



THE KET AESTHETIC: VISUAL CULTURE IN CHILDHOOD

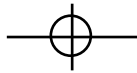
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This paper explores the choices children make among objects and images supplied by their culture, and the ways that commercial objects and images are appropriated and reinterpreted in their own art making. Emphasis is placed on the operation of children's agency and their tendency to define themselves, as individuals and as members of a distinct culture of childhood, through choices which may violate adult tastes and persist in spite of adult prohibitions.

In his essay, "Barney in Paris," Adam Gopnik (2000) describes the dismay of a conscientious parent confronted for the first time with his child's enchantment with one particular element of American commercial culture:

When people ask why Martha and I, not long after the birth of our first child, left New York for Paris, we can usually think of a lot of plausible-sounding reasons....The real reason was Barney. We had seen one after another of our friends' children. . .sunk dumbly in front of a television set watching a man in a cheap purple





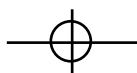
dinosaur suit sing doggerel in an adenoidal voice with a chorus of overregimented eight-year-old ham actors. Just a glimpse was enough to scare a prospective parent to death: the garish Jeff Koons colors, the frantic prancing, the cynically appropriated public domain melodies. And, finally, that anthem of coercive affection — “I love you/you love me/we’re a happy family” — sung, so incongruously, to the tune of “This Old Man.” (pp. 166-167)

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If the Gopniks’ solution to the dilemma of Barney was idiosyncratic, the problem itself was not: What parent has never experienced such intense aversion to an icon their child dearly loves? It was not “American kiddie video culture” (2000, p. 167) in general that was at issue, but Barney specifically, Gopnik avers: He and his wife were eager to introduce Luke both to the enduring icons of their own childhoods and newer, but equally engaging characters such as Bert and Ernie. But the elder Gopniks’ shared dislike of Barney was deep. And so, opting for a radical solution, the family moved to Paris where young Luke’s experiences in the months to follow were direct and unmediated, the stuff of which the idyllic childhoods harbored in adult imagination are made: visiting the circus, playing in parks, riding the carousel, developing a fondness for Charlie Chaplin. This satisfactory state of affairs continued until the family returned to New York for a few days’ visit, and a jet-lagged Luke, installed in front of a VCR with a stash of tapes, encountered one lumbering purple dinosaur. Luke was, immediately and irrevocably, hooked on Barney.

The Barney tapes somehow followed Luke on his return to Paris to become the cause of considerable tension in the months ahead, as parents and child argued about their respective rights to the control of the VCR and the pleasures made available there. Gopnik observed his own warring parental impulses rising up in response to Luke’s affection for Barney:

Not wanting to be a bad or unduly coercive parent, I thought, Well, he has a right to his pleasures, but I too have a right — indeed a duty — to tell him what I think of them. We began to have a regular daily exchange... Naturally it occurred to us that the pro-Barney campaign was a resourceful and in many ways admirable show of independence on the part of a two-and-a-half-year-old who might

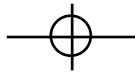


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otherwise have been smothered by his parents' overbearing enthusiasms....What puzzled me of course was why. Loving Barney in Paris was partly a way of teasing his parents, but it was not simply a way of teasing his parents; it was too deep, too emotional for that. Nor had Barney yet crossed the ocean, so it wasn't any kind of peer pressure from the French kids he played with in class and in the courtyard every day. In Paris, in fact, almost all the childhood icons are those that have been in place for forty years: stuffy, bourgeois Babar; witty Astérix and Obélix; and imperterbale Lucky Luke, the Franco-American cowboy in perpetual battle with the four Dalton brothers. Although these characters from time to time appear in cartoons, they remain locked in their little worlds of satire and storytelling. There is no Barney in France, and there is no French Barney. Whatever spell was working on my son, it was entirely, residually American. (pp. 170-171)

In this vividly recounted story of generations at odds, with an element of popular culture plopped defiantly between them, we encounter a classic instance of the "ket aesthetic" (James, 1998) at work. Allison James (1998, p. 394) explains that "ket" was a term originally used by adults to denote rubbish, or "an assortment of useless articles" (or, in its more archaic use, the carcasses of animals dead of natural causes). More recently, British children have adopted the term to describe the candies they purchase for themselves with weekly allowances. James proposes children's appropriation and transformation of the term as a metaphor for the relationship between the world of children and adults, one in which children construct and maintain a culture of their own, separate from, but dependent upon adult culture through the creative reinterpretation of adult practices. Adults also consume sweets, of course, but they seldom, if ever, choose for themselves the kinds of graphically named, luridly colored, deliberately transgressive, oddly performative candies that are favored by children—Warheads, Nerds, Gummy Worms, NikLNips, Sour Patch Kids, and so on. James suggests that it is through situations such as this, in which children's tastes and preferences run counter to those of the "cultured" adult world, that children define themselves as individuals and as members of a culture of





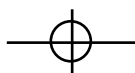
their own:

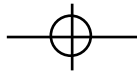
By confusing the adult order children create for themselves considerable room for movement within the limits imposed upon them by adult society. This deflection of adult perception is crucial for both the maintenance and continuation of the child's culture and for the growth of the concept of self for the individual child. The process of becoming social is often described in terms of "socialization," a model which stresses the passive mimicry of others. I would suggest, however, that this process is better seen in terms of an active experience of contradiction, often with the adult world. It is thus of great significance that something that is despised and regarded as diseased and inedible by the adult world should be given great prestige as a particularly desirable form of food by the child (1998, p. 395)

Within this "disorderly and inverted world of children" (James, 1998, p. 404), different standards prevail. As James points out, "kets" are the most social form of children's food, apt to be pulled from the mouth, examined, and shared, in the hours between the adult-controlled rituals of mealtimes, as "the normal eating conventions, instilled by parents during early childhood are flagrantly disregarded" (James, 1998, p. 400). Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) recognize children's devotion to "kets," emblematic of their fascination with other forms of literal and metaphoric "junk food," as, at the very least, an assertion of agency and control, if not active resistance to the restrictive nature of adult culture. When children's preferences manifest themselves, in the choice of characters to admire, television programs to watch, toys to campaign for, many adults become uneasy. Much of this discomfort emerges from our desire to see our children (and to have our children be seen) doing something serious and worthwhile. "The tensions...have as much to do with what we think we ought to be doing as parents or teachers, than necessarily anything indigenous to the artifacts themselves" (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 25). And yet, in the art room as elsewhere, the "ket aesthetic" prevails whenever a slackening of adult control occurs.

Even among very young children, in the early years of preschool, the impulse to apply developing graphic skills in the service of popular culture

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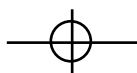


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emerges early. Not long after they create the first forms that attentive adults recognize as representations, children begin to cluster figures in groups, forming alliances that may be ambiguous in nature, but clear in their solidarity of purpose. For many young children, the temptation to dress these figures up as favorite characters derived from popular culture surfaces almost instantaneously. It is as if the depiction of such characters is intrinsic to young children's fascination with their capacity to produce images and objects, their motivation to enter and explore the realm of image making.

For many years, I have studied the choices that preschool and kindergarten children make when they are encouraged to create images and objects in classroom settings but without the direct intervention or control of teachers and parents. I have been interested in the choices children make when their work is "voluntary," in the sense defined by art educators Betty Lark-Horowitz, Hilda Lewis, and Marc Luca (1973) — made within occasions and structures arranged by adults, but with the significant decisions of medium, scale, elaboration, and subject matter, left entirely to the individual child. It is important to realize that, even when none of the usual parameters of school art lessons are imposed, the work children produce can hardly be considered spontaneous, for even very young children quickly realize that there are limits to adult tolerance for manifestations of the "ket aesthetic" (Cannella, 1997; Tobin, 1995). And yet the social and personal identities of contemporary children are deeply implicated in their participation in the common culture of their generation and social group. There is undeniable social value in the highly visible display of the symbols of children's culture, the public demonstration that one is "in the know" regarding the latest and most prestigious cultural icons. Children moving between cultures, as many contemporary children do, may find their efforts to establish friendships facilitated by the global marketing strategies of Disney, Mattel, and Nintendo. The ability to enact appropriate story lines and to create convincing likenesses, to incorporate in visual representations the telling details, are potent sources of cultural capital, eagerly accumulated by children striving to establish their own identities and memberships within the group.

Not long ago I had the opportunity to visit my seven-year-old nephew Matthew, currently a first grader at a Catholic elementary school in Chicago.

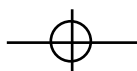


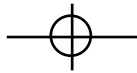


Several months earlier, in an effort to show his aunt and uncle some of his favorite neighborhood haunts, Matthew had escorted us to a shop specializing in collectibles — cards, games, action figures, and other paraphernalia — associated with characters from popular video games, television series, and films. Knowing of his interest in collectors' cards, I asked Matthew which series among the many available he was most interested in collecting. He answered without hesitation — Pokemon, the ubiquitous “pocket monsters” imported from Japan, characters which seem to have remarkable global appeal and staying power; they have been around for a while. Knowing that the ability to draw Pokemon characters is a skill with a great deal of cachet in the early elementary years, I asked Matthew who, among his classmates, was most accomplished in drawing Pokemon characters. He sighed and shrugged, deeply resigned, and told me, “I don't know. Pokemon is banded (sic) in our school.”

While it is easy to sympathize with the teachers who decided that Pokemon was “banded” in Matthew's school, it is important to consider the effects of such efforts to prescribe appropriate and inappropriate educational content (Tobin, 2004). This enforced division of children's interests, into official and unofficial spheres (Dyson, 1997; 2003; Hamblen, 2002), reflects the status of popular imagery as “a recurring site of struggle and negotiation” (Seiter, 1999, p. 5) between adults and children. The “cultural pedagogy” (Kincheloe, 2002, p. 84) made available to children outside of school, through a pervasive visual and mediated culture, educates powerfully, from infancy onward. And, in ways subtle and overt, teachers may resist the incursion of that unofficial world into their classrooms. Ellen Seiter (1999) notes that, “As early as the age of four, children can appreciate that *The Flintstones* is not normally a part of the school's curriculum — not the sort of video title (like a nature documentary or a *Sesame Street* episode) that would be approved for classroom viewing” (p. 4). Preschool children learn quickly, through lessons directly and indirectly offered, that the experiences valued in their schools are of a different order than those they might choose for themselves,

that they are not supposed to talk about TV in this school, where books are valued, where tapes are rarely shown, where show-and-





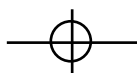
tell objects are censored. TV takes its place in the repertoire of forbidden references, like those to smelly feet or body parts or diapers. In fact, TV songs or jingles are often sung moments before or after crude language or jokes are voiced. No wonder many teachers hate popular children's TV, when it is associated with bedlam, rule-breaking, forbidden activities (pp. 4-5).

The carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984; Grace & Tobin, 2002) erupts all too quickly in classrooms where children's unofficial interests are allowed to prevail.

In part, adult resistance to the allure of popular culture for young children reflects visions of childhood innocence that persist despite much evidence to the contrary. Children allowed to write or draw or construct the images and stories that are most intriguing to them may well, as Dyson (1997) suggests,

take refuge in stories that strike adult educators as not only constraining (i.e., unimaginative, derivative) but downright dangerous (i.e., filled with the complexities of power and identity, of gender and race). "Innocent" children, adults may feel, should be free from such complexities, free to play on playground and paper. But children's imaginative play is all about freedom from their status as powerless children. Tales about good guys and bad ones, rescuers and victims, boyfriends and girlfriends allow children to fashion worlds in which they make decisions about characters and plots, actors and actions. Thus, for children as for adults, freedom is a verb, a becoming; it is experienced as an expanded sense of agency, of possibility for choice and action. (p. 166)

As Brent and Marjorie Wilson (1982) emphasized in explaining why children draw, it is just this capacity to engage in world making, to document the present, explore the past and anticipate the future, to invent scenarios and control events, that makes the creation of images and objects, visual and verbal narratives, so compelling to children. In other historical moments, those captured by the developmental theories that undergirded art education practice during most of our lifetimes, the content of children's drawings emerged largely from direct personal experience, supplemented, frequently,

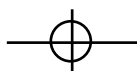


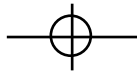


by more fantastic speculations that came from books or films or stories shared by those known to the child (Thompson, 2002). These sources retain their presence in the drawings of contemporary children, their potency increased many times over by the wholesale immersion of this culture in a “hypertextuality” (Kincheloe, 2002) that has, in many significant respects, altered the relationship between adult and child, as both consumers and creators of culture.

An examination of children’s drawings reveals the range of mediated sources upon which young children rely as they create drawings reflecting the interests they bring from the “unofficial” spheres of childhood to a relatively open classroom activity, drawing in sketchbooks. Images with sources in visual culture constitute a category of young children’s drawings that bears an unusually close relationship to the world of objects, and suggests the particularly irresistible appeal for children of characters and stories presented as intertextual — or, more crassly, through “total marketing” (Fleming, 1996, p. 117) strategies which tie together animated programs, books, films, and toys in a sort of blitzkrieg mode of product placement. While many of the figures drawn by children in preschool and early elementary years tend to be highly conceptual, simplified, almost generic in nature, operating on what Wilson and Wilson (1982) describe as a “simplicity principle,” even the most rudimentary representations of characters drawn from media sources attest to the artist’s attempt to specify the unique attributes of that particular subject, to capture the distinguishing physical traits and accoutrements of dress, cuisine, and weaponry that set the Ninja Turtle Donatello apart from his companion, Michelangelo, for example. Homages of this sort betray an unexpected competence in observation and depiction of relevant details, even as they follow an expected evolutionary sequence, from early depictions of figures standing alone against an undifferentiated ground toward an increasing interest in portraying action and interactions within settings that are more fully described.

These early appropriations of media-inspired imagery appear to be accomplished best in drawn images — or so it seems when children’s worlds are observed only from the margins of the classroom. Children typically have fewer opportunities to work with materials that lend themselves to





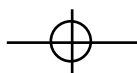
construction or collage, and perhaps because such materials are more resistant and more exotic, children tend to create more abstract images when such opportunities arise. It may also be the case that teachers provide more explicit direction and establish constraints in children's work with these materials that preclude the incursion of these interests. Children's direct use of these toys as props and premises for dramatic and constructive play — in everyday activities that could be considered the genetic precursors of performance and installation — is largely relegated to play at home and in the neighborhood.

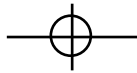
In some respects, this division between the official and unofficial worlds of children's culture is necessary and appropriate. As Kincheloe (2002) observes,

the new childhood seems to distinguish itself from adulthood on the basis of an affective oppositional stance toward it...Children...seek to distinguish themselves from those with whom they are most frequently in contact — adults...In this context, it is interesting to observe how children — particularly those from middle-class and above backgrounds — are drawn to cultural productions and even food (e.g., McDonald's) that transgress parental boundaries of propriety, good taste, and healthfulness (p. 80).

North American children have become adept practitioners of "consumption as self-creation" (Scott, 2002, p. 64), "actively creating their own identities that are beyond the reach of adults" (Fleming, 1996). There is, in this, a mixture of resistance to adult standards of quality and propriety, assertion of control, and affirmation of children's own power to construct an autonomous culture in which they are the experts and guides.

And, significantly, there is choice, exercised both in the selection of objects of play, and in the further choice of which of the array of such objects children choose to memorialize in drawings or elaborate in the scenarios of solitary or social play. As Dan Fleming points out in his book, *Powerplay: Toys as popular culture* (1996), fully three-fourths of the toys purchased in the US are "licensed," that is, associated with some media character that exists in another form. The Shirley temple doll of the 1920s was the first such media tie-in. But, as Fleming observes, "Today it seems impossible to

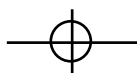




conceive of the toy industry as being anything other than dependent on a popular culture which shapes and structures the meanings carried by toys” (p. 40). The proliferation of toys spawned by popular culture renders many traditional observations about the ways play functions for children obsolete. For example, visual realism, faithfulness to the original, matters greatly in contemporary objects of play: Handcrafted approximations are decidedly inferior substitutes for exact replicas incorporating all the features relevant to the smooth operation of the original. Plastic action heroes virtually demand to be cast in reenactments that hew to the scripts as given, incorporating the child’s knowledge of the “real” situations in which such characters might find themselves. These scenarios can only be reenacted robustly and authentically if all the relevant parts, props, and players are at hand. This responsibility for truth to form can be a heavy one: Arguably play is constrained as energetically as it is promoted by a plastic tub brimming with X-Men and all that they survey.

It is possible to interpret the visual culture of childhood as a culture manufactured for children by adults who understand them poorly. This is a notion worth considering, even in regard to those items, classic children’s toys and books, of which most adults would heartily approve. However, as Dan Fleming points out, “On a more upbeat note, it is worth reminding ourselves of the sheer imaginative energy which children invest in the playthings of their mass culture; and it is very much their culture” (Fleming, 1996, p. 37), reliant upon their choices. Fleming (1996) asks if the success of a particular product line is ever

fully comprehensible as simply the accumulation, the adding on top of each other, of a young organism’s developmental urge to play, the promotional effect of a TV series, and the inherent tactile or visual attractiveness of the toy as an object? That stacking up of pressures and appeals certainly says something about what is going on. Examining things just a bit more closely, however, soon reveals, as an entirely distinctive feature of children, toys and popular culture in their fascinating interrelationships, a certain unmistakable “synchronization” across those areas. When it all comes together around the Ninja Turtles or the Transformers, this





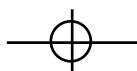
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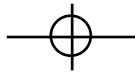
powerful “synchronisation” is clearly more than the sum of the parts — clear if for no other reason than that other similar parts do not stack up to the same effect. (pp. 15-16)

In a recent column in the New York Times Magazine (February 15, 2004), Rob Walker chronicled the success of a collection of slightly mis-shapen stuffed creatures known as Uglydolls which have, so far, been most popular with young adults. Walker discussed with the dolls’ designers their plans to expand into a childhood market, and the likelihood that the dolls would appeal to this newly targeted group:

Each character comes with a tag explaining the character’s back story and how they all “know” one another and what each one is like. Wage works diligently at Super Mart, although, poignantly, no one at the store knows he works there; Jeero, meanwhile, wishes Wage and Babo wouldn’t ask him so many questions, since he “just wants to sit on the couch with you and eat some snacks.” Hits with kids like the American Girl dolls have a similar narrative glue. To Tracy Edwards, the Bameys vice president who oversees the chain’s home and kids businesses, the Uglydoll characterizations are important: “The stories, in the end, sell the dolls.” (p. 28)

And yet more than narrative possibilities are at work in children’s selections among the multiple choices made available by the culture. Evidence of this selective appropriation may be seen in the highly discriminating process through which images and objects are chosen as subjects for children’s voluntary drawings. Many equally beloved images, which seem to function in very similar ways in children’s imaginative lives, seldom or never find their way into children’s drawings. The paradigmatic fashion doll, Barbie herself, is rarely drawn, though fashion models and lavishly attired women appear frequently among young girls’ voluntary drawings. The most cherished texts of children’s literature, such as *Where the wild things are* or *Winnie the Pooh*, are seldom spontaneously adapted as subjects for dramatic, constructive, or symbolic play, while *Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers* seem ideally suited to this purpose. This mysterious process of selection provides continual demonstration of children’s agency, their





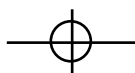
identity as “social actors shaping as well as shaped by their circumstances” (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998, p. 6), and their continual involvement in the construction of their own distinctive visual culture.

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Discussion

Undeniably, the way that adults envision childhood affects the clarity with which we are able to “see” children. As William Ayers (1993) poses the problem, “When we look out over our classrooms, what do we see?” (p. 28) What we make of the “ket aesthetic” and the children who subscribe to it is largely a matter of perception. Typically, as Andrew Stremmel (2002) notes, “We regard childhood as provisional, preparatory, and subordinate to adulthood as opposed to a unique and distinct time and place in the development of a person. We often disregard children’s problems, squelch their creativity, deny their emotions, and generally ignore or diminish the significance of their daily experiences” (p. 43). So accustomed are we to considering the limitations of children, Stremmel observes, that university students enrolled in teacher education programs frequently register more surprise at children’s competence and kindness, than they do at instances of misbehavior.

This systematic underestimation of children’s competence and integrity reflects a widespread but depleted “image of the child” (Malaguzzi, 1993), a perspective that is decisive in determining our orientations and actions toward children. Patricia Tarr (2003) recognizes that competing images of the child prevail in contemporary North American society: Adults may envision the child as a cute object; as a “wiseass”; a consumer; an innocent; a tabula rasa. In each case, whether they relate to the child as parents, researchers, teachers, or merely as bystanders, they will act toward the child in a manner consistent with the image of children that they hold; as Malaguzzi notes, it is difficult “to act contrary to this internal image.” Daniel Walsh (2002) suggests that adults tend to orient themselves toward an “eternal” child — timeless, universal, essentially unchanging — rather than recognizing the situated, specific, “historical child” that stands before them. This tendency is apparent when children exceed expectations or defy normative assumptions in the classroom, in moments when teachers may deny children’s ability to do what





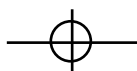
they are clearly doing at that very moment — to participate in prolonged discussion of a work of art, for example, or to draw from observation, or to collaborate in an undertaking.

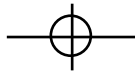
A more abundant image of the child permeates the educational philosophy and practice in the preschools of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy, widely considered to be exemplary pedagogical sites. Loris Malaguzzi (1994) explained:

It's necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child we need to hold. Those who have the image of the child as fragile, incomplete, weak, made of glass, gain something from this belief only for themselves. We don't need that as an image of children. Instead of always giving children protection, we need to give them the recognition of their rights and of their strengths. (n.p.)

As James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) acknowledge, we live in “an era marked by both a sustained assault on childhood and a concern for children” (p. 3). A widespread cultural ambivalence toward children influences the provisions made for parenting and teaching, and shapes the basic understandings of children on which we operate. There is a movement evident in sociology and other fields to recognize children as “social actors” rather than “a defective form of adult” (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998, p. 96; see also Prout, 2000). This shift of academic focus occurs at the same time that “Children are arguably now more hemmed in by surveillance and social regulation than ever before” (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998, p. 7). In an age in which parents fear for the physical and psychological safety of their children, the limited forms of autonomy once available to children have been further reduced.

Writing more than two decades ago, Brent and Marjorie Wilson (1982) acknowledged the role that the arts play in allowing each of us, children and adults alike, to imaginatively explore worlds beyond those we directly experience. They suggested that children may be particularly dependent upon the interventions of artists, writers, and scientists who facilitate the process of “coming to know.” They posed the question:



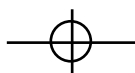


what of the special plight of children, who have the most learning to do and the fewest means of attaining it? Firsthand exploration is the furthest from their grasp — imagine going to India when you aren't allowed to cross the street alone — and symbolic exploration of realities through the arts and other media is still out of reach because children have not yet attained the skill of “reading” books, maps, formulae, and diagrams as adults easily do. There is, however, one notable exception, in media that are primarily visual and correspond in at least some ways to children's firsthand experience of the world — television, films, drawings, and paintings...These visual symbols — pictures — provide children with their primary symbolic means of understanding reality. (pp. 22-23).

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This fundamental insight into the primacy of graphic languages in young children's coming to know the world has been enacted to great advantage in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, where graphic representations serve as a primary means through which children represent, expand, and communicate their understandings. As the work created by children in Reggio Emilia and in other supportive contexts attests, children's facility as interpreters and producers of visual imagery is far more sophisticated than we may suspect, when demonstrated in contexts in which children themselves are seen as “rich, strong, and powerful.”

As Wilson and Wilson (1982) pointed out, children both select and create images in order to frame the puzzling and amorphous questions that they confront in the process of coming into the world, to render them manageable and available for continued scrutiny. These questions focus on matters of life and death, identity, conflict, values challenged and confirmed. Children's intrinsic determination to make meaning of the world propels them to make use of the resources at their disposal in the particular historical moment in which they find themselves, the “tools and symbol systems” (Vygotsky, 1978) of their culture. Children accomplish the construction of meaning in various ways, through play and work, in dialogue with peers and adults, in their active engagement with the world, and in piecing together bits of conversation overheard and, perhaps, only partially understood.



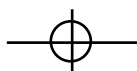


The artifacts and activities that comprise children's culture can facilitate this process of making meaning, for individual children as well as the peers who endorse and enjoy similar pleasures. Fleming (1992), for example, recognizes contemporary toys as suited to contemporary times: He describes them as "harmonizing objects," which serve children's attempts to make sense of an increasingly confusing world, one in which the horrors of war, the effects of poverty, the banality of evil occur in plain sight:

The bad things out there, as perceived by children, are now so numerous that toys are increasingly impelled to take on forms capable of drawing those things into childhood play, in order to satisfy the child's determination to deal with them (such "determination" being a structural feature of play rather than a conscious aim). In other words, childhood requires objects that are flexible enough to bring into some kind of balance a variety of feelings and meanings which might otherwise have remained disturbingly at odds with one another. (p. 62)

There are at least two ways to conceptualize the culture of childhood. The first perspective, characteristic of what is known as "the new social studies of childhood," sees children's culture as an inevitable and largely benign result of children's collective lives, their existence in groups. William Corsaro (1997), for example, suggests that traditional theories of socialization imply an individualistic and directional process in which the child is cast as passive recipient of adult culture. He offers, in place of the concept of socialization, the notion of "interpretive reproduction," to recognize "the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society" (p.18) and their simultaneous reliance on the adult world and its "cultural routines" (p. 19). Corsaro explains:

Children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. The term reproduction captures the idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture, but are actively contributing to cultural production and change. The term also implies that children are, by their very





participation in society, constrained by the existing social structure and by societal reproduction. (p. 18).

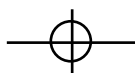
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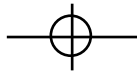
Corsaro stresses that “children are always participating in and part of two cultures — children’s and adults’ — and these cultures are intricately interwoven” (p. 26). Within local cultures of childhood, rituals and artifacts that bind children within classrooms and cliques are created with ideas borrowed freely from the adult world. “Peer culture is public, collective, and performative” (Corsaro, 1997, p. 95). As Allison James (1993) puts it, the culture of childhood is “a context within which children socialise one another as well as socialise with each other” (p. 94). Even local peer cultures may entail a certain oppositional stance toward adults and the control they exert; at the very least, adults may be excluded from its operations.

A second, more ominous perspective emphasizes the role of distant adults in the creation of culture for children, the conviction that “traditional notions of childhood as a time of innocence and adult-dependency have been challenged by children’s access to corporate-produced popular culture” (Kincheloe, 2002, p. 83). Changes in the cultural experience of children have created a more mediated, more vicarious, more globalized and commercial culture, with significant implications for the formation of children’s cultural and personal identities (Kincheloe, 2002; Christensen & James, 2000), and for their relationships to adults. Joe Kincheloe (2002) summarizes his interviews with children about the role of media in their lives:

In the new information environment and the new childhood that accompanies it, attention to television, Internet, video games, music CDs, videos, and other productions is the vocation of children. They are the experts in this domain and their knowledge surpasses almost every adul...Through their new access to information children know that there exists an esoteric knowledge of adulthood and that adults are hiding information from them. (p. 96)

Gaile Canella (1997) points out that this process has long been in motion: “Originating with adults, child-rearing manuals, bedtime stories, literature, and mass-media impose on children a particular knowledge that dictates need. Very little evidence exists for the presence of child discourse





and knowledge in society. Younger human beings are not heard without the filter of those who are older” (p. 35).

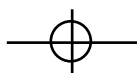
Within this perspective, children can be seen as hapless victims of commercial culture or as relatively powerful and well-informed agents. Joseph Tobin (2004) writes:

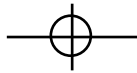
In the first scenario, [popular culture] is seen as an Althusserian apparatus, sinister, powerful, and systematic in achieving its seduction and interpellation of child consumers, who are seen as lacking agency and the capacity to resist commercial appeals and industry-launched fads...In the second scenario it is the children who...hold the cards...The second scenario is reflective of the much more upbeat American school of cultural studies that emphasizes the pleasure, agency, and resistance of consumers (even when they are children). (p. 8)

It is the playful and subversive nature of kinderculture, the deliberately transgressive choices that children make among the options made available to them, that testify most clearly to children’s capacity to contribute to cultural life. Ellen Seiter (1999) suggests that this more “‘forgiving’ theory of media effects” is common among teachers who have ample opportunity to observe children, to witness what they do with the found materials of children’s culture. Nicholas Paley (1995) notes, children operate within the culture as it is provided to them as bricoleurs, ready to improvise with materials ready at hand, to transform what is given in order to make it newly meaningful to them.

Implications for teaching and research

Jo Alice Leeds (1989) and Diana Korzenik (1981) are among those who have pondered the relationship between adult aesthetic judgments and the valuation of child art that prevails at a particular historical moment. As Leeds pointed out, attitudes toward children and childhood are equally decisive. An examination of the role of commercial culture in children’s artmaking raises innumerable questions about artmaking, its origins and sources, about “why children draw.”

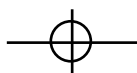


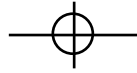


What are the implications of this discussion for teaching and understanding child art? Where does the “ket aesthetic” fit in our understanding of graphic activity in childhood and in the curriculum? One of the basic tenets of the “creative self-expression” movement, early in the last century, stipulated that art education should draw its content from children’s life experiences. This dictum may have been more readily endorsed in theory than it was embodied in practice; adults are notoriously inept judges of what is of interest to children, though children are remarkably willing to play along much of the time. But, as Patricia Tarr insists, “Curricula need to take up children’s questions rather than ignoring or glossing over their issues” (2003, p. 7). That is, we need to find ways to understand more clearly how children’s life experiences, including those derived from a commercial culture which we view with skepticism, can enter and inform the pedagogical spaces we inhabit with them. We need to turn a clear and critical eye to the images of the child and the constructions of childhood that underlie our teaching and research, in order to better understand the world of contemporary childhood and the accommodations we might make to the experience of being a twenty-first century kid. Anne Dyson (1997) suggests that the exclusion of these interests from the classroom may well undermine children’s creative and critical capacities and the democratic mission of schooling:

Curriculum must be undergirded by a belief that meaning is found, not in artifacts themselves, but in the social events through which those artifacts are produced and used. Children have agency in the construction of their own imaginations — not unlimited, unstructured agency, but, nonetheless, agency: They appropriate cultural materials to participate in and explore their worlds, especially through narrative play and story. Their attraction to particular media programs and films suggests that they find in that material powerful and compelling images. If official curricula make no space for this agency, then the schools risk reinforcing societal divisions in children’s orientations to each other, to cultural art forms, and to school itself. (p. 181)

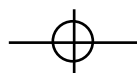
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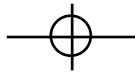




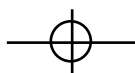
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Author's Note:

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Researching children's popular culture: The cultural spaces of childhood. New York: Routledge. Google Scholar. Morss, J. R. (1996). Thompson, C. M. (2006). The ket aesthetic: Visual culture in childhood. In J. Fineberg (Ed.), *When we were young*. (pp. 31-43) Berkeley: University of California Press. Google Scholar. Thompson, C. M., & Bales, S. (1991). Childhood in literature is a theme within writing concerned with depictions of adolescence. Childhood writing is often told from either the perspective of the child or that of an adult reflecting on their childhood. Novels either based on or depicting childhood present social commentaries rooted in the views and experiences of an individual. Childhood literature often offers moral imperative for the reader to combine social codes with entertainment.