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Subject to Power: The Postmodern Child Spectator

Patricia Pace

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Subject to Power: The Postmodern Child Spectator

Patricia Pace (bio)

Marsha Kinder. *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991.

Marsha Kinder's *Playing with Power* makes it clear that childhood is indeed a contested site, wherein the privileged space for unfettered and creative play, in opposition to the adult world of work and business as usual, becomes an anachronism at best. Of course childhood play (as Piaget, Bettelheim, and Huizinga demonstrated early on) has always contained elements of work important to the cognitive, psychological, and cultural development of the child. But Kinder's book puts forth the alarming argument that in this late twentieth-century age of increasingly sophisticated electronic and interactive media, coordinated and controlled by the multinational corporation, the most important "work" accomplished in childhood "play" may be to prepare the child for early entry into our greatest cultural pastime and leisure activity—product consumption.

As a child of the fifties who reluctantly bid goodbye to Barbie and trotted proudly to school with my Disney-decorated lunchbox, media and product tie-ins are no revelation to me. But to discover that Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TMNT) is a billion-dollar supersystem, which has crucial implications in the corporate mergers affecting the restructuring of nations and economies in the "new world order," is to witness a literal and figurative "re-militarization" of childhood. It is not only a question of the child's exposure to sexuality and/or violence—or, conversely, to positive images of family—but also of the whole complex set of relationships in which the child comes to understand the world. Will the child be empowered to negotiate his or her own narrative, or will the child be thoroughly constructed as consumerist subject? Will the child be empowered as a member of the world community who is able to effect meaningful social change, or will virtual reality suffice? The question Kinder wants to answer is whether or not there is power in (postmodern) play. **[End Page 226]**

The mother of eight-year-old Victor, "household Nintendo champion" (1), Professor Kinder clearly wants to see the Utopian possibilities inherent in her son's pleasures and activities, "from Muppet Babies to

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles." For those of us who teach fairy tales, Kinder's analysis of the postmodern assimilation of familiar narratives into kids' television, movies, and games provides reassurance that today's children receive their prescribed dose of oedipal drama and other psychic sustenance. She usefully notes that Nintendo hits are derived from "action genres . . . in which male heroes have traditionally grown into manhood and replaced father figures, and on myths . . . in which little guys beat giants" (104-105). Early morning Saturday television is dominated by animal characters who, like Beatrix Potter's irascible rabbits, get into trouble and arouse "less anxiety about 'good' versus 'bad' (that is, socially disapproved) behavior" (74). And, like the transformer toys that Susan Willis analyzes elsewhere, mutant turtles "[evoke] the comic prototype of Proteus . . . [and] transgress borders of species, race, ethnicity, generation, and media" (135). Kinder's readings of these and many other texts make a powerful argument for media as the contemporary child's primary initiation into narrative, and concomitantly, subject formation and the Lacanian "Symbolic Order" (11).

From Kinder's perspective, children's interactive media is fundamentally about transformation and mastery. Proficiency in technology equals postmodern literacy; in the theme park, video arcade, or the movies, the child assimilates the complex cultural codes that structure our contemporary discourse. Kinder is inclined to celebrate the intertextuality of the popular discourse, which relies heavily on the recycling and recombination of familiar plots, images, and modes of production across media. However, her close readings of individual narratives suggest that the only creative renegades employed by the corporate giants are in the engineering and marketing divisions; on the whole, the pleasurable repetitions in the postmodern plots confront the same old bugaboos of masculinity—the missing father or omnipotent patriarch, "a disavowal of obsolescence, castration, death" (110). Seen in the context of the real life space of play (wherein young boys may best their middle-class or...

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