

**MICKEY AND MR. GUMPY:  
THE GLOBAL AND THE UNIVERSAL IN CHILDREN'S MEDIA**

**by**

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**Mickey and Mr. Gumpy:**  
**The global and the universal in children's media**

Last month, my family had a visit from a young family: a Scot, who had spent his adolescence and early adulthood in New Zealand; his wife, a New Zealander; their two and half year old daughter, and their nine month old son. The family had lived in Scotland for some years before coming to live in Cardiff earlier this year.

To entertain the little girl, Tara, we brought down some books which had belonged to our own children, now aged between 22 and 31. She seized on a picture book which she already knew, *Mr. Gumpy's Outing*, written and illustrated by John Burningham.

The first picture in the book is an illustration of Mr. Gumpy in the spacious garden of his detached English country house, with the caption: 'This is Mr. Gumpy.' The next picture shows the back view of Mr. Gumpy's rural residence, with a verandah and Mr. Gumpy in front of it. It is captioned: 'Mr. Gumpy owned a boat, and his house was by a river.' From these two pictures and two short sentences, we can infer that Mr. Gumpy is a very prosperous and leisured fellow, that he is probably English, or at least British (with all the pastoral and upper-class connotations of English property owners who live by rivers) and he seems to have a private source of income. With deceptive economy, Burningham's words and pictures give us a lot of information about Mr. Gumpy's social hinterland. But we don't want to know about that . . . We then go on to hear what happens when Mr. Gumpy takes some unruly animals and children out in his boat . . .

*Mr Gumpy's Outing* was first published in 1970. It delighted all four of our children. To meet an old fictional friend in our strange house, and to have it read to her there, delighted Tara. Tara's parents and we - my husband, my youngest daughter, aged 22 and myself - all took delight in her delight; through this artfully simple and very amusing story, a bond was created across generations and, to some extent, across cultures.

John Burningham is a popular and respected children's author, on the way to becoming canonical. *Mr. Gumpy 's Outing* is still in print after 32 years and currently has websites in a number of countries including the US, Korea and Japan. His publishers, Jonathan Cape and Penguin, have an international market. He is, in other words, a global phenomenon. As a writer in English, with his sympathetic portrayal of a rather old-fashioned form of English squirearchy, Burningham and his ideology could be seen as somewhat suspect. Should we have been worried, therefore, rather than delighted, that a 22 year old and a two year old, and their parents, brought together by the accident of employment from opposite sides of the globe, were capable of enjoying the same story, and through it to begin to befriend each other?

I am not going to answer that question at this stage - but will amend it slightly, by substituting another fictional character, which not only these two generations of girls, but also two former generations of girls - myself and my mother - have enjoyed: Walt Disney's Snow White, first appearing in 1937. There are a number of accounts of the impact of this and other Disney characters, in Janet Wasko, Mark Phillips and Eileen Meehan's extremely useful and comprehensive account of cross-cultural research carried out in 18 countries, *Dazzled by Disney*. (2001). Young people from 53 different nationalities were interviewed, using standardised techniques, by a group of international media scholars, about the impact of Disney on their lives. Snow White is featured several times. David Buckingham (UK) quotes a female postgraduate student:

I used to love going to the cinema. I remember queuing up - one showing of *Snow White* was completely full, so we had to queue up for the entire length of the film and there were other people getting in the queue and it was so exciting.  
(p. 286)

In the same volume, Shunya Yoshimi describes how the Japanese animator, Tezuka Osamu, responded to Snow White when young:

I think I saw *Snow White* over 50 times. . . I bought bread and went to the theater and stayed all day . . . I turned my back to the screen and watched the audience laugh and cry, enjoying it as if it were my own. (p. 169)

Such moments of connection and communality are often said to be disappearing from our fragmented, privatised globally-capitalistic world, but for those of us (like myself and Buckingham) who do empirical research on children's culture and tastes, accounts such as that given by the female postgrad, and convivial moments such as the delight in Mr Gumpy shared by Tara and Elinor, are typical. Buckingham agonises, in his conclusion to his article: 'What do we *do* about Disney?' (p. 292) And we might put the same question about John Burningham and his global publishers. Well one answer is: nothing. Why not leave these young people alone to get on with their simple enjoyments and communions? This is certainly what Walt Disney (quoted in Wasko, 2001, p. 108), with his disingenuous disavowal of any ideological intent - 'we make the pictures and we leave it to the professors to tell us what they mean' - would recommend.

Another answer is to try to get to grips with what is going on in such moments because they may matter at the deepest level of human survival. To discuss the role of stories and cultural products in children's lives is to discuss their function in terms of the socialisation and continuation of the human species. As

psychologist and philosopher Robin Dunbar has argued (1996), stories matter from an evolutionary point of view because they teach children to be social (as in my Mr. Gumpy anecdote) and to be social is a human evolutionary adaptive strategy. Without social connections, people die; Dunbar cites (p. 201) the episode of the 1846 Donner Party wagon train across North America, where the highest mortality rates were among fit young men who had no relatives.

The requirement to survive, and to ensure the survival of one's offspring is - regardless of cultural diversity - a fundamental, universal characteristic of all living creatures, including human beings. Universality in this sense would seem to be a necessary ingredient for any globally successful forms of storytelling. Liebes and Katz (1990, quoted in Wasko et al, 2001, p. 13) have argued that it is; in their study of the international appeal of *Dallas*, they suggest that the success of American TV programmes is due not necessarily to aggressive marketing strategies, but to a 'universality or primordially of . . . themes and formulae'. How to come up with such universal themes in attractively marketable forms is a rather more difficult question - the answer to which would make us all rich. But universality - which, I suggest, is important to distinguish from globalisation - does seem to be a necessary component of internationally marketable stories, and this is particularly so for those directed at children. Why?

### **Globalisation and the universality of childhood**

The supposed universality of childhood has been characterised by Paul Hazard (1947) as 'the world republic of childhood' - and it has often been called into question by culturally relativist anthropologists and sociologists, such as the British scholars at Hull University's Centre for the Social Study of Childhood (see James, Jenks and Prout, *Theorizing Childhood*, 1998), who quite properly draw attention to the inadvisability of applying laboratory studies of the development of Western infants to children in non-Western cultures, and proposing the findings of these studies as prescriptive norms. The rest of this paper addresses these issues by looking firstly at international attempts to constitute universal rights for children; secondly at arguments from academic psychology; and thirdly, at a brief contribution from children themselves, drawn from recent studies of my own (Davies, 2001; Davies & Mosdell, 2001) which suggests that children may hold some answers to our legitimate concerns about what Herman and McChesney (1997) call the 'missionaries of global capitalism.'

### **Media globalisation**

Media globalisation has been defined by Herman and McChesney (*ibid*) as:

cross-border flows of media outputs, the growth of media TNCs [transnational corporations] and

the tendency towards centralization of media control, and the spread and intensification of commercialization.(p. 8)

An implication of 'cross-border flows' of any product is an underlying assumption of universality of human demand - an assumption that, even where human beings in a given culture have never been exposed to fast food, or animated movies, they can be persuaded to try these things for the first time. There would be no point in trying to sell goods, commodities or services to beings who had no use or desire for them, or who could never be persuaded, via some form of commonly-understood human communication, ever to have any use or desire for them. The considerable concern shown by many scholars about the destructive impact of global media (particularly American, but also Japanese and European, conglomerates) on local traditions, while appearing to defend local diversity, in fact also rests on an assumption of human universality - in this case a universal susceptibility to cultural persuasion. There are many problems associated with the globalisation of media products, including children's products, for the economies of non-Western countries, such as Korea. Seung Hyun Kim and Kyung Sook Lee in a chapter in Wasko et al (*ibid*) review the negative impact of Disney's domination on local animators and economic enterprises. They point out: 'Although the Korean animation industry has sufficient production competence, the financial system is weak and thus dependence on imported animation is common.' (p. 191). There are two primary concerns expressed in this, as in other papers, on the global reach of Disney: first, the impact on the local media economy and second, concern about the possible cultural 'swamping' of indigenous cultural traditions by global, and specifically American, ideologies and ways of doing things. The first concern is a political and economic one, related to the impact of imported products on the (unequal) distribution of wealth and power; the second, obviously linked to the first, is a psychological one, related to the impact of 'alien' cultural ideas on human minds and hearts. In the case of children, and the supposed impact of different cultural forms on their socialisation, economics and politics always need to be complemented by information from psychology, anthropology and sociology, (and to appreciate Mr. Gumpy, a literary training does not come amiss. )

### **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

In modern societies, there is a range of institutional provisions for children, all ultimately originating in what could be seen as a biological, evolutionary need for socialisation and protection, (survival) and all invoking the responsibility of adult society, whether corporate, state, or personal (parents, community etc.) for the care and moral training of the young. Although such concerns may, and do, vary culturally (for instance, in attitudes to gender roles, or child labour, or nutrition, or religion), the existence of such concerns is universal: adults everywhere, both at a personal and an institutional level, are - and have to be - concerned about children. .

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was an international attempt to formulate the ideal political relations of the child to adult society, and the corresponding responsibilities of adult societies towards children. It has been signed by nearly all the nation members of the UN (only two out of the 191 nations - the USA and Somalia - have not ratified it). Its 54 Articles deal with family life; labour; religion; culture; health and the law. A central tenet of the Convention is the universal right of the child to grow up with its own family, and within its own cultural traditions. Parents are identified as the people with 'responsibilities, rights and duties' for the child (Article 5), and from whom the child has a right 'not to be separated' (Article 9). Here, there is a possible tension between the universal right of the child to be with its family, and the universal right of the child to be treated as an independent agent. Thus, the Convention offers the possibility for other institutions to over-ride, or ignore, the wishes of parents when it comes, for example, to judging what is appropriate and suitable for children to see and hear - as in the regulatory provisions set up by states to mandate education, or for specialist children's broadcasting.

The convention provides for the 'right of the child to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child.' (Article 12). Article 13 asserts the child's right to freedom of expression and information.

This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

All these provisions presuppose that the child's views and tastes may be different from those of their parents, or their local culture, and potentially permit these views and tastes to be catered for not only by extra-parental authorities, such as the state, but also by global media providers such as Disney. The universal child thus becomes constructed in two ways - firstly, social-psychologically, as an individual and competent person, capable of forming opinions and attitudes distinct from those of his/her caretakers (and cultural group), and secondly, politically - as an agent, with his/her own representation in international jurisprudence, again independent of adult caretakers, but paradoxically with strong rights to make claims for protection and sustenance on these caretakers. The construction of the child as free agent, while clearly humanistically enlightened and disinterested, also fits well with the view of the child as consumer: an independent operator in the marketplace, capable of free 'choice' . The modification of the construction of the child as agent - that the child also has the right to be protected by adults - underlies attempts to regulate media production and promotion to children.

The tension between unfettered commercial promotion of children's products like toys, cartoons, computer

games, movies and their cross-promoted tie-ins, as pioneered by Disney, has given rise to much academic concern, particularly in the United States (for example Steven Kline's 1999 critique of television's merchandising links with the toy industry) and globally (such as Naomi Klein's best-selling *No Logo*, 2000). Such concerns also underlie a number of articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 17 proposes the role of the media as

disseminating information to children that is consistent with moral well-being and knowledge and understanding among peoples and respects the child's cultural background. The State is to take measures to encourage this, and to protect children from harmful materials. . . media should encourage international co-operation . . . from a diversity of cultural, national and international and international sources'

Article 17 also calls for the production of children's books and attention to the 'linguistic needs' of minority and indigenous children. Definitions of what 'respect' for cultural background means obviously vary widely across, as well as within, 191 very disparate countries - but 'respect' for the child *per se*, and not just as an extension of the parents, is formulated as an universal value. Article 31 stipulates that:

Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. . . . Member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

### **The role of the media producer**

The concept of the free child, choosing for him or herself within the cultural market place poses a challenge for media producers. While acknowledging the right of the child to have his or her own cultural background respected, producers may reserve the right to the freedom to represent, for instance, girls in equal roles with boys (not universally culturally accepted) or to deal with sensitive topics such as pregnancy or homosexuality, in certain kinds of television programming. Such radical representations can bring producers of children's material into conflict with parents and teachers, and may also make their products less attractive in a global market. Globalisation may thus result in less radical and adventurous approaches to children's storytelling on the part of local providers, or to no resources being available for local provision at all.

Certain genres are more marketable globally than others. In the UK in the last ten years, realism in

children's television drama - for example, stories about working-class children's lives in urban communities, a tradition which produced some very original television storytelling - has virtually disappeared, and has been replaced by internationally co-produced fantasy and comedy. The most spectacularly successful recent example of the fantasy genre has been the Harry Potter books and movies, set in a thinly-disguised, upper-class boys' boarding school of the kind popular at the beginning of the last century (e.g. Billy Bunter). Recent televised examples are *The Magician's House*, 2000, (co-produced by the BBC with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), a time-travel story with a remote mountainous setting ostensibly in rural Wales, actually filmed in British Columbia, and a witty comedy series co-produced by the BBC with Radio Telefis Eireann, *Custer's Last Standup* (2000-2001). The representation of smart, 'cool' and well-dressed Irish teenagers in this show must have gone some way to remove the historical English prejudices against the Irish as 'thick' and violent - a positive effect of the economic pressures towards co-production brought about by globalisation.

In an interview in 1996, (in Davies, 2001) John Marsden, in charge of animation at Carlton UK, a commercial company, described some of these pressures in the changes that were overtaking his profession:

I think most of the people working with children [in the UK] . . . are all slightly privileged not to come from a commercially driven area, we come from a public broadcasting tradition. . . Channel 3 [the main independent commercial channel in the UK] was almost totally funded by money from ITV [Independent Television] stations; we didn't have to look to other countries for income to make programmes, so we could actually make those programmes for children in the UK. It's changing in the fact that we can't make programmes solely for the British market.

The child's supposed right to *receive* information 'regardless of frontiers', and to participate 'fully in cultural and artistic life', as the Convention stipulates, lays open the possibility of conflict between different sets of rights - not only between children and adults, but also between parents, charged with duties and responsibilities for children, media regulators, charged with 'protecting' children from 'injurious' material, and media providers - national providers, such as John Marsden, and global entertainment corporations, toy manufacturers, world wide web providers, and print publishers, all seeking to profit from the child's 'right' to information. In principle, the Convention thus not only upholds the child's right to have access to local, as well as global, forms of culture, it upholds the child's right to enjoy culture which may not be approved of by adults. The problem - if problem it is - is that children may well prefer global culture - such as Disney - to local culture. Buckingham (*ibid*:: 293) acknowledges this 'dialectical tension between ideology and pleasure'. But, in summing up, he reverts to the language of the Convention in making a humanistic defence of his interviewees' rights to be treated as intelligent agents:



Of course these are "educated" people; but if they find it easy to see through and to challenge Disney, can we necessarily assume that uneducated people are unable to do so as well? And, more to the point, are we right to assume that children are 'mere swallows of fictions'; with lasting consequences for their beliefs and values.?

If, like Buckingham, we are to defend not only people's pleasures, but also their ability to 'see through' to the ulterior commercial and ideological motives of the providers of those pleasures as one way of confronting the problems of global culture, on what terms are we making this defence? Here, the study of human psychology, in particular the ways in which young children learn, can help us. The ability to 'see through' is an aspect of theories of mind - the ways in which human infants come to understand that other people have mental states, and that these mental states may be different from their own.

### **Blank slates and blank states**

In some ways, we could characterise the upbringing of a baby as a colonialist enterprise; we have to introduce this apparently naive and inexperienced person to the ways of our world, and to persuade him or her to fall in with them. When the 'colony' appears not to want to fall in with our ways, and when they indicate that they prefer their own ways, we can become very indignant, even positively punitive. If we are wise, of course, we don't respond punitively, but develop a collaborative and mutually-supportive system for integrating the child -'colony' into the community of nations constituting the family or household, so that eventually there is reciprocity and equality. A very explicit political analogy between children and peoples in the developing world has been made by two of the most widely-cited and influential critics of the Disney global enterprise - Ariel Dorfman, and Armand Mattelart (1971, 1975) in *Como Leer el Pato Donald (How to Read Donald Duck)* They argued that 'The imaginative world of the child has become the political utopia of a social class'. In the Disney universe, say Dorfman and Mattelart, the child is equated with 'the noble savage' and the noble savage with underdeveloped peoples. These representations, they argue, from a Marxist perspective, have 'only one true object: the elimination of the working class.'

A rebuttal to this view of the power of Disney to eliminate whole social groups is built into Dorfman and Mattelart's comparison between children and 'underdeveloped peoples'. The newborn infant is not a 'blank slate' - John Locke's *tabula rasa*, - but brings into the world both shared and unique genetic predispositions, including the capacity for extremely rapid learning. Thus, by the time a child, like Tara, is two and a half, she is not only much more physically competent than her (already very alert and sociable but not yet walking, talking or weaned) nine-month old brother, she also has the linguistic and social competence to understand the cause and effect of Mr. Gumpy's narrative. She can anticipate the impending

disaster as each animal disobeys Mr. Gumpy's warnings not to misbehave in the boat, she can laugh at the inevitable denouement, and, when she visited us, she was able to form a new relationship with a grown-up stranger based on these shared cultural understandings. In the sharing of the tale of Mr. Gumpy, Tara demonstrated the beginnings of what developmental psychologists and philosophers call 'a theory of mind' - a skill that isn't usually fully developed (at least according to Western laboratory studies) until children are around four. Theory of mind (ToM) first formulated by Premack and Woodruff (1978) is usually tested by asking children to recognise 'false beliefs' - the possibility that another person may hold a view that is contrary to the actual state of affairs. Tara's ability to employ the kinds of 'social referencing' which enable us to understand other people's mental states permitted her to recognise the older girl's enthusiasm for the story, and hence to trust Elinor to read it to her. But, more than that; it also permitted her to enter into a non-existent, imaginary world and to theorise about the mental states of fictional characters who - as she knew - did not exist at all. Through activating her linguistic narrative competence she could see what would happen as the rabbit 'hopped about'; Tara, remembering that Mr. Gumpy had asked the rabbit not to do this, was gleefully able to predict the disaster of the overturned boat.

If we accept Mattelart and Dorfman's analogy between developing peoples and children, we can argue that so-called underdeveloped or developing cultures are no more blank slates than two year old, or newborn, children are. Cultures and individuals within cultures can have their own long-standing ways of doing things which may be as resistant to outside interference as is Mr. Gumpy's rabbit (who is, of course, just a naughty - or, if you prefer - an effectively adaptive child in disguise). Rather than accept a view of developing peoples as naive and vulnerable to powerful global messages in ways which are likely to obliterate their own (by implication, less powerful) ways of doing things, theories of mind studies might suggest to us that resistance is biologically and psychologically programmed into human beings, so that they are innately equipped not to accept everything they are told - or sold - without activating mechanisms for evaluating, and if necessary, rejecting it. This provides a potentially empirical basis for the rather diffuse concept of 'the active audience', so popular in recent years in media and cultural studies.

### **The biological roots of culture**

The idea that human beings are biologically programmed to behave in certain ways is, however, often resisted in cultural studies. Barrett, Dunbar and Lycett (2002) in their study of human evolutionary psychology, insist that 'human nature and culture both have biological roots.' (p.2). To point out the universality of culture and its origins in human natural selection - as Dunbar does in his book about the universally-observed social function of gossip - is, they argue, not to be biologically determinist:

To understand our evolutionary history and recognise its antecedents in the animal kingdom is not

to deny what it is to be human. In fact, it can only add to our understanding of the human condition, and possibly even help us overcome human frailty. It can explain why we have to teach our children to share (since they won't do it naturally); it can shed light on why people prefer to gossip about their neighbours than solve problems in differential calculus. (p. 2)

For Barrett et al, 'phenotypic plasticity' - the ability of human beings to adapt to different circumstances, and to develop different cultural patterns for dealing with these different circumstances - is 'the most important of human evolutionary adaptations.' We have evolved to be cultured, and regardless of temporal and local variations, variations which are themselves evidence of this species-specific plasticity, all human beings *are* cultured: culture is universal.

Where children are concerned, the functional importance of culture is seen by many writers as central. In the words of DeFleur and Ball Rokeach (1989), 'culture is the solution of problems of living handed on to each generation.' Culture enables the human race not to reinvent the wheel in every generation, but to develop procedures, particularly through language, and more particularly still, through purposeful creative activity, often with playthings (toys), to *teach* our children to do it. A happy feature of the way in which humans have evolved culturally, and which sometimes makes me believe that there may be a benevolent god working through all this, is that what works most effectively in the socialising of human children is fantasy.

The ability to fantasise is a central aspect of 'second-order intentionality' - or the ability to recognise another's point of view. As Barrett et al point out:

Storytelling is only possible with at least second-order intentionality, because composer and audience have to be able to imagine that the world could be other than as they find it. . . . if stories are more than just descriptions of fictional worlds then even more advanced mentalising abilities may be required. . . . the author of a story featuring three individuals involved in a triangular relationship has to be able to achieve fifth order intentionality, while the audience has to be able to manage at least fourth order. (p.362)

These increasing orders of mental inferencing all act to facilitate more sophisticated levels of social understanding and functioning. Barrett et al also point out the high proportion of 'origin stories' in all cultures which 'reinforce and bind the community into a functional coalition.' This way of analysing stories as promoting successful evolutionary adaptive strategies has even been applied to Jane Austen's novels - apparently the fictional events she describes (marriage choices, inheritance patterns and so forth) 'do conform remarkably well to evolutionary expectations.' (p. 362)

For children, stories serve many purposes one of which, as Barrett et al point out, is the fostering of the important social and cultural skill of second-order thinking - being able to see the point of view of another person, of which the apparently simple, but in fact extremely complex, gesture of pointing in babies is one of the earliest examples (Butterworth et al 2002). In the pictures from my book *Baby Language* (1987) which illustrate this gesture we can see how the five month old baby's sightline matches that of the mother as they both look at an attractive object to which the baby is reaching out. Stories also teach mimetic lessons about different ways of behaving - as in the case of Mr. Gumpy - and in so doing, (which is where the benevolent god comes in), provide a lot of enjoyment and pleasure: laughter, imitation and play. Similarly pleasurable activities like singing and dancing, argues Robin Dunbar (1996 *ibid*), not only provide measurably biological, feel-good euphoric states in individuals, they also serve to bind groups together in ways which verbal language cannot do. Hence the universal appeal of slapstick humour, (Donald Duck); rhythmic music (MTV), all kinds of dance - and of play.

### **Children's playground culture**

One of the remarkable aspects of children's own play-culture is that it has always had a global circulation, which has proved difficult to explain. Iona and Peter Opie (1959, reprinted 1986) describe how the same, or similar, children's slang, games and rituals, may turn up in widely different national and international locations almost simultaneously. For example, when the ballad of Davy Crockett was launched on British radio in 1956, a spoof was collected in September 1956 from a Swansea schoolgirl:

Born on a table top in Joe's cafe (apparently a real cafe in Swansea)  
Dirtiest place in the USA  
Polished off his father when he was only three  
Polished off his mother with DDT.

But before the official Davy Crockett song had reached Britain, an Australian correspondent, writing to the Opies on 3 January 1956, reported that 'the following ditty was sweeping the schools in Sydney':

Reared on a paddle pop in Joe's cafe  
The dirtiest dump in the USA  
Poisoned his mother with DDT  
And shot his father with a .303

The Opies comment: 'It seems that the schoolchild underground also employs trans-world couriers.' (p. 7,

*The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*)

Similarly with fairy tales: Bruno Bettelheim (1976) points out that the story of Cinderella is one of the most universal in the world, with many national versions, the earliest recorded one being in China in the 9th century. He argues that scenarios such as the 'reversal of fortune' story of Cinderella turn up in all cultures (and in literature, too, for example Jane Austen's novels *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*) because they reflect psychological universals; whether this is sibling rivalry, or oedipal conflicts or the startling bodily changes of adolescence reflected in the many physical transformations, for example, from frog to prince, found in fairy tales. One does not have to be as strongly Freudian as Bettelheim to acknowledge that the experiences of being displaced by younger siblings; of sharing parental attention and of growing from child to adult are universal, although different cultures may deal with them differently. We could also argue that such scenarios have value in terms of their evolutionary meanings: certain human qualities - the ability to co-operate, to socialise, to attract suitable mates and to cope with adversity - are adaptive in terms of reproductive success and hence survival. Cinderella ultimately prospers and catches the alpha male, the Prince, because she successfully adapts to different, difficult circumstances.

Alison Lurie (1990) has gone further and characterised classic children's literature, from Carroll's Alice, through *Little Women*, to *Wind in the Willows*, as politically 'subversive'. This view from a literary scholar develops the evolutionary argument for the value of universal narrative motifs into a political case. Lurie argues that the classic children's stories, including fairy tales, show the triumph of the dispossessed, particularly girls and women, over the rich and powerful. One could argue that this tendency to oppositionality is innate, a biological function which predisposes to, and selects for, uniqueness and cussedness. Theories of mind permit children's ability to appreciate irony, to understand when someone is lying, and to imagine scenarios different from the environment they currently occupy, in order to *achieve* adaptation. No change is possible, without the possibility of change first being mentally conceived. Evolution and human biology require adaptiveness and the most popular and universally favoured children's stories are those which illustrate this. To return to Disney, Paul Reis (in Wasko et al, *ibid*) points out that, in Brazil, it is not the openly propagandist Disney characters, especially tailored for the Brazilian political milieu, such as the wartime Zé Carioca, who are popular with young people; these are not featured in the widely-popular Disney theme parks which have become venues for, for example, 15th birthday parties. The popular themes continue to be based on the traditional characters - Snow White, Cinderella, Mickey Mouse - and El Pato Donald..

I want to show a clip from the first Disney coloured cartoon, *The Band Concert*, (1935) in which Donald - like Mr. Gumpy's hopping rabbit - plays a thoroughly subversive, and hence an evolutionarily adaptive, part. Donald's playing of 'Turkey in the Straw', an American folk tune, deflects the band, conducted by

Mickey, from playing a more serious European cultural product, Rossini's William Tell overture (which, of course, references in its turn, a story of Swiss national liberation struggle). This could easily (all too easily) be read as an image of US trashy populism obliterating other people's more refined cultures. However, does it really work like that? The Mouse, the dominant symbol of Disney, is represented as the baton-bearer of European, not American, musical culture. And when, in a miraculous piece of animators' artistry, the whole band is swept away by a storm at the end, we are perhaps being told that all culture is subject to the force of nature - as indeed it is. But, to return to my theme, it is the naughty, subversive child - el Pato Donald - who is given the last word: Donald, exploiting his human child's gift for formulating theories of mind, knows exactly how to wind Mickey up, and a last few defiant bars of 'Turkey in the Straw' close the narrative.

So are children, and later adults, victims of false consciousness in their pleasure and delight in fantasy and their resistance to imposed messages from adults? The fact that nice things happen when people read Mr. Gumpy together does nothing to adjust the structural inequalities in the world, particularly those brought about by globalisation. It could be and has been argued that falling in love with Snow White, or the toys in *Toy Story*, actively prevents children and young people from developing political awareness about the more disturbing aspects of the economic and cultural dominance of companies like Disney and the general process of Disneyfication - the vertical and horizontal integration of production and distribution whereby powerful corporate conglomerates can control all outlets. I would like to argue from my own research in *Dear BBC* (2001) and in *Consenting Children ?* (2001) that media narratives such as Disney's, as well as other kinds of story, can be positively used to generate political awareness - a view also held by media educators round the world (see, for example, Criticos in Kubey, 1997, 2001). Children, with their capacity for theorising about others' mental states, for imagining alternative states, and for having the developmental potential to grow up and put some of these imaginings into practice, inevitably have the biological and psychological capacity to be politicised (which is the opposite of being indoctrinated.) If, as teachers, parents, and adults generally, we do not build on these capacities to help children develop political consciousness, why blame Disney and their ilk? The problem may be closer to home, with us.

I want to conclude with some comments about media from children which suggest this potential for political thinking and action, given the right encouragement from adults. This encouragement came from, in the first case, a science-fiction drama provided by public service broadcasting (the BBC), and in both the first and second case, from the opportunity for children to discuss with their peers in school their views on the nature of TV drama, of filmed animation, and of their difference from the 'real'. This opportunity was facilitated by enlightened teaching in their schools, as evidenced by the children's assurance in discussion and their discursive range; it was also provided by the fact that some researchers (us) had been publicly funded to visit the schools to consult children about the broadcasting services provided for them. These

children were not observed in an experimental situation to demonstrate media 'effects'; they were consulted, within a negotiating forum, similar to a focus group, on their views *about* such issues as media effects. There is not enough space here to discuss the performative aspects of this situation, and whether the children would have responded differently in a less-structured environment (see Davies & Machin, 2000a and 2000b for more extended discussions of this issue.) What this procedure did allow them to do was to participate in the 'public sphere' of debate about media, in which they were 'constructed' not as experimental subjects, but as discursive participants, similar to the ways in which adults are allowed to perform in political consultation processes.

### **Discussing the real**

Hodge and Tripp (1985) point out that the question of what is 'real' is always a political question - and it is one that constantly exercises children when watching filmed and televised stories. The following exchanges from children concern the BBC drama series, *The Demon Headmaster* (1996- 1999), a sci-fi dystopic scenario about a power-crazy school principal bent on world domination, with both fairy tale and political fable elements, who is thwarted by a diverse group of somewhat alienated children. The show was hugely popular when it was first aired - more so even than the kinds of adult soaps that usually attract the largest child audiences, such as the BBC's *EastEnders*. Here children, aged between eight and eleven years, in a rural primary school in the North East of England, discuss aspects of the programme in terms of their credibility. It was noteworthy that the most 'unlikely' aspect of the story - the basic narrative premise of a group of children outwitting and defeating powerful adults - was never commented on as being unreal. Possibly the children accepted it because of its obvious evolutionary adaptiveness: the younger generation always has to make good the shortcomings of the old. These children were particularly concerned to defend the necessity of the concept of childhood and to rebut the Demon Headmaster's (anti-evolutionary) assertion that childhood was unnecessary. Here, second and third order theorising about the mental states of the character and his motives are evident:

Suzanne: I think that's not very real because he was a child once.

. . .

Frances: Yeah, but he isn't a normal person is he? He wants everybody to be like him.

Edward; He's just a normal person who hypnotises people and has normal evil thoughts. He's just a normal person underneath.

Suzanne: It would be impossible to get rid of childhood.

Edward: It's necessary to start your life .It gives you things like . .

Frances: Freedom.

Graham: You'd have to get rid of every child in the world as well.

Everybody: yeah, yeah.

Edward: With every child it would be impossible.

Suzanne: You'd have to get rid of everybody on the other side of the world.

Interviewer: So we think it would be a bad idea?.

Suzanne: A totally bad idea.'

In an interview with the youngest group in the study, some seven year old kindergarten-aged children in North-West London, the interviewer asked a theory of mind question about the audience for *Rugrats*, the American Klasky-Csupo cartoon - also internationally popular. This produced a cascade of speculation between the children, again, theorising about the mental capacity of different age groups:

Interviewer: Let me ask you what age group do you think *Rugrats* is for?

Stephanie: About our age, because babies wouldn't like it as much, because they wouldn't understand, and big people would find it babyish for them.

Interviewer: How old are big people?

Stephanie: Ten.

Interviewer: So it is too babyish for ten year olds.

Sarah: I would have thought it would be from about seven to about eleven, because my brother is eleven and he still likes it.



Interviewer: And not younger than seven?

Sarah: About six to seven then.

Maxine: I think you can watch it from any age under twelve years old, because you can watch any time really you don't have to watch it when you are this age or that age.

They then went on to talk about the 'real':

Interviewer: And have you ever watched *Julia Jekyll and Harriet Hyde* (a BBC comedy programme with live action)?

Children: Yes.

Interviewer: Is that a cartoon?

Children: No. They are films. They have got real people in them.

Maxine: The difference between cartoon characters and real people is because cartoon characters are like drawings and real people are like me and you. You can make them move with computers and they look like they are moving but they are really just drawings. . . . I think, I can't favouritism (*sic*) any films over cartoons, because in cartoons you can do anything, you can do anything really, you can make anything happen, as long as you can draw it. With films, I really like films, because it's real people and they are doing things sort of like more clear and more firm, the colours, and you can see all the things that are happening and it makes you feel it is true.

While in cartoons you know it is only drawings.

Some hope for the human race there, perhaps?

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