

# Television and commercialism 9960

Technology



## Television and Commercialism

Television is populated with images which are superficial and lack depth.

Programs look more like ads and ads look more like programs. All this leads to

a close circle of consumerism. The three excerpts relate to these unifying ideas thus the validity of their argument.

" Surface is all; what you see is what you get. These images are proud of their standing as images. They suggest that the highest destiny of our time

is to become cleansed of depth and specificity altogether." (1). We live in a world populated by images. Children's television has concocted small, preset groups of images such as rainbows for happiness, red hearts for warmth, unicorns

for magical regeneration, and blondness to indicate superiority ( 2). Images are just that a^" images which keep the viewer on a superficial level. For instance,

in the program Sailor Moon, little girls are kept on a level of clothes and being cute for boys. This is a very unrealistic outlook and short circuits any thoughts of importance in their lives. Barbie, the Mattel doll, also portrays a

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false image. With her petite, fragile figure, large bust, tiny waist, long legs, big eyes, and vast career ranging from a lifeguard to a doctor, Barbie wins the

hearts of many innocent little girls who become subjected to her unrealistic image.

Most often in television there is no depth beyond the surface, what you see is what you get. This is very prominent in children's television, where without the special effects in action- adventure shows, all that is left are shows that lack enthusiasm. For example, many children's programs are alike.

They often involve very innocent, sweet, high-voiced creatures that live in happy land. They are threatened by bad people who capture one of the happy creatures. However they are rescued on the end and everyone lives happily ever

after. In response the viewer experiences the emotion of feeling " happy."

These programs allow for a quick emotional response but no deep response that

permits you to go past the surface.

However, television allow us to see further at times such as a program about black Americans discovering their roots. Yet shows like this are far and few between. Most of the time, we only see what's on the surface which focuses on what society already knows or what they (writers) think we need or want to know (3).

" Television, with all its highly touted diversity, seems to becoming more of a piece, more a set of permutations of a single cultural constant: television, our debased currency." (4). TV looks like TV and when you look at it deeper it takes you back to itself, this is referred to as homogeneity. " But even as television becomes televisiona^" plus, it remains the national dream factory, bulletin board, fun house mirror for distorted images of our national desires and fears... And yet non of the metaphors seems quite right, because finally television is not quite anything else. It is justa^" television." (5).

Ads are becoming to look more like programs with the use of narrative strategies called " mini- narratives." This strategy is used in a particular

Pepsi commercial which models the TV show Miami Vice. It features Don Johnson

and the music of Glenn Fry. It is almost as if the commercial is a three minute

episode of the show. Similarly programs are beginning to look like ads. When

Price Adam pulls out his sword in the show He-Man, he is encircled with lively,

lightning flashes as he shouts in a deep, echoing, voice, " By the power of Grayskull... I have the power!" He then transforms into He-Man . This appears

to be a commercial for the He-Man action figure and sword of power. There is a

history behind programa^" length commercial. A cartoon Hot Wheels , which is also

the name of a line of cars made by Mattel, was aired on ABC in 1969. One of Mattel's competitors, Topper, filed a complaint with the Federal Communications

Commission (FCC) stating that the show was a thirty- minute commercial. The FCC

agreed stating that during the program, Mattel was receiving a commercial

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promotion for its product beyond the allowed time for commercial advertising.

(6).

Both ads and children's television generally have minimal plots which contribute to the lack of depth . In kids TV there is more focus on visual and sound effects, pyrotechnics and a recognizable theme song. " Plots repeat each

other from one show to another, no matter who produces them. Whether aimed at

little girls and syrupy sweet, or at little boys and filled with " action"

sequences in which the forces of Good triumph, however provisionally, over the

forces of Evil, they involve an obsession with theft, capture, and kidnapping

(emphasis on " kid" ), with escape, chase, and recapture, with deception and

mechanical transformation from one shape or state of being to another a ^"  
all

stung together to make each show a series of predictable permutations." (7).

"... TV now exalts TV. Spectatorship by perserving a hermetic vision

that is uniformly televisual. Like advertising, which no longer tends to evoke

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realities at variance with the market, TV today shows almost nothing that might

clash with its own busy, monolithic style. This new stylistic near integrity is the product of a long process whereby TV has eliminated or subverted whichever

of its older styles have threatened to impede the sale of goods; that is,

styles that might once have encouraged some nontelevisual type of

spectatorship." (8). " Authorship" as a business concept has moved from

television studios to the toy industry, greeting card companies, advertising

agencies, and cereal companies. In only a short time, a small a^" scale business

of licensing popular kids characters to appear on products has been turned into

a multibillion dollar industry. Through the " licensed character" and the

program a^" length commercial. Originally the idea of character licensing came

about in 1904 when the Brown Shoe Company purchased the rights to use the name

of a popular comic strip character, Buster Brown, to promote its children's

shoes. (9). At first, licensers thought it was a good idea to simply get free advertising value of having their " image" on a product with no payment required.

(10).

Character licensing was made for children's television and started to get out of hand. The 1950's were a golden age of kids TV. Announcers like Buffalo Bob of Howdy Doody who did ads themselves would pressure the viewers by

saying things such as " have your Mom or Daddy take you to the store where you

get Poll Parrot shoes, and ask for your Howdy Doody cut out!" (11). Thus

popular characters in kids TV lead to huge lines of products to which their images are attached.

The process of TV merchandising began with a successful show. Then along came a toy company who had paid for the right to make a doll of the show's

main character. Then a clothes company paid to make clothing featuring the character and on the story goes. (12). More importantly, this created a new



framework for not only marketing a toy, but an image. Thus leading to children

surrounded by advertising images which were mirrored off every object that caught their eye. (13)

Cartoons are often about multiply groups so that there are more characters to sell. The more they sell the more money they make. " What better

than urging kids to get into sharing and togetherness and cooperation by buying

whole integrated, cooperative, loving sets of huggable, snuggable, nurturing dolls? ( " Ten Care Bears are better than one, " as one Care Bear Special put it.)" (14).

Kids have enormous imaginative capacities which leads to highly structured play which requires highly structured toys. For instance, in the cartoon Sailor Moon, the characters wear rings to give them power. What better

marketing strategy than to create gadgets which will increase sales. After all, Sailor Moon is not Sailor Moon without her ring, and Price Adam is only He-Man

with his sword.

Children's television is "intimately linked to the seasonal launching and selling of new lines of dolls and other licensed products a^" not singly, but

in bonded groups: ten or more Care Bears; scads of My Little Ponies; eight Hugga Bunch plush dolls with their baby Hugglets in their arms." (15). These shows focus on the need for teamwork. Most often in children's television one

of the worst crimes you can commit is to be alone.

Consumerism becomes a naturalized act since all you see is superficial and fake. You begin to believe what you see is real because that is all you see,

so it seems natural. The ideas of superficiality and lack of depth, as well as homogeneity combine to promote consumerism. Ads portray utopias which convey

that we are supposed to think it is the magic of things. Such that if we buy these things they will transform our lives. For instance, if a child has a He-Man sword he too will have the "Power of Grayskull." These images try to place

the product's image onto the image of this transformation and eventually lead to

a purchase. (16).

" If we want a different set of images on the screen, we'll have to

produce not just better plots, but a different production system with different goals in a different world." (17).