



ARTICLE

The Business of Branded Enchantment

Ambivalence and disjuncture in the global children's culture industry

BERYL LANGER

LaTrobe University

Abstract. Mapping the global distribution of children's consumer culture and its conditions of consumption and production, this article argues that while the continuing salience of sacralized understandings of 'childhood' lends enchantment to the means of consumption in the children's culture industry, it also intensifies moral scrutiny of the industry's products and conditions of production. The article examines the strategic use of sacralized understandings of childhood by both the industry and its critics and considers the disjunctive global flows of enchantment, exploitation and critical intervention mediated by information communication technology. It draws on a range of sources, including public domain information on corporations and industry associations, unobtrusive observation of sites of children's consumption, the packaging and promotion of children's toys, games and entertainment, ILO and NGO research on toy production in Export Processing Zones, academic and activist discourse on global consumer capitalism and recent theoretical work in the sociology of childhood.

Key words

childhood • consumer culture • exploitation • global market • profane • sacred

THIS ARTICLE REFLECTS on children's place in the global cultural economy, as constituted by the 'children's culture industry'.¹ It explores the political economy of the industry, the uneasy intersection of its conditions of production with its promotional rhetoric and means of consumption, and the inherent instability of its relation to contested evocations of childhood

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Vol 4(2): 251–277 1469-5405 [DOI: 10.1177/1469540504043685]
www.sagepublications.com

on the shifting ideological terrain of millennial capitalism (see Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000). At the beginning of the 21st century, 19th-century oppositions between the 'sacred child' and 'profane market' compete with late 20th-century constructions of children as 'cool' and 'media savvy', and the moral taint associated with profiting from children is challenged by capitalism as a 'religion' which, as Deutschman (2001: 32–56) argues, offers redemption through the 'promise of absolute wealth'. Nonetheless, global capital and its critics continue to invoke the sacred child, whether to expand the market or critique it. The article explores this paradox, drawing on Appadurai's (1990: 296) analysis of globalization as a 'complex, overlapping disjunctive order' to frame discussion of the global children's culture industry as one that rests on an ambivalent fusion of exploitation and enchantment.

First, a disclaimer: the article is exploratory and makes no claim to being comprehensive or definitive. Neither 'globalization' nor 'childhood' is neutral; both terms are loaded with moral and political baggage. According to Mattelart, globalization refers 'not just to an actual process but also to a project, not just to fragments of reality but also to firmly established beliefs' (2002: 592). Childhood, too, can be viewed as a project, defined according to whether it is framed by the tropes of 'nostalgia' or 'development'. In late modernity, according to Jenks, the child has become 'the site or the relocation of discourses concerning stability, integration, and the social bond' (1996: 106). This sets up an opposition between childhood and negative constructions of globalization as destructive of 'the social' within 'local' cultures. Conversely, childhood has discursive affinity with globalization when 'made intelligible' via the trope of development (1996: 36), as in International Council of Toy Industries (ICTI) press releases which position the children's culture industry as catering to the 'natural' emergence of 'real' childhood, defined as a space of play, for which economic development is a precondition:

Play is critical to the healthy development and well-being of all children, and transcends cultures, ages and time zones. (ICTI, 1999)

As more and more people begin to prosper and afford toys for their children, toy business throughout the world becomes more significant. (ICTI, 2001b)

This link between children, play and toys serves to legitimize the incorporation of the 'sacralized' child into the 'profane' market. Zelizer's

argument that 'the relationship between the market and non-economic value is not static' (1985: 213) is relevant here. The elision of childhood with play, fun and toys situates toyshops and toy makers as part of the enchanted landscape of childhood, which naturalizes and sacralizes the children's market. It also, however, makes toys problematic commodities – both 'sacred' and 'profane' (Durkheim, 1965) – and subjects toy makers to standards of 'moral accounting' associated with childhood rather than 'mere commerce'. Given the conditions of global commodity production, this makes corporate branding in the children's market an inherently tricky business.

While the toys, games, films, television, food and branded 'stuff' marketed to children among the most visible manifestations of global consumer culture in everyday life, theorists of globalization and consumer capitalism have shown little interest in children. There are monographs and edited collections dedicated to the discussion of children *and* consumption or globalization (see Cook, 2002; Kline, 1993; Seabrook, 2001; Seiter, 1995; Stephens, 1995), but the categories 'child' and 'children' are rarely included as subjects of discussion by social theorists interested in consumption or globalization as such. There are, for example, no index listings for children in the contents of boundary-defining texts in the 'new' field of the sociology of consumption by Corrigan (1997), Miles (1998), Miller (1998), Ritzer (1999, 2001)² or Slater (1997). Children are similarly absent from field-defining books on globalization, with the notable exception of Albrow's (1996) *The Global Age*, where they do make an appearance, albeit briefly. This absence is arguably problematic. It ignores a mounting body of recent scholarship on the social and historical constitution of childhood (see, for example, Cook, 2000, 2002; Jenks, 1996; Kline, 1993; Zelizer, 1985), implicitly endorsing the neoliberal view of the 'consuming global subject' as already existing and 'natural'. Childhood is a key moment in the social formation of global consumers, and children a major target market for global capital. Analysis of children's place in the global cultural economy is thus relevant to the sociology of consumption and globalization; it should not be confined to the sociology of childhood.

CHILDREN AND THE GLOBAL MARKET

Ewen's (1976: 139–49) account of the pivotal role of children and young people in reshaping the material practices of immigrant families to 'produce consumers' for US industry in the early decades of the 20th century provides a useful point of entry to understanding children's place in the global cultural economy. He argues that relations between parents and

children were reshaped through two sets of oppositions – youth/age and modern/old-fashioned – linking ‘youth’ and ‘modernity’ to consumption and positioning established patterns of thrift and home production as old-fashioned. A parallel process can now be observed in the global marketplace, with parents and grandparents led by the tiny hand into McDonald’s restaurants, from Beijing to San Salvador (Langer, 1998: 171; Yan, 1997: 65). Ethnographers rightly point to the cultural particularity of what McDonald’s means and how its restaurants are used in different countries; they also provide examples of the old giving in to the demands of the young for burgers and coke rather than noodles and tea (Watson, 1997: 101). Cross’s (2002: 442, this issue) characterization of children as ‘valves of adult desire’ is crucial here, positioning the ‘wondrous child’ as both product and ‘pied piper’ of capitalist modernity. Adult pleasure in children’s delight draws families into global markets in both ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries, not least through Disney and McDonald’s, whose corporate logos are metonyms for global culture. Ritzer (1999: 30) notes the significance of

the role that McDonald’s and Disney, alone and in concert, play in hooking children on consumption. . . . Both clearly recognize that their present and future depend on attracting young children. Of course, children grow up to be adult consumers, many of whom eventually will have children of their own and begin the cycle anew.

The incorporation of children into the market is part of a broader social logic through which capitalism reconstitutes life stages as cradle-to-grave markets, as in the 1950s construction of ‘teenagers’ through consumption of age-specific culture and the recent emergence of consumer lifestyles for ‘seniors’. In the last quarter of the 20th century, children proved a particularly profitable ‘frontier’ for global capital, both as ‘sites of consumption’ and independent consumers within an age-segmented market for toys, games, clothing and entertainment, all subject to cycles of fashion and obsolescence. One of the key strategies through which children were ‘hooked’ to this logic was through the articulation of entertainment and product spin-offs – a process that did not so much begin in the late 1970s as move into a new phase of accelerated hyperconsumption. What distinguished the entertainment product cycle that emerged in the wake of the release of *Star Wars* in 1978 was its global reach, the accelerating speed of the fashion cycles to which children’s play was bound, the pervasiveness of the product universe into which children were drawn and the magnitude of the corporate assault through which childhood was reconstructed as

something to be consumed (Cook, 2001; Engelhart, 1987; Giroux, 2000; Kline, 1989, 1993; Langer, 1989, 1994; Seabrook, 1985; Seiter, 1995). By the end of the millennium, the equation between children and consumption was effectively normalized, particularly, but not exclusively, in the North. To be a child is to be a consumer within a very specific market. Its boundaries are outlined in *What Kids Buy and Why* (Acuff, 1997), 'a guide to the successful creation, development, and marketing of products and programs targeted to today's youth ages birth through the teen years' and dedicated to 'the preciousness and sacredness of the hearts and minds of children everywhere':

'Products' include virtually anything targeted for sale to kids, such as toys, games, sporting goods, foods, software, publications, clothing, and such personal hygiene items as shampoo or toothpaste. 'Programs' include such entertainment programming as feature films, TV animation and electronic games, and such 'edutainment' as educational software. (1997: 2)

The entertainment product cycle can be seen as inherently 'anomic' (Durkheim, 1970: 247) in that it generates a state of perpetual dissatisfaction by stimulating desire for the new and redefining what preceded it as useless junk. This process drains all meaning from the word 'enough', situating it as an anachronism from a bygone era when toys and games were finite resources passed down from older to younger siblings and cousins. Such notions have no place in what Sklair terms the 'culture-ideology of consumerism' (1998: 136) required by a system that depends on continuous consumption. He argues that 'the self-imposed necessity that capitalism must be ever expanding on a global scale [depends on] selling more and more goods and services to people', including those for whom 'basic needs [have] already been comfortably met' (1998: 148). According to this logic, the global children's culture industry can only be sustained if children can 'be relied on to keep buying' when their rooms are filled to overflowing with toys and games. Hence, the emergence of 'commoditoys', characterized by a capacity to stimulate rather than satisfy longing and a short but intense 'shelf life' as objects of desire. Their essential feature is that satiation is endlessly postponed. Each act of consumption is a beginning rather than an end, the first or next step in an endless series for which each particular toy is an advertisement: first, because its package is also a catalogue; and, second, because it is part of a tantalizing universe without which the one just purchased is somehow incomplete (Langer, 1989). The presence of 'marked and marketed spaces' for children (Cook, 2003: 148) in chain

stores, shopping malls, fast food restaurants and superstores maximizes children's exposure to the universe of 'commodity' possibility. What Ritzer (1999) identifies as 'the new means of consumption' thus play a major role in reproducing the cycle of perpetual desire in which consumer capitalist childhood is embedded.

Estimates of profit generated by children's incorporation into 'the culture-ideology of consumerism' are necessarily loose, but available indicators suggest that they are substantial. In 1989, for example, the Standard and Poor Index of the top 100 US companies ranked toys number one (Seiter, 1995: 196). In the same year, according to a report by the American Consumers' Union (1990), worldwide sales of licensed products (lunch-boxes, backpacks, pyjamas, t-shirts, breakfast cereals, and so on) reached \$64 billion – up from \$10 billion in 1980. Ten years later, the Consumers' Union (1998: 136) estimated that elementary age children in the USA had independent spending power of around \$15 billion per year and 'influenced' another \$160 billion. Marketing psychologist Dan Acuff (1997: 1) puts an even higher figure of over \$200 billion per year on combined purchase and purchase influence 'kid power' in the USA, which is consistent with James McNeal's (1998: 38) calculation that children's aggregate spending roughly doubled during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and tripled during the 1990s. By the end of that decade, American children directly controlled \$24.4 billion per year and influenced the spending of another \$300 billion (Linn, 2000a).³ Global sales of toys and video games in 1999 totalled \$71 billion⁴ – a fraction of children's global contribution to corporate profit through the purchase of food, drink, licensed clothing, sneakers, sports equipment, computers, movies and theme park attendance, currently estimated at more than \$450 billion (Gotting, 2003). In short, over the past 20 years, the television/film/merchandise strategy of the children's culture industry has produced children as a lucrative global market⁵ embedded in a culture that holds it to be a universal truth that each child has the right to the pursuit of fun, excitement and consumer durables.

Global circulation of the belief that 'real' childhood is organized by a combination of toys, fun, games, fantasy and controlled adventure, appropriately packaged for 'age' and 'stage', is essential to market expansion not in the sense that cultural construction *precedes* the market, but in the sense that this version of childhood is constituted *through* the market. The two are inseparable. To borrow from Jeremy Seabrook's (2001: 50) observation on the global reach of consumerism in general, the global expansion of the children's market involves the spread of both an 'iconography' of childhood and 'of all the objects' promoted as indispensable to its realization. These

objects are everywhere – as likely to be found in Manila's SMMegamall and the department stores of Siam Square in Bangkok as in Los Angeles or Toronto. Small girls wheeling Barbie carry-on luggage can be spotted in airports around the world, as can Nintendo-clicking boys in branded sweatshirts and sneakers. So, too, is the 'iconography'. The discourses of childhood through which children are positioned as consumers and sites of consumption circulate within the global 'ideoscape' – a 'concatenation of ideas, terms and images' (Appadurai, 1990: 299) of childhood, which underpins both expansion of the market for children's culture and criticism of its conditions of production.

MAPPING THE GLOBAL MARKET

Children's spending power is unevenly distributed, both within and between countries, but the market for toys and video games is nonetheless global. Of the \$69,493m spent on toys and video games in the year 2000, for example, \$30,949m was spent in North America, \$16,059m in Europe, \$16,942m in Asia, \$2,768m in Latin and South America, \$972m in the Middle East, \$1,370m in Oceania and \$433m in Africa (ICTI, 2001a). North Americans spend almost twice as much on children's toys and games as Europeans and Asians combined, but the market for children's consumer culture is not confined to the affluent North. Substantial markets in newly industrializing countries (French and Crabbe, 1998; Robison and Goodman, 1996) suggest that the lives of children in the South cannot be fully understood in terms of the 'wide-eyed child, smiling or starving' evoked in the fundraising campaigns of aid agencies (Coulter, 1989). Conversely, statistics on per capita spending are a poor guide to the complexity of children's relation to consumer culture in the North. Elizabeth Chin's (2001) work, for example, shows that consumption among poor and working-class black children in the USA is constrained by an awareness of limited resources and family need. Comparable indications of the way that children's participation in global consumer culture is framed by family income emerged in focus group interviews conducted in Melbourne, Australia in 1997 and 1998. In one inner city primary school, which served two distinct social groups (professional middle-class 'gentrifiers' and recently arrived immigrants living in public housing), things taken for granted by children of the first were objects of wistful longing for children of the second, who would say things like, 'I'd love to have a McDonald's party, but my mum couldn't afford it' (Langer and Farrar, 2003: 122).

The new global division of labour produces polarization within countries (and cities) as well as between them, so that children's participation in

global consumer culture depends not just on whether they are located in the North or the South, but on their parents' position within class relations that cut across that divide (Bauman, 2002: 83; Sassen, 1991: 251; Sklair, 1998: 137). This is not to suggest that the gap between rich and poor countries or between the industrial and newly industrializing world is of no consequence. These divisions are at once obvious and embedded in regional sales figures for children's commodity culture. However, aggregate statistics for Europe and Asia give no indication of the differences in per capita spending of the rich and poor countries in each region, and the division between rich and poor countries, which underpins the location of toy production in the Export Processing Zones⁶ (EPZs) of densely populated countries in Asia and Latin America, elides the division between the rich and the poor *within* these countries.

In India and China, for example, population size, extreme poverty and an expanding middle class combine to provide cheap labour and market potential – a tantalizing prospect for producers and marketers of global children's culture. Thus, while UNICEF (2003) estimates that 35 percent of the population of India live on less than \$1 per day, global marketing network IQPC (2000) promoted its 'Kid Power India 2000' conference on the promise that 'kids in India are becoming increasingly affluent' and are 'recognized as an important market in terms of absolute size, spending power and purchasing influence'. A similar opposition is evident in competing discourses about China as a prime site of global toy production, on the one hand, and consumption, on the other. Many of the world's toys are produced in the EPZs of southern China, but China's importance to the children's culture industry lies as much in the market potential presented by its urban middle class as in the surplus rural labour⁷ available for work in its EPZs. Advance publicity for 'Kid Power China 2003', a conference on 'understanding kids as consumers in China, and marketing to them effectively', informs potential participants that 'in a typical urban Chinese family, children influence purchases 69 percent of the time' and that 'children in the big cities have an aggregate yearly income of \$5 billion in terms of weekly allowance, gifts from elders and pay for chores'. 'Chinese children', we are told, 'can't be ignored [because] China's one-child policy has created powerful and vocal kid consumers with huge buying leverage'. As is usual in Kid Power conference promotion, the prospective client is invited to 'get into the mind of a child for two days' and 'fully understand what makes them tick' and is presented with such questions as 'Could you predict the next big thing for kids in China?' and 'Are you using kid emotions to leverage pester power to your advantage?' (IQPC, 2003).

Reports of an investigation into public disorder triggered by a McDonald's Snoopy doll promotion in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou in April 2001 provide independent support for the claim that kid consumers in China are 'powerful', 'vocal' and 'can't be ignored'. The promotion 'turned violent' when 'dwindling supplies of the hot-selling cartoon canine dog triggered a run on the US fast food giant's restaurants', which led to 'scuffles among customers and a smashed window at one location'. According to a Reuters (2002) report on the findings of the investigation:

Disgruntled Guangzhou residents flooded McDonald's hot-lines with complaints after queuing for hours without getting their hands on a doll, state media have said. Parents complained their children's education was on the line as disappointed students who collected anything but the full set of six dolls lacked the will to pursue their studies.

The number of Snoopy dolls reportedly sold (233,140) suggests that 'pester power' has considerable 'leverage' in urban Chinese families and that it works through connecting fun to development – in this case, at least, by positioning the 'treat' as a precondition for study rather than its reward.

The consuming child who can raise riots through pester power represents one version of childhood in China. A radically different account is embedded in NGO discourse about labour rights in factories where so much of what children consume is produced. This discourse operates on two levels. One focuses on the age of toy factory workers, constructed as 'little more than children themselves' or, on occasion, as 'child labour', a category constructed in relation to 'fairly recent' western conceptions (Seabrook, 2001: 39) of childhood as being under 18 years of age. The second, more extensive in relation to China, documents the wages, occupational hazards, hours of work and living conditions of the largely rural migrant labour force in terms that would preclude the possibility of participation in global children's culture by their children. See, for example, reports on work conditions in toy factories in China produced by the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee (HKCIC, 1999, 2000a, b), Asia Monitor (Wong and Frost, 2000) and the Hong Kong Coalition for the Safe Production of Toys (2003).

AMBIVALENCE AND THE GLOBAL CHILDREN'S MARKET

Incorporating children into the global market is a profitable business. It is also, at the level of ideology, an unstable one. The advertising and

promotional discourse through which groups like Kid Power Exchange position children as a 'lucrative market' provides compelling evidence that childhood is no longer bound by the opposition between the sacred child and profane market,⁸ but the legacy of ambivalence generated by this opposition has not disappeared. Children's relation to consumer capitalism is subject to continuous negotiation over where boundaries should be drawn and whether or not they have been breached – even at the turn of the 21st century, when, as Cross puts it, 'the child and consumption merged in the look of wondrous innocence that challenged the older image of the sheltered child' (2002: 445). Jenks's (1996: 106) argument that late modern society has 're-adopted the child' as a 'form of nostalgia' and 'longing for times past' and the Comaroffs's (2000: 334) characterization of 'millennial capitalism' as at once 'rooted in the past and new in the present' go some way to making sense of the moral and emotional intensity that can still be mobilized by romantic evocations of childhood. As Cook observes:

Childhood designates a distinctly moral arena – indeed a hypermoral arena – unlike any other. . . . No word or deed related to children can be morally neutral because everyone must position herself or himself in relation to the power/agency void inherent in this intensely overdetermined moral space. (2002: 7)

The children's culture industry is thus subjected to moral as well as financial accounting, with each turn of the entertainment product cycle carefully scrutinized for intimations of desecration. 'Moral panic' (Cook, 2001: 83), in consequence, is endemic.

It might be anticipated that the advent of the cool, thrill-seeking late 20th-century consumer child would liberate the children's culture industry from the sacred child and its moral guardians. The marketing of video games in terms of 'twisted humour, aggressive product values, and music video production aesthetics' (Kline and de Peuter, 2002: 260) can be read as a shift in this direction, but there are no obvious signs of a parallel reduction in the market appeal of 'innocence' and 'enchantment'. The 'magical' and the 'monstrous' appear together in toy stores, not so much side by side on the shelves as in alternate aisles. What is crucial to the children's culture industry is not so much the specific content of what is understood by the child as the designation of childhood as a cultural space constituted by consumption. The continuing market appeal of nostalgic evocations of the sacred child ensures that magic and enchantment remain

central to that cultural space, along with the ambivalence about children and commerce called out by this icon of innocence. The market constitution of the 'cool consumer child' thus takes place in an ambivalent cultural space in which the legitimacy of consumer childhood is contested rather than secure.

ENCHANTING THE MARKET

One way that ambivalence generated by children's incorporation into the market is managed is by inscribing products with qualities associated with the sacred child, the developing child and, as the target market moves through ages and stages, the fun-seeking child. Above all, according to Marina Warner (1994: 37), the contemporary cult of the child 'insists' on children's 'intimate connection' to a 'wonderful, free floating world of the imagination'. It is this connection that is appropriated by the children's culture industry and sold back to children (and their parents) in commodity form. Consistent with Durkheim's (1965: 55) argument that relations between the sacred and the profane are only possible if 'the profane is to lose its special characteristics and become sacred after a fashion and to a certain degree itself', the 'free-floating world of the imagination' is woven into the promotional language used to situate products as being 'for kids'. Rather than setting limits to the market, in other words, the 'magic of childhood' is strategically deployed to turn 'the world of the imagination' into a free-floating theme park, accessible only to children who own the right 'stuff'.

Corporate literature positions the children's culture industry as a conduit to the world of the imagination: manufacturers of magic and purveyors of fun.⁹ Disney's Magic Kingdom, for example, is 'the place where storybook fantasy is everyday reality'; Disney online is 'where the magic comes to you'; Hasbro Inc.'s motto is 'making the world smile'; and McDonald's children's website (www.Ronald.com) is 'the Internet's land for fun'. The industry also evokes the discourses of cognitive development ('experts consider play to be children's work') and child protection, as in the Toy Industry Association publication *Fun Play, Safe Play*, which advises parents to 'choose appropriate toys, encourage positive play experiences and, above all, ensure safe play'.

One of the better demonstrations of how the children's culture industry inscribes its products as inseparable from childhood is provided by the Toy Manufacturers of America Annual Report for 1999. It begins by juxtaposing the 'global paradigm shift' generated by late 20th-century technology and the 'Yes Virginia' letter on the existence of Santa Claus, written

in 1897 by the editor of the *New York Sun* – a classic statement of the view that children are bearers of enchantment in an otherwise joyless world: ‘There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.’ In quoting the Virginia letter, the report positions toy manufacturers as guardians of this ‘eternal light’, ensuring the continuity of the ‘true essence of childhood’ into the new millennium, despite the ‘profound influence’ of technology on every area of our lives, including the world of toys! ‘While every conceivable part of today’s society is adapting to the Cyber-world, what remains a constant is the true essence of childhood . . . as innocent and pure as the Virginias that touch our lives.’ In identifying its products with the true essence of childhood, the Toy Manufacturers Association locates itself *within* the sacralized realm of childhood rather than at the ambivalent point of intersection between children and commerce. This is a neat discursive move, but it carries implicit claims about how toys are made; children who believe in Santa Claus also believe in his workshop.¹⁰ This shifts the legitimation problem from the issue of whether or not children should be consumers to the question of how what they consume should be produced. Children are no longer sheltered from consumption as such, but the look of ‘wondrous innocence’ (Cross, 2002: 445), in which adult ‘longing for times past’ (Jenks, 1996: 106) is met through children’s delight in toys and treats, is inherently precarious. It rests on children’s ignorance of how their toys and treats are made.

Much of the entertainment on which spin-off products are based is structured in terms of the epic struggle between ‘good and evil’, typically played out in narratives involving the triumph of the ‘weak over the strong’. This makes dissociation from the ‘pain and sweat [of] distant others’ (Seabrook, 1985: 58) even more necessary, in that children constituted by such a culture are arguably coded to be on the side of the oppressed and exploited. The demonstrable capacity of adults to ignore the conditions in which their branded sneakers and clothing are produced is less available to children with such intensively (and expensively) nurtured imaginations. The aura of fun and enchantment surrounding the global children’s culture industry is, therefore, only sustainable if conditions of production in the toy industry remain hidden from consumers (Langer, 2002: 76). Ironically, the global paradigm shift of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which makes it easier for big brand companies like Disney, Hasbro, Mattel and McDonald’s to transact the global business of subcontracting production to EPZs, makes it harder for them to control the flow of

information about what goes on there. As the CEO of Hasbro, Allen Hassenfeld told a meeting of the World Economic Forum, 'the fact is that the Internet makes us totally open – there is nowhere for corporations to hide' (Vogel, 2001).

BRANDING IN THE 'OVERDETERMINED MORAL SPACE' OF CHILDHOOD

The sense of vulnerability expressed in Hassenfeld's remark is consistent with Naomi Klein's (2000: 343) argument that 'brand image' is both the source of corporate wealth and the 'corporate Achilles heel'. Contra Bauman's thesis that capital is now free to operate in a 'global space', which 'lies beyond the reach of all extant institutional guardians of standards of decency and ethical responsibility' (2002: 79), Klein demonstrates that the corporate move from producing 'things' to producing 'brands', and the penetration of these brands into all areas of culture and identity, have created a 'volatile' connection between consumers and brands. Corporations might no longer be bound by 'the legal/ethical wardenship' of the nation state (Bauman, 2002: 79), but the project of building equity in brand names (McNeal, 1998: 40) gives the brand itself a symbolic power, which limits the apparent freedom of corporations, while building their markets. As Klein (2000: 335) points out:

the more successful this project is, the more vulnerable these companies become: if brands are indeed intimately entangled with our culture and our identities, when they do wrong, their crimes are not dismissed as merely the misdemeanors of another corporation trying to make a buck. Instead, many of the people who inhabit their branded worlds feel complicit in their wrongs, both guilty and connected.

The intimate entangling of brand and identity is nowhere more evident than in the experience of childhood in the last two decades of the 20th century. The colonization of children's lives by the entertainment product cycle has woven Disney, Hasbro, Mattel and McDonald's into the fabric of everyday life for urban children across the globe. That this process coincided with the relocation of toy production to EPZs is one of global capitalism's more ironic contradictions or disjunctions, depending on your preferred theoretical frame. Companies whose corporate logos are insinuated into children's lives through association with much-loved icons like Winnie the Pooh and Snoopy or whose brand images are tied to the manufacture of magic, enchantment, fun and adventure are trapped by their own promotional rhetoric in ways that make the segregation of consumption

from production particularly vital to brand integrity. There are, of course, other grounds on which corporate credibility is routinely called to account in the global cultural economy, but the vulnerability of companies involved in the children's culture industry is specific to the 'intensely overdetermined moral space' (Cook, 2002: 7) in which they market their products. In deploying nostalgic evocations of childhood to sell their products, they reinvigorate the discourse of sacralization and its attendant ambivalence about the intersection of children and commerce. As argued, this no longer expresses itself in the form of opposition to children's consumption as such, but in a concern about the conditions of production, in relation to issues of quality and safety, on the one hand, and disenchantment, on the other. The circumstances under which most of the toys that enchant the children of the affluent are made present the industry with one of the more intractable and enduring legitimation problems. At the beginning of the 21st century, the 'dark secrets' from which children's innocence must be protected are not sexual, but industrial.

THE DISJUNCTIVE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CHILDREN'S GLOBAL CULTURE

The separation of commodities from the social relations involved in their production is hardly novel (Klein, 2000; Marx, 1867[1946]), but the new global division of labour takes it to another level, not merely separating, but severing, manufacture from design and marketing. Toys 'made' by Mattel or Hasbro, for example, are no longer produced in the US in Mattel or Hasbro factories, but in EPZs in newly industrializing countries, where factories producing the toys are under contract not to Mattel or Hasbro, but to their local 'suppliers'. According to the ILO (1998), EPZs can be thought of as 'the vehicle of globalization', in that 'when global production networks and chains are constructed, EPZs provide the links'. This, at least, is the theory; in practice, the links between corporations and the factories in which 'their' products are made are obscured by the complexities of franchising and contracting, which shift formal responsibility for workers' wages and conditions from the 'marketers of magic' to their suppliers and subcontractors. This arm's length arrangement would seem to provide an instant solution to the industry's legitimation problems while boosting profits through lowered labour costs, but only so long as the links from subcontractor to company are concealed. With wages and conditions that often breach ILO conventions, national labour laws, International Council of the Toy Industry codes and corporate codes of conduct, these arrangements make the possibility of exposure even more of a threat to corporate credibility.

A press release issued by the ICTI after its 29th annual general meeting in Budapest in May 2003 (10 years after the toy factory fires in Thailand and China forced the issue of worker safety on to its agenda) provides an indication of industry awareness that the problem is yet to be solved:

Among the issues on the conference agenda, working conditions in toy factories throughout the world dominated the discussions. It was noted that great progress has been made in implementing the ICTI Code of Business Practices to improve factory working conditions.

The context in which such statements must be read is provided not just by the broad spectrum anti-globalization movement or the industry-targeted campaigns mounted by organized labour in Asia, Europe and North America, but by internal pressure from ethically motivated investors. At the annual general meeting of Hasbro in May 2002, for example, a resolution requesting 'that Hasbro commit itself to the implementation of a code for its international supplies and Global facilities based on international labor organization standards' and 'commit to a program of independent monitoring and reporting' was moved by a representative of Walden Asset Management, 'a Boston-based money management firm that manages \$1.2 billion for socially concerned investors [owning] approximately one million shares of stock'. Responding to the Board's recommendation of a 'no' vote on the resolution on the grounds that 'Hasbro has had a code since 1993 which is mandatory for all suppliers and vendors and that all factories in the Far East have been accredited', the mover of the resolution argued that 'management is providing much too much of a rosy picture, a "we've dealt with all the problems" defence':

It does not serve investors well to gloss over problems we still face. As the board is aware, this issue is a potential landmine for the toy industry, as well as the clothing and footwear industry. A company like Hasbro, whose reputation has tremendous value, can not afford to be embroiled in public controversies about issues like child labor or other sweatshop practices. We can't afford to be lagging behind others in the industry. It is the right thing to do and good business to be leaders on this issue. (Soumerai, 2002)

Such motions attract minority support,¹¹ but their very existence suggests that, as a disciplinary strategy, branding has effects on companies as well as consumers.

The 'political economy of the sign' is perhaps more amenable to materialist analysis than Baudrillard (1981: 93) allows, at least in the case of children's culture. Once attached to a toy, company brands take on the kind of materiality that Durkheim (1965: 262) saw in the emblem, both standing for and strengthening conviction in a childhood that requires protection from disenchantment. Like other commodities, toys and games are indeed 'signs', but what they signify is an 'overdetermined' (Cook, 2002: 7) moral space of nostalgia and enchantment, which cannot withstand 'too much reality'. Toys are not only signs, but objects, and the 'real' conditions of their production are irredeemably disenchanting.

Appadurai's (1990: 296) argument that there are 'fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics', which come into focus when globalization is viewed as a complex process involving different dimensions of 'cultural flow', has particular resonance here. The flow of entertainment and spin-off 'stuff' which draws children into the enchantments of the market is global, but so too is the disenchanting flow of information about how the 'stuff' is made. The global flow of the entertainment product cycle typically begins in Los Angeles; the flow of discrediting information begins in Hong Kong, Bangkok, Manila, Dhaka or any other centre from which suppliers mediate between the four 'big name' producers of global children's culture (Disney, Hasbro, Mattel and McDonald's) and the anonymous subcontractors who hire workers to meet contract deadlines. Because the global flow of children's consumer culture is inseparable from the circulation of a global ideoscape involving ideas about childhood and labour human rights, the counterflow of information about how its material aspects are produced threatens the credibility of the corporations that profit from it. The fact that the networks of production and the networks of critical discourse rely on the same information technology is a further irony of disjunctive flow. As Klein notes:

It's as if the global production chain is based on the belief that workers in the South and consumers in the North will never figure out a way to communicate with each other – that despite the info-tech hype, only corporations are capable of genuine global mobility. (2000: 347)

Much of the investigative work that has been used to connect consumers to the conditions in which their children's toys and licensed clothes are made has been carried out by labour human rights groups in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, including the Asia Monitor Resource Centre, the HKCIC, the Hong Kong Coalition for the Safe Production of

Toys and the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational Accident Victims – the last two formed in the wake of two toy factory fires which became emblematic of workers' human rights abuses in the global toy industry.¹² The first, at the Kader toy factory in Bangkok on 10 May 1993, killed 188 workers and injured hundreds more, who escaped by jumping from the upper storeys of the building. An ILO report concluded that 'the lack of an adequate number of clear, unobstructed means of egress to a safe area outside of the building contributed to the substantial number of deaths' (Gold, 1993: 2). A special issue of the ANROAV newsletter *Rights*, commemorating the 10th anniversary of the fire, included a letter from an ex-organizer of the Asia Monitor Resource Centre who visited the location several days after the fire. His recollections capture the surreal horror of the juxtaposition of toys and tragedy:

I remember the place looked like a war zone. The air was filled with the thick smell of burnt plastic and other material. The bodies of Bart Simpson scattered all over the ground – some half burned, some without heads or limbs, some half completed. There were many other toys too. But the bright yellow colour of the Simpson stood up most vividly on the black ashes. (Chua, 2003)

The second fire, in which 87 workers were killed and another 47 seriously injured, took place at the Zhilli factory in Shenzhen, China in November of the same year (*China Labour Bulletin*, 2000). Zhilli produced soft toys under contract to the Italian multinational Artsana S.p.A/Chicco ('a brand trusted by parents in over 75 countries') and it is arguably this fact that made the fire and its casualties 'newsworthy'; there were 'at least 110 serious factory fires' in Guangdong Province alone in the first seven months of 1993 (Symonds, 1997: 70).¹³ Focus on Kader and Zhilli by labour human rights activists (Multinational Monitor, 1996: 1) can thus be seen as strategic appropriation of the residual emotional and moral power of childhood – a symbolic space from which industry can be called to account. As Smockum observes:

Even the Toy Coalition admits the success of its campaign lies in people's feelings of guilt about the toys they buy their children. 'We target toy factories for lacking occupational health and safety standards simply because the issue of toys appeals,' says Wong. 'Consumers do not want their children's gifts made by sweated labour.' (22 December 2001)

The Canadian Labour Congress (2001b), too, targets the toy industry in anti-sweat campaigns:

not because toys are made in conditions worse than many of the other things we buy, but because of what they symbolize. . . . Toys represent friendship, fun, caring, belonging, love, warmth and intimacy. Toys are purchased for people of all ages but mostly by, or for, children. They symbolize a caring relationship. But at the other end of this 'symbol' are the realities facing the workers who make these toys.

Focus on the responsibility of big brand multinationals for conditions subject to control by local authorities might also be seen as strategic. According to Anita Chan, governments share responsibility for conditions in EPZs, and anti-sweatshop campaigners should reorient their strategy accordingly. She argues:

Currently, the movement does not apply any pressure on the governments of the developing countries where the products are produced. Yet they are important players. . . . Many such governments, far from representing the interests of their workers, are instead preoccupied with competing with other poor countries to sell cheap labour. (2001: 234)

A multinational corporation, however, is not only more accessible than the government of a developing country, but more obviously compromised by any disjunction between the 'aura' surrounding its brand and the conditions in which its products are made. Corporations involved in the production of children's consumer culture are doubly compromised: first, because their promotional rhetoric is so steeped in enchantment; and, second, because their claim to be an integral part of 'real' childhood subjects them to a higher order of moral accounting. These corporations are trapped by their own promotional rhetoric. In deploying the magical aura of childhood to sell things, they give life to the nostalgic image of the sacralized child, and, while this no longer presumes children's *exclusion* from the market, it does require that the conditions in which things are made should either be 'suitable for children' (not too distressing or guilt inducing) or hidden from consumers. This gives the exposure of disenchanting conditions of production in the children's culture industry their particular inflection – the juxtaposition of rhetoric and reality. The gap between the rhetoric of fun and fantasy used to *sell* the products and the pay and conditions of workers who *make* them is often so extreme that simply identifying a particular factory

as producing 't-shirts for Disney' or 'Happy Meals' toys for McDonald's creates public relations problems, particularly when hourly rates for workers are compared with executive salaries. Disney is particularly vulnerable. Corporate evocation of 'magic', 'fantasy' and 'fairy tale' lends itself to ironic inversion by anti-sweat activists, who produce headlines like 'Working for Disney in Bangladesh: A Dungeon, Not a Magic Kingdom' (National Labor Committee, 2002) and 'Mulan's Sisters: Working for Disney Is No Fairy Tale' (HKCIC, 1999). Disney's emphasis on 'wholesome family values' has also 'called out' a sizeable lobby of shareholders, many with religious affiliations, who use the forum of annual general meetings to pressure Disney to 'do the right thing'. In the words of the As You Sow Foundation (a network of 'socially concerned' Disney investors):

Just think the word 'Disney' and wholesome images pop into mind. Why? Because Mickey Mouse, Mulan, and the Little Mermaid are more than cartoons. With a touch of magic that would make the Sorcerer's Apprentice proud, Disney's free-market alchemists (also known as the Consumer Products Division) have transformed these characters into cultural icons that seem to personify common family values.

CONCLUSION: THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF BRANDED ENCHANTMENT

The imbrication of character-based entertainment and product promotion gives added edge to brand vulnerability in the children's market. For children, it is not just the brand that becomes 'intimately entangled' with culture and identity, but the characters (from Winnie the Pooh and Snoopy to Harry Potter and Nemo) which connect children to products through emotional identification. Stephen Kline (1993: 194) links the growth of the toy market in the 1980s to character marketing – 'the idea that "personality promotes loyalty" to a product line' – which succeeds according to the strength of children's identification with the characters represented in the dolls and figures. The place of toys as 'transitional objects' (Winnicott, 1965: 143) and as conduits for adult nostalgia (Cross, 2002: 442) further complicates the emotional mix. Klein (2000: 335) argues that many of the people who inhabit the 'branded worlds' promoted by corporations 'feel complicit in their wrongs, both guilty and connected'. I would argue that this sense of guilt and complicity moves to another level of intensity when the connection is not just that of consumers to branded products, but of children to toys and games. Moreover, this sense of complicity can be

retrospective, as I discovered when one of my students, a young man in his early twenties, looked through reports on toy production in China on my desk. His eye had been caught by the snarling rendition of Mickey Mouse on the front page of the HKCIC's publication *Beware of Mickey: Disney Sweatshops in Southern China* (2000b). He picked it up, along with the National Labor Committee's *Toys of Misery: A Report on the Toy Industry in China* (2002), which was the next document in the pile. Leafing through the grim details of hours, wages, toxic chemicals and young women fainting from exhaustion, his distress was visible: 'I feel as if my whole childhood was based on exploitation', he said. 'It makes me feel terrible.'

My student's comment resonates with Canadian writer Sarah Cox's (1998) wish that her daughter should be able to look back on her childhood knowing that her dolls and stuffed animals were not made in sweatshops. Cox speaks of how what she came to know about the toy industry intruded on her pleasure in watching her daughter play, of the 'unbidden images that flit through my mind every time I see her pick up a tattered and much beloved Cabbage Patch Kids doll' purchased at a garage sale:

What concerns me is this: the very doll my daughter wraps in a blanket could have been made by one of the workers killed in a 1993 fire at a Thai factory churning out Cabbage Patch dolls for Hasbro Inc. perhaps by a teenager, even a child, who stuffed the doll's body or painted its hazel eyes. Fourteen time zones away, I am somehow bound to that factory, that place, that imagined but very real worker.

The place of childhood in the ideological field of millennial capitalism can no longer be captured in terms of an opposition between children and the market, as such. The hegemony of the market as a source of all good and the elision of notions of consumer choice and consumer rights with citizenship make children's access to consumption a 'natural' extension of the 'rights of the child'. At the same time, however, the psychological dynamics of children's attachment to toys and the particular place of children's consumption in sustaining adult nostalgia for a lost world of 'innocence' and 'enchantment' locate children's consumption, and the production on which it depends, within an emotionally loaded cultural space. This raises the question of the unintended consequences of the profits of enchantment. Might the roots of anti-corporate global activism be found in the 'enchanted garden' of global children's culture?

Notes

1. The term 'children's culture industry' borrows from Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), whose critique of the commodification of culture is signalled in the fusion of 'sacred' and 'profane' in the term 'culture industry'.
2. Ritzer (1999: 30–1) does in fact discuss children's involvement in the economy as consumers and the important role played by 'new means of consumption', such as McDonald's and Disney, in 'hooking children on consumption'. The omission of 'children' from the index might thus be read as an indication of the perceived priorities of readers.
3. In another article published in the same year, Linn (2000b) offers different estimates of American children's spending ('over \$28 billion of their own money in 1999') and influence ('a whopping \$500 billion of their parents' purchases), a disparity that serves to highlight the difficulty of accurately documenting children's spending power.
4. Statistics on toy sales compiled by the International Council of Toy Industries (2001a).
5. Whether or not corporate 'strategies' define the limits of the 'tactics' (de Certeau, 1984: xix) through which children use commodity culture for their own ends is a contested question. See, for example, Jenkins's (1998: 24) critique of Kline's (1993: 44) argument that 'what might be taken as children's culture has always been primarily a matter of culture produced for and urged upon children'.
6. The ILO defines EPZs as 'industrial zones with special incentives set up to attract foreign investors, in which imported materials undergo some degree of processing before being exported again'. EPZs are central to the new global division of labour, offering reduced labour and infrastructure costs to corporations and economic growth in the form of jobs and investment to newly industrializing countries. According to the ILO (1998), 'the classic model of labour regulation', defined in terms of a framework of minimum labour standards, and free trade unions and employers coming together to negotiate binding agreements that regulate their interaction 'is extremely rare in EPZs'.
7. Kam Wing Chan (2001: 148) notes that surplus labour in rural China was estimated at 160 million in the early 1990s.
8. Negotiated in the critical encounter between capitalist industrialization and its critics, the boundary between the sacred child and profane market produced child labour as a social problem in need of reform and constituted the family as a sacred space of maternal love and childhood innocence, untouched by the rational calculus of capitalist modernity (Houghton, 1957: 343–8; Patmore, 1905: 151–3; Zaretsky, 1976: 51–2). Paradoxically, both the view that children required *protection* from the market and 'the ethic of modern consumerism' (Campbell, 1989) through which they have been incorporated *into* the market were grown, as Warner (1994: 37) puts it, 'in the ground of Romanticism'.
9. According to the Toy Industry Association *Fact Book* (2002), the 'true essence of the toy industry [is] to take an idea and transform it into a toy that allows a child to discover, explore . . . and yes, make magic'.
10. Belk's (1993: 85) observation that Santa Claus offers children a vision of a

- 'magical economy without scarcity or need of paying' is relevant here. A magical economy would also be one without exploitation or drudgery.
11. A motion on the implementation of global human rights standards put to Hasbro in 2003 by the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility was supported by 12.6 percent of voters. A resolution on company practice regarding the human and labour rights of workers in China received support from 9.38 percent of Disney investors. (The same resolution received support from only 6.05 percent of Coca Cola investors (Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, 2003), but whether or not the 3 percent difference in sensitivity among Disney shareholders can be attributed to a 'childhood effect' is impossible to say.
 12. The April/June 2001 issue of *Asian Labour Update* ran a report on the annual meeting of the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational Accident Victims under the headline: 'Remember Kader: Safety for Labour'. Each year, the anniversary of the Kader fire is marked by memorial events focusing on occupational health and safety. Tenth anniversary activities included a solidarity march, seminars on occupational health and safety and a memorial gathering of survivors and relatives of the dead at the factory site on the outskirts of Bangkok, at which plans for a memorial to be built at the site were announced (Charoensutthipan, 2003).
 13. *China Labour Bulletin* (2000) estimates of 38,000 factory fires in China in 1993 sound apocryphal, but ILO statistics listing 7062 fatal injuries in industrial accidents in that year and an *Insurance Journal* (25 June 2002) article noting 'around 150,000 factory fires in China in 1997, triple the number reported in 1990' put them within the realm of credibility.

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Beryl Langer is a Senior Lecturer in the Sociology and Anthropology Programme at LaTrobe University, Melbourne. Her articles on the commodification and globalization of childhood have appeared in edited collections and journals, including *Thesis Eleven* and the *Journal of Australian Studies*. Address: Sociology and Anthropology Programme, LaTrobe University, Victoria 3086, Australia. [email: b.langer@latrobe.edu.au]
