



January 2001

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Toys: A Study in Popular Culture

Sometimes the best popular culture material your class can investigate may be in the shopping mall down the street. For many years I have successfully conducted "mall-crawl" field trips with my high school students in which we look at the structure, ambience and pop culture connections of these environments. Equally as rewarding – and central to the holiday season – is a visit to Toys "R" Us.

If you wish to organize this kind of field trip, be sure to contact the store manager in advance so there will be a clear understanding of the educational value of your visit. (And divide your class into small groups.)

Here are some key questions for a "Toys 2000" assignment.

- What were the major trends in toys this past year?
- What do they tell us about popular culture in 2000?
- List the five hottest toys.
- What do you like and dislike about the Toys "R" Us stores?
- Account for the popularity of the leading sellers such as Pokemon
- Which toys, in your opinion, are the best for kids? Establish your own criteria to make your decision such as the potential role of a toy in stimulating creativity.
- Recently, the Toy Manufacturers of America told the press: "Technology is influencing every aspect of the toy industry whether it's the toys themselves, the design or the production." Assess this year's techno animals such as Poochi, Albo and Pogo Scooby. Do you think that electronics make the toys more entertaining?
- Just for fun, what toys get your vote as the tackiest? Why?
- What generalizations can you make about what today's toys tell us about the needs and behaviour of children today?
- What are the tie-ins with media and popular culture (i.e. toys that are associated with TV shows or popular films.)
- Are any toys you played with as a child still being sold? What did you like and/or dislike about them?
- How are toys divided into toys for boys and toys for girls? To what extent do you consider this separation to be harmful, sexual stereotyping?



- There are numerous articles in magazines and newspapers and on the Net about toys. Consult these to enhance your field trip observations. Write a report or make a video on the role of toys in our culture.

Suggested Print Resources:

Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of TV Marketing*, Garamond Press, 1993. Looks at the history and development of children's play culture and toys from Lego to Barbie Dolls and poses the critical question whether or not children's play should be defined by marketing strategists.

Gene Dell Vecchio, *Creating Ever-Cool: A Marketer's Guide to a Kid's Heart*. Pelican Publishing, 1997. All the techniques for creating brand loyalty in kids by one of the top American ad masters and marketers. This book will change the ways you think about popular culture for kids -- their toys and other pop culture passions.

Britney Spears: Can She Hang on to Fame?



Teen pop star Britney Spears has as many detractors as she has hard nose fans. Reporter Sharlene Azam in the October 17 *Toronto Star* posed the question "how long will her fame last?" What is especially intriguing is the recent shift in Britney's image. "In a short time, she has gone from looking like a cheer leader to looking very comfortable in next to nothing." Her concert telecast on December 2 was ample proof.

Here are some discussion starters for the classroom:

- How would you explain Britney Spears' appeal to fans that admire her? How would you explain why so many young people distrust her?
 - Britney Spears' strategy for surviving in the pop culture jungle is to move from her childlike image to a more sexualized image. How would you explain this move and how well do you think it is working?
 - Madonna has been active since the late 1970's and has managed to reinvent herself many times. To what extent is this possible for Britney?
 - The law of stardom suggests that to stay a star, you must recreate yourself every three years. What have other successful stars done to recreate themselves? Have any successfully bucked this trend?
 - Imagine you are an image consultant for several current singers or pop groups. What recommendations would you make to help them successfully reinvent their images and identities?
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Recent Teachable Moments

The Death of Pierre Elliot Trudeau



Television loves spectacle and ritual and the funeral of the influential and charismatic Pierre Elliot Trudeau provided it. After the theatrical eulogy by Justin Trudeau, there was the moving moment when he kissed the casket and said farewell with "Je t'aime Papa." At this solemn occasion, there were celebrity sightings (stars like Leonard Cohen and Margot Kidder) and the extraordinary encounter of Cuba's Fidel Castro talking to former US president Jimmy Carter.

The innumerable television retrospectives and interviews with friends and colleagues over a five-day period helped to establish a kind of rare, unifying mythic dimension for the country. That Trudeau was many-faceted – a skilled statesman, a parliamentary debater, an intellectual maverick, a buffoon, a playboy, a loving father – allowed each of us to selectively frame and negotiate the meaning of his elusive identity.

Most Trudeau observers would agree that he knew how to use the media effectively.

- Look at several segments of one or more documentaries on Trudeau and try to isolate the elements that explain his strong visual image. (Some examples might include: his cool, aloof presence; clowning – who can forget the pirouette behind the queen?; a sense of menace when angered – his response "Just watch me!" when being interviewed about imposing the War Measures Act.)

Humour or Sexism?

The Canadian Cancer society has run some controversial advertisements about the importance of women's breast examination. One uses the line "Put your breasts in my hands." Apparently, young people have no trouble with the words and feel it is not exploitative, whereas most people over 40 are alarmed at the implied sexism. What do you think?

You can take a look at this ad in quicktime at AdCritic.com:

<http://www.adcritic.com/content/breast-cancer-society-of-canada-cam-exam.html>

Eminem



The fuss in Toronto last November about the misogynist lyrics of rapper Eminem was ultimately amusing and revealing. Controversy usually translates into good ratings, but the concert was already sold out before the would-be government censors, including Ontario's Attorney-General, made a vain attempt to ban him. Insiders claim the heart of the controversy is that Eminem is a white rapper saying those horrible sexist things. Why? Well, black rappers, it seems, get away with it.

The discussion question for all of us then becomes, "why do we have this double standard?"

Politics and the Media

During the recent federal election:

- How successful were the handlers, PR flacks, spin doctors and image consultants for the party leaders?
- Did the PC negative campaign work, especially the K-Tel style commercial of the 101 broken promises of the Liberal party?
- And what about the Stockwell Day ads where he was posed with his grandchildren?
- Ultimately, Stockwell was the big loser. Joe Clark claimed in the TV debates that Day looked



like he was auditioning for a game show host. People criticized him for not following a script, about being too glib and often out-of-control. How would you describe the television images of each of the leaders? To what extent did these images contribute to their success or failure? If you were an image consultant, what advice would you give each of them?

Recommended Resource

The British Film Institute is a venerable UK institution that has fostered media education for many years through publications, special screenings and regular seminars and institutes. Their most recent document, *Moving Images in the Classroom: A Secondary Teachers' Guide to Film and Television*, is an excellent resource for teachers. Using a developmental approach, this short, very pragmatic guide takes a systematic approach to teaching film and television. There are sections on integrating media literacy in different subject areas, with a handy grid outlining the learning objectives, activities and outcomes expected from pupils. You can download this document. (You will need Acrobat Reader) at: www.bfi.org.uk/education/classroom.

Upcoming Events

McLuhan is revived!

Media educators will be interested in knowing about the course "Understanding Marshall McLuhan" even if they don't live in the vicinity of Toronto. Marshall McLuhan's phrase "The medium is the message" and his notion of the "global village" are among his best-known and cited – if little understood – concepts. Twenty years after McLuhan's death, almost 40 years since the publication of *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, his ideas still exert their influence and fascination. The purpose of this course is to recollect McLuhan's life and times, revisit key works in order to develop a deeper understanding of his insights and lessons, and to assess and evaluate his contributions in light of recent developments in media.

Date: 01/23/2001 to 04/17/2001

Time: 6:00PM - 9:00PM

Meeting Day(s): Tuesdays

Number of Meetings: 13

Cost: \$645.00 Later Life Learner Cost: \$645.00

Location: Class St George

Brought to you by the School of Continuing Studies at <http://learn.utoronto.ca> and Bob Hanke, Senior Research and Teaching Associate The McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology, U of Toronto bob@mcluhan.utoronto.ca.



Media education : Have we sold out to our sponsors?

Arguably the most controversial issue among media educators is the growing commercialism in our schools and even in media education materials and practices. Twelve media educators representing six different countries weighed in on the debate and are featured in the forthcoming winter issue of *Telemidium, The Journal of Media Education* (from Madison, Wisconsin.) Edited by Barry Duncan. We will keep you posted about responses from media educators.

Naomi Klein

Hear Cultural Journalist Naomi Klein on February 1, 2001. Teens sporting their Nikes and Tommy Hilfiger clothes raise questions about individual and tribal identity, global media influences and social issues associated with the odious Asian sweatshops that create this stuff. Naomi Klein, author of the best selling Canadian book *No Logo: Dealing with the Brand Bullies* will speak about these and other issues to media teachers on February 1 in Toronto. (Location to be determined.) This event is sponsored by the Association for Media Literacy in Toronto. Stay tuned.
aml@interlog.com

The Final Word

The final word this month comes from Kathleen Macdonnell, children's fiction writer and author of *Kid Culture: Children & Adults & Popular Culture*, a book which takes a positive view of the role of popular culture in the lives of young people. Her new book (Spring 2001) is *Honey, We lost the Kids: Re-thinking Childhood in the Multimedia Age*. She presented at the Summit 2000 conference last May in Toronto. I asked her about the trend this year in techno-animals and interactive toys such as "Amazing Babies" in which two dolls interact electronically.

"Today's young people feel totally comfortable with electronic toys. Parents may have had fears about the role of machines in their own lives, but young people can handle the new technology. Much of the uproar about the arrival of the Teletubbies was from those critics who felt that kids were being turned into mindless automatons. Finally, the line between a toy and something utilitarian is becoming increasingly blurry as kids play with their new Palm Pilots."

Barry Duncan is an award-winning teacher, author, consultant and founder and past president of the Ontario-based Association for Media Literacy. Co-author of the best selling text book, *Mass Media and Popular Culture*, he has presented workshops and keynote addresses to thousands of teachers in Canada and around the world. You can contact Barry at baduncan@interlog.com.

