assumption that there is a particular sector of society, characterized by its low social class, lack of educational attainment, or lack of moral sense, which is susceptible to corrupting influence. The 'impressionable' group cited by *The Times* occupies this role as a discursive legitimator of increased media regulation, but, characteristically, it is not made clear who this group is. It seems that the group consists of others than *The Times*'s own readers, and is probably made up of the children of working-class families. The medium through which horror becomes part of the 'furniture of reality' is probably the television apparatus, since it too is literally part of the furniture. The television, while appearing to be a neutral medium and one of the physical trappings of the home, becomes responsible for the introduction into domestic space of a drug-like force of disruption. The public furore over the Bulger case, fuelled by irresponsible journalism, is significant theoretically for two reasons. First, ignorance of the significance of modality led commentators to opinions about imitative violence that are based on children's assumed ignorance of media representation: a representation stood as a causal factor that mechanically provoked a behaviour, so that the behaviour is a simple repetition of the representation. Modality, a term deriving originally from linguistic theory, describes the degree of conventionalization exhibited by a text, and hence the text's closeness of fit with notions of the real. For example, many horror films (including *Child's Play 3*) have weak modality in that they are highly conventionalized, even to the point of being ironic reworkings of explicitly foregrounded horror conventions. Secondly, the polarization of the pure and innocent victim versus the violent, demonic, or perverse perpetrators, illustrates a long-standing binarism in representations of childhood. The demonization of the child killers extended, because of the supposed effects of the film *Child's Play 3*, to the representation of the film as demonic and perverse. Such an extension had already taken place in the 1984 Video Recordings Act, in which tellingly-named 'video nasties' were withdrawn from circulation, and much tougher rules on certification and distribution of videos were introduced.[11] The 'nastiness' of the videos was established by selective description and interpretation of sequences of particular films, without awareness of modality, or sophisticated critical apparatus of film interpretation. The 'nasty' videos were condemned for their possible effects on children, both to disturb them emotionally and to provoke imitative violence. The recurrent pattern here is that a demonized object becomes a causal motor for the

[11] See *The Video Nasties*, ed. by Martin Barker (London: Pluto, 1984).

production of a demonized child, both of which are established discursively as Others, abjected in contrast to a norm.

The view that children are prone to imitative violence claims support from methodologically dubious research over a long period, mainly from the USA. Work by researchers such as Bandura and Himmelwhite and others gave credence to this view, despite highly questionable methods of gaining evidence, and arbitrary interpretations of child behaviour.[12] The widespread opinion that mass media had fundamentally altered childhood for the worse, and concerns over the difficulty of controlling children's access to and use of media, led to such pronouncements as Neil Postman's that childhood had become extinct in Western metropolitan societies.[13] However, a now less prominent strand of media theory opposes this view. Marshall McLuhan, for example, argued that media users, especially television viewers, interacted with media in a way parallel to children's supposed creative and involved relation to the world around them.[14] McLuhan's work proposed that electronic media such as television surpassed the linear, rationalistic, and literary heritage of Western civilization by returning to an iconic, tribal, and bardic mode which he associated both with 'primitive' tribal societies and with avant-garde (especially Modernist) arts. Young people, for McLuhan, were equipped with valuable interests and competencies in responding to television and other recent media forms, as well as the energy for social change which he also valued and saw around him in the 1960s. Like some of the popular movements of the time which drew on Romantic conceptions of nature, childhood, and organic social utopianism, McLuhan's use of the figure of the child represents a call for the reinvigoration of technological culture by a paradoxical return to a preexisting Nature. Both broadly positive and negative theories of media draw on childhood in ways that largely reinforce conventional understandings of the child as different from adults, and socially and culturally in process. For both pessimists and optimists, the figure of the child was a key component in understanding a Western metropolitan society perceived to be dominated in new and significant ways by mass media culture.

Recent defences against the scapegoating of media draw on the concept of media literacy, which concerns children's knowledge of media codes and conventions, genre, narrative, and production processes. This approach rests on the notion of the child's use of media as potentially rational, arguing for curriculum teaching in media literacy as a means of enhancing and imparting ways of using media that will make the most of their potential and

[12] Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (London: Prentice Hall, 1977), H. T. Himmelwhite and others, *Television and the Child: An Empirical Study of the Effect of Television on the Young* (London: Nuffield Foundation, OUP, 1958).

[13] *The Disappearance of Childhood* (London: Allen, 1983).

[14] See for example Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964; repr. London: Ark, 1987).

protect the child against possible ill effects.[15] But the emphasis on the acquisition of skills, and the drive for rational control by the child over media interactions, risk repeating the binary oppositions between rational child and irrational child, active and passive, agent and victim, that have underlain much of the debate on both childhood and popular culture for more than a century. Cognitive research on children's interaction with media similarly focuses on rational articulable responses, and only very recently have more complex emotional responses become a subject of study. David Buckingham, who has published extensive work on children and the media, draws on a Cultural Studies approach, adducing children's and parents' talk about television in wide-ranging and considered studies, to focus on the 'positive' and 'negative' emotional responses to television.[16] What Buckingham argues is that both watching television and talking about television are important means for children to understand themselves and others, and also to perform their own identities to themselves and others in a dynamic social process. Part of this dynamic interaction involves gaining and deploying knowledge of television codes and conventions (media literacy), such as distinctions between genres, narrative forms, and contextualization of the programme text through knowledge about the production processes that gave rise to it. By means of such awareness of narrative, form, genre, and production process, children may be able to manage the emotions provoked by television and video to some extent. Buckingham's research claims that children sometimes seek out disturbing programmes or videos, such as horror films, in order to test their own maturity at coping with troubling emotions. This coping, he argues, is achieved partly by gaining the understanding of modality which will allow them to repudiate and manage these emotions with respect to particular genres and forms, and the awareness of modality is itself a characteristic of 'adult' relationships with media texts. Viewing horror films is seen, then, as a means for children to test their own maturity, and the significant number of children who view horror films which are not certificated for their age-group is taken as an indication both of children's desire to enter the adult cultural world, and of their determination to test the limits of their own vulnerability as non-adult, non-rational subjects. Indeed many horror films concern a vulnerable and/ or childlike figure's repudiation of or revenge against adult rationality and control, and this may make them especially attractive to children.

Children's culture, consisting not only of film, television, and video, but also toys, games, and play, is not separable from the discourses of culture as whole. For children's media culture is produced not by children, but for

[15] See for example Robert Hodge and David Tripp, *Children and Television: A Semiotic Approach* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986).
[16] His works include *Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy* (London: Falmer, 1993); *Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media*, ed. by David Buckingham (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television*.

them, and thus encodes the pressures and contradictions evident in adult culture. As Dan Fleming has shown, the manifestations of children's culture 'take as their jumping-off point the bleakest features of a post-liberal reality: social disintegration, the isolation of groups defined by their own ritualised difference from each other, an *anomie* that justifies the existence of militaristic saviours, *ninja* experts and awesome technological solutions'.[17] The references to ninjas and technology here are to the phenomenal success of the television series *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Transformers*. *Turtles* depicts a group of four human-scale turtles, unwanted pets flushed into the sewers of New York who have mutated because of toxic waste. They are befriended by campaigning journalist April O'Neil, and an exiled Ninja master who has also mutated partly into a rat. The Turtles do battle with the evil Shredder, a former Ninja master and now head of an international crime organization. *Transformers* is based on the conflict between two races of intelligent machines, the Autobots and Decepticons, whose conflict is deferred in time and displaced to Earth, where the creatures take on the forms of familiar domestic machines with the power to transform themselves into awesome robots and humanoid or animal-like combat machines. For Fleming, the objects, products, and practices within children's media culture 'belong in a system of meanings with the potential to tell stories which transcend that bleakness, while nevertheless recognising it. Such recognition is vital to the effective object relations that play depends on if it is to be an antidote to bewilderment' (p. 147). The uneasy negotiations of difference in children's media are explored in some detail by Fleming in relation to *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* (shown in Britain from 1994), for example (pp. 19–28). In this series, American teenagers put aside their identities to become part of a team of galactic superheroes, the Power Rangers, and in turn put aside their individuality as specific rangers to operate huge combat machines (Zords). The Zords then combine together into a single Megazord in the continuing battle against the Rangers' alien foes. Differences between teen identities become merged in the Ranger team, and in their absorption into technologies. While the Rangers are relatively powerless as high-school students (tyrannized by their high-school Principal), in their Ranger and Zord incarnations they defeat the 'adult' alien monsters who seek to tyrannize and dominate the universe. The hopelessness of individual action, the uncertainties of social role, and the ever-present threats of violence and environmental degradation which form some of the dominant understandings of contemporary society are present in *Power Rangers* in a coded form. These problems are granted spectacular power as threats, but also symbolically tamed both within the story (where the Rangers always win) and by the narrative structure of the programmes themselves, where repeated tropes of martial

[17] *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 147.

arts combat and technological destruction provide reassuring spectacular resolutions to the disjointed and sometimes illogical narrative segments.

Power Rangers, *Transformers*, and *Turtles* are produced by international commercial television production companies, and their close relationship with toys and other merchandizing has given rise to anxieties among parents, educators, and regulators that programmes for children should have greater regard for the functions of television in education and child development. These responsibilities on the part of programme-makers and broadcasters have underlain much of the discourse of British television production in the public service tradition. An insight into this discourse can be gained from the work of Roger Singleton-Turner, a BBC producer whose book *Television and Children* is both a guide for programme-makers, and is addressed to the wider audience of educators, parents, and officials concerned with children and television.[18] He argues that the competencies and knowledge held by children and the adults who make children's television are different. However, the constant between children's and adult programmes, for Singleton-Turner and the BBC in general, is the view that 'Children have neither economic nor political power, but they deserve the best we can do for them' (p. 22). The explanatory discourses that legitimate Singleton-Turner's sense of quality and appropriateness derive from developmental psychology and from the professional discourse of television production. A discourse on media literacy draws on developmental psychology to promote the notion that television is a language that can and should be learnt. For example, Singleton-Turner claims: 'The whole grammar of television needs to be learnt by each viewer. There is evidence that the language of film and television is learnt in a similar way to spoken language and that children of increasing maturity accept with understanding an increasing vocabulary of filmic conventions' (p. 23). Therefore, narrative forms should be relatively linear and clear, to avoid the child's creating 'extraordinary constructions in his [*sic*] mind to explain what he has seen'. A discursive model of child development is constructed as an evolutionary learning process that moves teleologically towards the normative adult viewer. The specific results of this developmental schema are to prescribe the audio-visual form of programmes, according to the 'stage' in development which the child is assumed to be at, with the simplest forms for the youngest audience. Relations between long shots and close ups should be signposted (to avoid confusion over the sizes of objects and people), time ellipses between shots should be rare in programmes for young children, and cutting rates should be slower than for an adult audience. In essence, the form of children's programmes comes to resemble early cinema, and children's programmes repeat the 'evolution' of film from the static camera shooting theatrical boxed sets, with little cutting or change of frame size, to a contemporary style of rapid

[18] *Television and Children* (London: BBC, 1994).

montage, fast cutting, and 'unmotivated' use of pan or close up in programmes for older children. The learning curve of child viewers becomes a condensed version of the normative and teleological history of audio-visual communication, thus producing a reductive view of both media history and language acquisition.

Media theory addressing the child audience, and film, television, and video watched by children links work on representations, modes of social and cultural identity, and questions of politics and the regulation of production and consumption. At the centre of these concerns is the question of what the child is and means. Since the child is defined negatively and retrospectively as a being who is not yet an adult, the issues of how identities are discriminated, represented, and how they may be modified, necessarily arise. But what it is to be a child is, from an adult perspective, always partially a mystery, and requires the participants in the debate to adduce a complex and conflicting range of discursive understandings that seek to shape childhood and to mobilize it. From the perspective of the theorization and regulation of children and the media, the terrain on which children's interactions with media occur is also relatively inaccessible. Despite the significance of more public spaces such as the playground or the classroom in providing frameworks for children's own discourses about media, the home is the space where most of that interaction with media takes place. In contrast to the heavily regulated space of the cinema, the home television set, either as a broadcast medium or as the vehicle for watching video film, is difficult to control. The home is criss-crossed by different uses of television by parents and children, with the television apparatus functioning as either a parental delegate, substitute, or baby-sitter, or as a representative of public space beyond the home, in the control of broadcasters rather than parents and thus potentially suspect.[19] The root of this anxiety about the child's media interaction is the assumption that the child is determinant of the adult, and this legitimates a discourse about how media may produce a socially undesirable child who in turn becomes a socially undesirable adult. It is important to recognise how close the links are between debates about the regulation of children's media and the heritage of regulation of the working class, or of 'the masses'. For the othering processes in each case are parallel, and each depends on efforts to seize the rebellious or unpredictable object in discourse. Both 'the masses' and children are summoned and shaped by discourses in order to render them amenable to possibilities of action, and as such the most significant medium in the debates over children and the media is the medium of language.

[19] See David Oswell, 'Watching with Mother in the Early 1950s', in *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, ed. by Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham (London: BFI, 1995), pp. 34–46.