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Pedagogy Edition Barbie:
An analysis of the role that Barbie plays within
contemporary children's culture

Mattel's Barbie may appear to be just a children's toy or a doll, but in the fifty-five years of Barbie's existence she has evolved to more than a simple toy (Steinberg 271). Barbie has become an important artifact of contemporary children's culture. Many children, especially young girls, have at least one or more Barbie. Barbie and other popular cultural objects in the media play a crucial role in shaping contemporary children's culture. Media teaches children about the dominant society by providing lessons regarding what is and what is not acceptable in society. Barbie and other media objects assist children in forming unique identities and a distinctive sub-culture that is separate from the dominant adult culture. Within the production and consumption of media there are several opportunities for children's voices to have an impact. Children create their own meaning with every media artifact that is produced. These meanings may differ from the producer's intended meaning. Children's voices are also influential when it comes to economic consumption. Barbie and other popular cultural artifacts impact contemporary children's culture by providing education about the dominant society and allow for a creation of a separate subversive culture that is unique to children. Barbie and other popular culture figures provide a space where children's voices have power and are influential in the perceived meaning and consumption of objects that are produced.

Media provides children with valuable information about the dominant society and more specifically about what is and what is not acceptable within the society. In Douglas Kellner's article *Towards a Critical Media/Cultural Studies* he states, "media culture helps shape people's view of the world and deepest values, defining good or evil, their positive ideals and sense of who they are as a people, as well as who and what are threats and enemies..." (5). Media is a teaching tool for everyone

about how to fit in. However, media becomes more valuable for children as an instructor about society due to children's lack of both experience and relationships. Barbies and other popular cultural objects are often the first experience children have with media. As Mark Poster points out, Americans obsess about selected aspects of popular culture (578). Prominent popular culture figures like Barbie become an extremely important component of children's daily lives. Barbies inadvertently teach two important lessons about society. These lessons are about consumption and about fitting in with peers by means of possessing the Barbies and Barbie accessories their peers deem essential. Shirley Steinberg states in her article *Barbie The bitch still has everything*, that one doll is never enough (270). She then explains that recesses in the fifth grade consisted of lugging plastic cases full of Barbie accessories onto the playground to play with her friends (271). Barbie and other popular cultural artifacts attempt to teach children from an early age the importance of consumption and the value that is placed on having objects that are popular in society.

In addition to teaching lessons about the dominant society, media also provides opportunities for children to exert agency over their own lives. Through their consumption and use of Barbie and other popular cultural artifacts children form a subversive culture that is distinctively different from the adult dominant culture. Kincheloe and Steinberg refer to this subversive culture as "Kinderculture" (Kincheloe 256). Kincheloe states in his article about the influence of McDonald's, "Their ability to produce entertainment for children that adults deem inappropriate is central to this enterprise" (256). He elaborates by arguing that the oppositional culture that is created is turned into a form of power for children (260). This oppositional culture provides children with a space that is not fully mediated and controlled by adults. It provides them with the space to explore and make meaning for themselves. As Kincheloe states "...they finally know something that Dad doesn't"(260). This oppositional culture provides contemporary children's culture with a sense of power and control over the adults. Children possess information about and membership in a culture where adults do not. This oppositional culture

has always produced great anxiety with adults about the influence of mass media within American culture (Stephenson 590). Adults fear the influence of spaces that children occupy that they cannot control or understand (Stephenson 588). In addition to providing children with a space to exert agency media also provides a space where children's voices can be influential.

Media is often an institutional voice for children as it both explains their role and provides ways of participation within society. Media also provides a space for children's own voices to be listened to in a meaningful manner. In Mark Poster's article *Perfect Transmissions*, he states that within every cultural object there are many layers of context (578). Children create their own context of meaning about objects through their own interactions with Barbies and other cultural materials. Within these cultural objects that are produced for children, children exert their own voices over how the object is consumed and used. Children are not passive consumers. They are active analytical consumers who often construct their own meanings of objects produced for them; which are often quite different from the intended meaning of the producers (Kincheloe 257). Poster argues that producers and consumers have equal power in the context of the meaning of an object but not equal access (580). The more access you have the more power you possess over the dominant meaning of a cultural object (Poster 580). The opinions of the producers- adults and corporations- on the understanding of dominant meanings behind cultural artifacts are listened to more readily because they have more access and resources. Despite this, like any other feature of kinderculture (Kincheloe 256), the effect of Barbie and other popular culture curriculum that is produced for children is idiosyncratic, in that for some children it may facilitate conformity but for others it inspires resistance (Steinberg 278). Therefore, when it comes to the dominant meaning of cultural objects, the producers' voices may overshadow those of children. Children are still able to choose the meaning they provide to cultural objects and choose how those objects will affect their lives.

Children's voices are influential when it comes to the economic consumption of popular cultural

objects. There is an enormous children's market when it comes to popular cultural objects and media. Kincheloe estimates that children aged five to twelve spend \$5 billion of their own money and influence household spending of \$140 billion annually on fast food and other products (259). Similarly Steinberg questions, "What kid law was written which expressed the need to have multiples of any and every toy and object?" (272). She continues by stating that Barbies are that way; you can never have enough (272). Money and sales capture the attention of corporations. Due to the fact that Children are large consumers, their voices are important and listened to in the corporate world when consideration is given to media and advertising directed at what children like. Children are inevitably positioned in market relations to voice what they like and do not like and are empowered to make decisions within this context (Kincheloe 257). Kincheloe argues that we cannot understand contemporary children's culture outside of its relation to the market, and that children always make decisions in this context (257). Although children's voices are heard in the corporate world when it comes to products produced and advertised for them, it is important to realize that the corporate culture does exploit them. The corporate effort to ideologically construct children's consciousness is a cold reality (Kincheloe 257). Therefore, although media provides children with a space to voice their opinions and to influence the world around them, it is important for contemporary children's culture to be aware of the ways in which their voices are being exploited and used to serve the interests of multinational corporations (Kincheloe 256). If children have critical media literacies, which include "the abilities to access, navigate, critique, and create content and services available via information and communication technologies" (Mansell 108), then they will be better situated to ensure that they use media in an empowering way and minimize the exploitation of corporations.

Media is often thought of as an institutional voice for children, in that it is produced for them with the intention of teaching and explaining their roles as children. Barbies and other popular cultural objects educate contemporary children's culture about the dominant society. Both the consumption as

well as how popular cultural objects are used within society, inform children of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in the dominant culture. Shirley Steinberg states how having Barbies and bringing them to the playground was a bonding experience for her and her friends. This provides an example of how children use popular culture artifacts to form identities, connect with their peers, and create a unique culture based on the information and things that adults do not control or understand. Media also provides a space where children's own voices can be listened to in a meaningful way. Children construct their own meaning and ways of using popular culture objects such as Barbies, which may be contrary to what the producers intended. When discussing the success Mattel has with Barbies, Shirley Steinberg talks about how children cannot have just one Barbie; they always want more and more accessories (270). There is a large and profitable children's market of which corporations are highly aware. This influence over major multinational corporations provides contemporary children's culture with a space to have their voices be powerful. However, it is also important to note how corporations exploit and influence children's voices in these spaces. In order to ensure that children are able to use media as a positive space and have their voices listened to in a way that is empowering to them they must possess critical media literacies. By having critical media literacies, children will be better able to recognize, question, and critique the media that is being aimed towards them and how they in return respond to such media. As Rebecca Stephenson says in regards to contemporary children's culture, Barbies and other popular culture artifacts are “important media artifacts that deserve critical attention” (599). Barbies may appear to be just toys but they are very much something that matters (599) and something that greatly influences contemporary children's culture.

Works Cited

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