

Reinvention of Childhood in a Networked World

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Abstract

This paper will consider the reinvention of childhood wrought by children's association with new information and communications technologies, and the contemporary commentaries on this social process. It will note generational differences in approach to these technologies but focus mainly on the new stories, images and allegories being told of childhood. It will address the contemporary media reinvention of childhood through the analysis of two contemporary examples—one utopian, the other apocalyptic. Fact is fictionalised as mythic and connotative agents are used to control what and how the association of children and new information and communications technologies is seen.

Introduction

Barthes (1973) noted that a photograph is only denotative or objective (as a first-order sign) in that it is the outcome of a mechanical process of reproduction. The same photograph is connotative (as a second-order sign) because of human intervention. The photographer becomes the encoder who transmits attitudes or judgements about the subject of the photograph. The theatrical devices of lighting, colour, camera angles, composition and distances are used to enhance the theme of the text. The juxtaposition of images used means that what is intended as the neutral recording of reality is, in essence, a subjective re-justification or confirmation of commonly held beliefs and prejudices. It is also concerned with the writing of new stories, images and allegories of childhood. The analysis of photographs in this paper will consider both first and second order signs, their denotation and connotations.

What emerges from the analysis in this paper is the notion that the verdict has not yet been cast, and that there is ambivalence and contradiction in media interpretations of the reinvented child. There are arguments in the literature that suggest that this is symptomatic of times of change, where there are few rules to follow, and no models or exemplars in place. The models we are offered are extremes—either technology will advantage our children, or fatally compromise their values and sensory experience of the world.

The concern raised by this reinvention of childhood is the unequal relationships between today's children, their parents and teachers, and that generational divides are

widening. The social issue is one of media manipulation of reality for purposes which are either blatantly commercial or remain conjectural. The paper concludes by questioning how adults can best guide children through a world that is different from their own and that is not clearly defined or understood. Technology is not neutral and we accept that it has irrevocable impacts on whole societies and cultures. When it challenges notions of the innocence and wonder of childhood, then we must become cognisant of these changes and their probable effects.

Reinvention of Childhood

What are the cultural signs of childhood? The word "childhood" is itself evocative and when said, engenders different meanings amongst those who hear it. Signs are so deeply embedded within cultures that their meaning is derived from the stories, images and allegories of that culture (Panofsky 1970). Childhood at the beginning of the twenty-first century is an unknown. We are witnessing a reinvention of childhood in Western cultures, a rewriting of its stories, images and allegories—new stereotypes and images of childhood are being forged through the ways children interact with new information and communication technologies. This paper will contend that while there are generational differences, the reinvented child is effectively a media invention, one that remains itself in transition until our society decides if the technology will have a positive or negative impact and if the changes are ones we should welcome.

Children are now referred to as the I-Generation (Peach 1997) or the Nintendo Generation (Kenway 1995). The argument is that "having grown up in the information age, many are regular, and apparently comfortable, users of its new technologies" (Kenway 1995: 20). The implication is that there are generational differences between today's children and their parents, and children and their teachers. Turkle (1996) described her interactions with Tim, a child who could play a game without knowing the details, without asking the "why" questions but knowing (almost instinctively) the story grammar of the game, its aims and goals. Tim "is able to act on a vague intuitive sense of what will work even when he doesn't have a verifiable model of the rules underneath the game's behavior" (Turkle 1996: 69). Tim is aware of Turkle's discomfort in this environment and consoles her by offering, "Don't let it bother you if you don't understand. I just say to myself that I probably won't be able to understand the whole game [SimLife] any time soon. So I just play it" (Turkle 1996: 70). This interaction reinforces the generational differences—at an almost unconscious

level—of today’s children and their elders in their understanding of new technologies. Different approaches are revealed. Adults seemingly need to understand. Children know that understanding is optional, provisional and transitional. You play to understand, you do not need to understand in order to play.

The stereotypical reinvented child is present in the scenario described by Dr Dianne Ravitch, the former Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education (cited in Postman, 1995). Ravitch argued that:

In this new world of pedagogical plenty, children and adults will be able to dial up a program on their home television to learn whatever they want to know, at their own convenience. If Little Eva cannot sleep, she can learn algebra instead. At her home-learning station, she will tune in to a series of interesting problems that are presented in an interactive medium, much like video games. ... Young John may decide that he wants to learn the history of modern Japan, which he can do by dialing up the greatest authorities and teachers on the subject, who will not only use dazzling graphs and illustrations, but will narrate a historical video that excites his curiosity and imagination.

(Ravitch 1993, cited in Postman 1995)

Postman (1995: 39) responded to this scenario cynically by suggesting that here is not a new technology but a new species of child. We can begin to see this new species of child through media representations and to this end, this paper will now focus on two such representations.

The first image (Figure 1) was presented in the Australian print media in 1997. It appeared in a weekly national newspaper and accompanied an article entitled *Parents Pay for On-line Offspring Edge* (Hickman, 1997).

A semiotic analysis of this photograph as a first-order sign gives us a detailed inventory. Three children, wearing school uniforms, are shown using a personal computer in their home. They are Caucasian/Anglo, well-dressed, apparently healthy, clean, well-groomed and well-fed. The children bear a physical resemblance to each other and are shown in an *en famille* setting so the fact that they are siblings could be reliably presumed. The caption of the photo is “The Hughes children of Cherrybrook in Sydney’s north-west, Lucy, 7, Jonathon, 10, and Michael, 12, tap into the world from home.” This informs the reader that the children are brothers and sister, that they live in a particular place, have a home computer and are connected to the Internet.

When we look again we see the encoding, the intervention of the photographer. We see the children in a posed artificiality. It is not sensible to use a computer when grouped in this way. The children are huddled together to align their faces, to balance the photograph’s composition against the computer on the right-hand side of the image. Anecdotal knowledge and observation of children at a home computer would dispute this image of tranquil collaboration. The research into gender roles in



Figure 1: “Parents Pay for Online Offspring Edge” (Hickman 1997)

computing would suggest that it is unlikely that Lucy, the youngest and the sole female, would have control of the keyboard. Her placement closest to the front of the picture plane suggests that it is she who is in charge while her older brothers are merely interested observers or helpful tutors. There is no clamouring or childish squabbling. The scene is beatific. The children, with glowing cherubic faces, gaze intently (almost reverently) at the monitor. They are transfixed with a common gaze, a psychic line runs between the children and the machine. The newspaper’s photographer would have posed the children carefully to make the maximum use of the light from the computer and the rear window. The lighting brings greater focus to the children’s faces. The simple act of creating comparatively darker areas behind them adds to their angelic supernatural appearance. The colours are muted—largely due to the quality of newsprint as a material and its inability to support opaque oil-based inks. This softening also works as an atmospheric device adding to the measure of comfort in the home, and by association, the warm caring environment engendered by this space. Depth of field (controlled by the focal length of the camera) is controlled so that the foreground is in greater focus than the background. The artistic devices of sfumato and chiaroscuro are inadvertent agents in the subliminal images being conveyed. These effects were devised during the Italian Renaissance and are visible in the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael.

The second image (Figure 2) is in stark contrast to the Renaissance-like image of Figure 1. It shows an infant seated on a small green plastic chair in front of a television set. He is playing a video console game, the controller (joy-pad) is visible on his lap. This photograph comes from an article entitled *A killer in nappies* (Davies and Robson 1999). The caption reads “Babe in Arms: Two-year old Samuel Simpson is just learning to talk but already he’s a computer games whiz, playing all day.” The caption informs us the child’s name and age. The image shows us a white, well-nourished, clean toddler in a nappy. He is so small, his feet do not reach the floor. There is an empty baby’s bottle on the floor beside his chair.



**Figure 2: “A Killer in Nappies”
(Davies and Robson 1999)**

The photographic elements here are totally different from those in Figure 1. Here the scene is almost two-dimensional—as in a tableau, or painting of the Early Renaissance. There is no softening of the light, no control of the depth of field (that is, all parts of the image are of equal clarity) and no illusion of aerial perspective. What we see is contrived to tell us a story, to reinforce the theme of the text.

It is not a posed photograph and has a sense of reality to it which is absent from Figure 1. The image “reads” from left to right. We see and accept the image of the child on the chair, seeing the nappy and the bottle but ignoring the games controller. We move across and put the child into a relationship with the computer game and are shocked. If it were an older child or teenager in the place of Samuel, we would not have the same reaction. The cultural shock comes from a mismatch between what we see and our cultural signs.

These two images (Figures 1 and 2) are of real children. But who is the child of the twenty-first century? Is the reinvented child “a killer in nappies” or is it one of the Hughes children whose parents have given them an “on-line offspring edge.” The media are here portraying two contradictory views. The first (as seen in Figure 1) could be described as utopian, while the second (in Figure 2) is apocalyptic. Turkle (1996) cited a report which classified contemporary commentaries on information technology and communications as (a) utopian, (b) utilitarian, and (c) apocalyptic. She explained that:

... Utilitarian writers emphasise the practical side of the new way of life. Apocalyptic writers warn us of the increasing social and personal fragmentation, more widespread surveillance, and loss of direct knowledge of the world. To date, however, the utopian approaches have dominated the field. They share the technological optimism that has dominated post-war culture, an optimism captured in the advertising slogans of my youth.

(Turkle 1996: 231-232)

We could therefore argue that the mass media itself is uncertain which story to tell. Olson (1987) believed this inconsistency to be a sign of transition and that “what a

‘computer’ is, can do, and what the consequences will be—will vary inevitably to the point of contradiction” (Olson 1987: 185). He also argued that during such periods of change:

... There are few new rules, outrageous levels of hopes and dreams, a score of hawkers and hucksters, and above all, new winners and new losers. When new rules are made, old dreams and fears sport their best and return for another season’s duel. At the same time, the processes reshaping our material order reshape our institutions, our visions, and our myths about what our social order is all about.

(Olson 1987: 186)

This attempt to match “old dreams and fears” to new realities of childhood are evident in the images discussed in this paper. The utopian image (Figure 1) accompanied an article whose very title suggested that the purchase of a home computer was the act of loving parents making a better world for their children, of generous provision, of parental care and responsibility. It attaches understood notions of parenthood to a computer. It quoted the children’s mother, as well as the president of the Parents’ and Citizens’ Association, a university academic (a lecturer in computer science) and the proprietor of a major Australian retail chain specialising in electrical products.

The apocalyptic image (Figure 2) also carried an emotive title. This time the effect is one of fear not promise. The child in Figure 2 is said to be “a killer in nappies.” The connotations here are of social deprivation and psychopathic behaviour, an absence of parenting, a dereliction of responsibility. This article quotes the child’s mother (here describing her as “unrepentant”), and a child psychologist warning of the deleterious effects of exposure to simulated violence. This second article speaks of danger, using terms such as “frightening,” “sinister” and “socially retarded.”

Yet—apart from the media spin—what is really happening in the Hughes home in Sydney and the Simpson home in Corby, Northamptonshire is surprisingly similar. Mrs Hughes reportedly said that her only concern was “that it was difficult to drag them [the children] away, even for meals.” Samuel’s father said “He won’t come when you call him for his dinner.” This reluctance is covered at length in Samuel’s story but appears as the last paragraph in the story of Lucy, Michael and Jonathan.

Computer games are played in both homes. The Hughes children reportedly “battle each other in their favourite combat game, *Doom*.” Samuel’s favourite game is *Golden Eye*. In the latter case, the reporters noted that *Golden Eye* is recommended for children aged 15 years and over. In the former case, the fact that *Doom* carries a similar MA+ rating is omitted. Yet, how are these children different? The answer is that they are not. What is different is the representations of their lives in the mass media.

So what were the motives of the media in representing these lives in this way? The utopian image was part of an

advertorial—an editorial with a high element of advertising content. That the proprietor of a (named) electrical chain was interviewed and cited is proof of this. The article also named specific products and gave their prices. The whole rationale could be the justification of the purchase of a home computer and an Internet account.

But it is more insidious than this—it is manufacturing a new view of home and family life, and more particularly of childhood. Smith (1993) surveyed advertising and photography from the 1920s to the 1950s and noticed that the *Tableaux Vivants* displayed were subsumed into modern life. The manufactured images included those of the executive in the office tower, the worker in the clean well-organised factory, and the housewife in the appliance-filled kitchen. The environments become a background and accepted as the norm. Such manipulation is non-neutral. It creates a false reality, false expectations and desires. With the purchase of a home computer (from the named supplier), your children will be advantaged.

What then was the motivation to describe the life of Samuel and his family in such deprecating ways. This article could have been written with Samuel as a *wunderkind*, so young and yet so capable to interact with machines so effectively. He cannot yet read, but can, presumably follow the story grammar of a game. He cannot dress himself but has the manual dexterity and eye-hand co-ordination needed to operate a game controller. Samuel is the precursor of Turkle's Tim, who just "knows" what to do. He is the new child—yet we are made to be terrified of him. We are given to believe that he will grow up to be a murderer. Much is made of the fact that one of the few words in his nascent vocabulary is "Die." There are behavioural issues for Samuel, and such a fixation must be considered as a concern. He is similarly being denied the sensory experiences essential for a growing child. But Samuel is here being made the archetype of the feared child, who takes a gun to school or who abducts and hurts other children. He is the scapegoat for a society desperate to explain such horrors. Technology is blamed, but only by association. The fault here is not the violent video game, it is the parenting of the child that is called into question. Otherwise, allegations of psychosis would also have been leveled against the Hughes children.

That the photographs discussed in this paper both appeared in colour in newspapers is in itself significant, in that it immediately draws attention from even the most casual reader and adds a sense of value to the event. The decision to reproduce the images in colour (in a monochrome environment) comes from an editor. We are led to see these events through the intellectual processes of others. We do not believe what is seen, we see what we believe and we see what someone else believes. We look through other people's eyes. We look through cultural understandings which are still in a state of flux. What we are seeing is either an apocalypse, where "a sense of the 'human' is ... fatally compromised by technology" (Wark, 1991-1992). Or we are seeing a utopia? The children of this utopian advantage are wrapped in a cloth of warmth and nurture. The computer, by association, becomes part

of this scene and is also imbued with the positive senses evoked.

Media images are an appeal to the senses. The writer and photographer employ imagery to relate to the human senses of sight, hearing, touch, movement and so on. It is not (nor can it be) a pure account of physical data. That the children are interacting with machines speaks to our senses rather than our intellect. We are given a text (words, images or sounds) and we build a diegesis (the total world of narrative action from the text). The first level here establishes a context, but cannot pretend to be value-free or strictly denotative of events because of the diegetic information it carries. The second level is where we start to measure the images against our experience and cultural understandings. We accept that there is a new child—one who is being re-invented through associations with technology. What we do not know is who this child will become, and whether this reinvented childhood is one we should encourage or eschew, favour or fear. Images of childhood are of innocence and wonder. We are left with the question of whether the reinvented child will know these things. We are left with the possibility of not knowing who our children are or what they will become.

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