

In the worst possible taste

Children, television and cultural value

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Steve (aged 6): I love Animal Hospital. It's my best programme.

Charlie: Did you watch the monkey one?

Steve: Yeah, that was so funny. It started itching other monkey's bums and they started spitting down on people's heads.

Debates about children and television have largely been preoccupied with the potential impact of 'harmful' material. Such debates implicitly define children as a 'special' audience, with distinctive characteristics and needs. Children, it is argued, are in need of protection, not just from commercial exploitation or ideological manipulation, but also from the consequences of their own vulnerability and ignorance.

One of the implicit concerns in these debates is with the question of children's taste. It seems to be assumed that, if left to their own devices, children will choose to watch material that is not only morally damaging but also inherently lacking in cultural value. Dietary metaphors are common here: children, it is often asserted, will opt for chips and chocolate bars in preference to the nourishing cultural food that adults consistently tell them is good for them. Children's 'natural' taste, it is argued, is for vulgarity and sensationalism, rather than restraint and subtlety; for simplistic stereotypes rather than complex, rounded characters; and it is led by the baser physical instincts rather than the higher sensibilities of the intellect. Children and 'good taste' are, it would seem, fundamentally incompatible.

Children's television/adults' television

Historically, the main focus of this concern has been on the effects of material that is aimed at adults, rather than on programmes aimed specifically at children. In 1996, for example, a British market research report revealing that children's preferences are for 'adult' sit-coms and soap operas resulted in outraged headlines about 'the scandal of the "view as you like" generation'¹. In fact, this story is far from news. Right from the beginnings of television, children have always preferred to watch programmes that are not made for them (Abrams, 1956).

A closer look at the ratings, however, reveals a more interesting story than simply that of children watching 'unsuitable' material or 'growing up too fast'. To be sure, children's programmes are rarely among the top rating shows for children; and there is a good deal of overlap, with the same popular sitcoms and soap operas featuring on both

adults' and children's charts. Nevertheless, many of the most popular programmes with children are not especially popular with adults, and vice-versa. Our analysis of the ratings for 1995, for example, found that 'adult' programmes such as Neighbours, Gladiators, Mr. Bean or You've Been Framed, which are peripheral in the general chart, were consistently in the top 20 for children; while dramas such as Heartbeat or Inspector Morse, which featured in the general top 20, were absent from the children's chart (Buckingham, Davies, Jones and Kelley, 1999). To some degree, of course, these differences can be explained through scheduling and availability to view: programmes like Inspector Morse run after the 9 p.m. watershed, while the most popular 'adult' programmes among children are often screened in the early evenings, especially at weekends. Nevertheless, this kind of comparison should lead us to question any easy opposition between 'children's' and 'adults' programmes.

Unlike any other area of television, 'children's programmes' are institutionally defined by the nature of their audience rather than the nature of the programme itself: if a programme is made for children, then it is a children's programme. Conversely, a programme such as Noel's House Party, which has a number of features and conventions that make it particularly attractive to children, is classed as Light Entertainment, because it is not made specifically for children. Yet many would question whether it would be fair to describe it as an 'adults' programme.

Clearly, these categories are much more relative - and indeed, more value-laden - than straightforward institutional definitions would seem to imply. Just as sociologists of childhood have increasingly questioned the unitary category 'children', we should acknowledge that what it means to be 'adult' is also heterogeneous and negotiated. Obviously, there are different kinds of grown-ups - in traditional socio-economic terms such as class and education, but also in terms of lifestyle and culture. Similarly, 'adult' television - that is, television not made specifically for children - offers different kinds of grown-up subject positions, from that of the serious, intelligent citizen who watches Newsnight to the ironic, playful viewer of Eurotrash (who might, as often as not, be the same person).

Nevertheless, when we look at the kinds of 'adult' programmes that children watch in their millions, there seem to be particular features and conventions that they have in common, such as action, humour and narrative simplicity. So to what extent can we talk about an aesthetic dimension to children's preferences - or indeed a distinctive 'children's taste culture'?

Falling standards

If much of this debate continues to focus on 'adult' programmes, the impact of deregulation and commercialisation has given rise to new concerns about the nature and content of children's television. Here again, the issue of children's taste is often an underlying - and frequently unacknowledged - concern.

For example, Stephen Kline's (1993) critique of the commercialisation of children's culture repeatedly invokes what it assumes are shared assumptions about cultural

value. Kline looks back wistfully to the golden age of 'classic' children's literature. These stories, he argues, 'took on the ability to enthrall and delight the child' as 'writers joyfully undertook experiments that charted new courses for the literate imagination' (p. 81). Through the development of popular literature and comic books and thence to television, Kline traces a steady cultural decline, resulting from the 'homogenising' and 'levelling' of the mass market. While the Victorians are unstintingly praised for their 'rich emotional texture' and their 'unfettered imagination', contemporary television is condemned for lacking their 'psychological depth', 'exuberance' and 'innocence'. Cartoons in particular are condemned as universally 'formulaic', 'predictable', 'inane' and 'banal': by virtue of their 'truncated characterisation', their 'stylised narratives' and their 'stultified animation', they are judged to be unable 'to deal adequately with feelings and experience' (pp. 313-4).

The problem with these judgments is not just that the key terms themselves remain undefined, but that the evidence that might exemplify and support them is simply taken for granted. It is easy to condemn The Care Bears and My Little Pony, as Kline does, for lacking 'the wit, individuality and subtle humour of A.A. Milne's eternal characters' (p. 261), not least when very few of one's readers will ever have seen such programmes. If there is any doubt, a few silly quotations taken out of context will easily do the trick. Such assertions are seen as self-evidently true, and as somehow neutral. In the process, the social basis for such judgments of taste is simply evacuated.

As Ellen Seiter (1993) suggests, social class is certainly one dimension here. As in a great deal of Marxist cultural critique, Kline paradoxically takes the position of the 'old' bourgeoisie in his attack on the new ruling ethos. He implicitly judges The Care Bears by the criteria one might use to evaluate the relative claims of Middlemarch and The Mill on the Floss: depth of character, complexity and moral seriousness are seen as 'eternal' qualities whose value is self-evident. As Seiter suggests, such distinctions between 'quality' children's television and 'trash', or between 'educational' and 'non-educational' toys, could well be seen as a reflection of what she calls the 'smug self-satisfaction of educated middle-class people'ⁱⁱ.

Yet this debate also raises questions about what it might mean for adults to pass judgments on children's media culture (see Buckingham, 1995a). The problem here is partly to do with the implicit assumptions about the audience that are at stake - and in particular, the notion that adults should be in a position to define what children need, irrespective of what they appear to want. Why is it that children positively prefer the 'crude' to the 'complex'? Why do they actively seek out 'one-dimensional' characters and 'predictable' narratives, rather than those which possess 'rich emotional texture'? Might there not in fact be very good reasons for these choices? Yet the problem here is not only to do with audiences: it is also to do with the criteria that are being applied in making such aesthetic judgments. Could it be that the value of such apparently 'inane' and 'stultified' productions might need to be judged according to different aesthetic criteria, irrespective of whether or not they are popular with audiences? And if so, how (and by whom) are those criteria to be identified?

Not in front of the children

In the practice of broadcasting regulation, children are central to discussions of taste. In regulatory discourse, taste is frequently coupled with decency: 'good taste' is something that must be sustained in the interests of a cohesive and democratic society. In this respect, it is symptomatic that Britain's 'taste and decency' watchdog, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, has played such a major role in the debate about the future of children's television in the UK. Since its inception in 1990, the BSC has commissioned two high-profile studies of the provision of children's programmes (Blumler, 1992; Davies and Corbett, 1997), whose concern has quite clearly been to defend what is seen as the 'great tradition' of British children's television. Yet in practice, this tradition appears to be identified primarily with home-produced 'quality' drama and educative factual programming: children's apparent liking for American cartoons is perceived as a serious problem, and as something that will inevitably result in a 'dumbing down' of British television (Buckingham, Davies, Jones and Kelley, 1999). Here again, a narrow conception of 'quality' is implicitly held up as a universal norm.

The BSC's most recent Code on Taste and Decency (BSC, 1998) carefully acknowledges the very subjective nature of judgements about taste, accepting for example that 'comedy has a special freedom to confront the boundaries of good taste'. However, this liberalism appears more problematic when it comes to children. Concern about 'bad' language, for example, is framed in terms of what children may hear and imitate. Likewise, the dangers of sexual innuendo are defined as follows:

Sexual humour and innuendo cause offence if broadcast when there are children and young people in the audience... Care is needed therefore in the scheduling of risqué programmes and programmes which unexpectedly contain material of this kind (our emphasis).

One might well ask to whom the 'offence' is being caused here. Could it be that the primary concern is to save adults from embarrassment, rather than to protect children from the dangers of illicit sexual knowledge?

As in so many other areas of social policy, it could be argued that taste on television is policed and regulated in the name of children, but in the interests of adults. And yet the trouble is - as audience research consistently reveals - that children love precisely what they are apparently being protected from. One glance at audience figures (for all their limitations) reveals that children in their millions enjoy lavatory humour (Mr Bean, Bottom), ritualised violence (Gladiators, Biker Mice from Mars) and vulgar sexual innuendo (Blind Date, Birds of a Feather). As even a former Director of the BSC explained to us in an interview: 'Tits and bums are natural fare for children... I mean, bad taste is highly enjoyable to them'.

Children are not - and never have been - the ideal, rational citizens of the regulatory imagination. Yet their liking for the crude and vulgar continues to be invoked as evidence of a general decline in standards in public life. Thus, for example, in a paper entitled 'The Consumption and Enjoyment of Crime as Popular Pleasure', reported in the Daily Telegraph (4.4.97), Mike Presdee of Sunderland University attacks what he

sees as the ritualised humiliation inherent in programmes such as Blind Date and Gladiators on the grounds that they are watched by the whole family:

Gladiators is real-life violence. There are two shapely young women dressed in sexually attractive costumes stood on plinths beating the hell out of each other, and mothers, fathers, children, grandparents cheer them on.

As we shall see, the features that Presdee singles out for particular criticism - the sexy costumes, the violence - are precisely the factors that children say they like and enjoy about the programme. Could it be that children positively seek out such ritualised humiliation and cruelty? And if they do, if such features are part of a distinctive 'children's taste', can such preferences simply be dismissed as evidence of 'immaturity' - let alone of some kind of moral or social decline? Or to what extent can such features meaningfully be judged in their own terms, according to aesthetic criteria that are specific to the genre and style of programming in which they feature so prominently?

Interpreting taste

To raise the question of taste in this context is inevitably to invoke the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1979). As Bourdieu amply demonstrates, aesthetic judgements cannot be divorced from social relations: distinctions of taste are a means of displaying and sustaining distinctions of class and social power. The preferences and judgments of those who have the power to ascribe cultural value become the apotheosis of 'good taste'; and in this way, the maintenance of aesthetic hierarchies becomes a means of perpetuating class differences and inequalities.

While his argument about the social basis of taste has been widely accepted, Bourdieu's analysis has also been criticised for its deterministic analysis of social class, and for its neglect of other factors such as gender. Furthermore, it has been argued, Bourdieu implicitly sees the hierarchy of taste from the perspective of the dominant classes, failing to take account of the subordinated classes who may not recognise it, or indeed actively refuse to accept it (Mander, 1984; Robbins, 1990; Schiach, 1992).

Despite Bourdieu's denunciation of the medium (Bourdieu, 1997), discussion of taste in relation to television also rather complicates neat distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture. In many ways, television can be seen as a distribution system rather than a distinctive cultural form: it can offer traditional high culture (opera) as well low culture (game shows) and many points in between. Indeed, it can be argued that it is precisely because of this blending that television has helped to break down traditional distinctions between elite and popular culture (Hartley, 1996).

In this respect, the relationship between taste, aesthetics and social power in the case of television is more complex than such essentialist distinctions allow. There is more heterogeneity both in the cultural objects that are consumed and within the audiences that consume them. As John Frow (1995) writes in his critique of Bourdieu's argument:

Two forms of essentialism operate... The first involves positing a single class experience common to sociologically quite distinct groups that Bourdieu includes in the dominant class. The second posits a single aesthetic logic of cultural practices which matches the intrinsic logic of a unitary ruling-class structure.

Furthermore, for certain groups within what could be described as the dominant class - particularly those characterised by Gouldner (1979) as the 'new class of intellectuals' or the 'knowledge professionals' - preferences for the low or the popular can themselves be a form of cultural capital. Aside from anything else, it is precisely these kinds of people who are making popular television programmes. The white urban 'knowledge class' seeking to appropriate certain versions of ethnic culture; the gentrification of football as a kind of working-class tourism; or the application of 'camp' as a way of flirting with definitions of sexual difference (Simpson, 1995) - these and many similar phenomena reflect the evolution of new 'taste cultures' that both reflect and serve to construct new social positionings that are not simply tied to fixed class distinctions.

Before cool

To what extent can generational differences be interpreted in these terms? Thus far, much of the debate on this issue in Cultural Studies has centred on the category of 'youth'. As Simon Frith (1998) has noted, the idea of 'hip' or 'cool' is both symbolically and empirically tied up with youth and change. For the 'knowledge professionals', to be youthful, or (more importantly) to know about what is youthful, provides a key source of cultural capital which can be traded on the employment market (Peretti, 1998). In this analysis, 'youth' becomes a symbolic construct that is to some extent divorced from biological age. Youth is a pattern of consumption rather than a demographic category: you don't have to be young to go to rave clubs, wear Nike trainers or listen to drum and bass (although undeniably it helps). When Tony Blair talks about Britain as a 'young country', or when media advertisers, schedulers and producers chase the elusive 16-25-year-olds, 'youth' is being defined as the ultimate desirable quality, far removed from the actual experiences of young Britons on Welfare to Work schemes.

Where do children, and children's tastes, fit into this matrix? For some market researchers and media producers, children seem to be perceived as a kind of 'pre-youth', a taste avant-garde, symbolically at the cutting edge of cultural innovation. What children like today will be what is cool and hip tomorrow. Youth, it could be argued, is getting younger every day. Within the discourse of the children's cable channel Nickelodeon, for example, children are constructed as 'sovereign consumers': sophisticated and difficult to reach, they know their own minds and they are not afraid to speak them (Buckingham, Davies, Jones and Kelley, 1999). However, as with youth, this new symbolic construction of children - as innovative, smart, street-wise and hip - can obscure the actual experiences of children themselves.

Here again, if we examine the kinds of 'adult' programmes that children watch and like, and the reasons they give for liking them, the picture is more complicated. Their tastes are quite distinct, but not necessarily 'cool' or 'fashionable': they prefer Gladiators to Inspector Morse, but they also like Top of the Pops rather than TFI Friday. Children are

choosing to identify with and to occupy some 'adult' subject positions rather than others, while at the same time avowedly retaining aspects of 'childishness'.

In the remainder of this article, we intend to explore these questions about children's taste via an analysis of extracts from discussions with children themselves. As we shall indicate, the socially performative nature of the kind of focus group discussions we undertook highlights quite acutely the social uses of judgments of taste (Buckingham, 1993). Like those of adults, children's expressions of their tastes and preferences are self-evidently social acts: they are one of the means whereby children lay claim to - and attribute meaning to - their preferred social identities. This is not, of course, to imply that they are free to select from an infinite variety of subject positions as and when they choose. We need to recognise children's agency in constructing and defining their own tastes and identities; but we need to avoid the sentimental view of children as necessarily 'media-literate active viewers'.

As we shall indicate, children's judgments about the cultural value of television articulate power relations, both within the peer group and in terms of the wider social groupings to which these children belong. Proclaiming one's own tastes, and thereby defining oneself as more or less 'mature', represents a form of 'identity work', in a context in which being a 'child' is effectively to be seen as vulnerable and powerless. Such statements clearly cannot be taken at face value, as evidence of what children 'really' think or believe. On the contrary, it is through such negotiations and performances that the meanings of 'childhood' are constructed and defined.

Talking taste

The data presented in this article are drawn from a larger study of changing views of the child audience for televisionⁱⁱⁱ. In addition to looking at how the television industry defines and constructs the child audience - through practices such as programme production, scheduling and research - we wanted to understand how children perceived themselves as an audience (cf. Buckingham, 1994). We decided to focus this aspect of our research around one key question: how do children define what makes a programme either 'for children' or 'for adults'?

We took this question to two classes of children in a socially and ethnically mixed inner-London primary school. Year 6 - the top year of primary school - was selected because of its transitional position. At the age of 10 or 11, these were the most senior or 'grown-up' children in the institution, looking towards secondary school, where they would be the least grown-up (cf. de Block, 1998). We chose to compare this with a Year 2 class of 6-7-year-olds, for whom we expected their position as 'children' would be more secure and less problematic. In total, we had contact with each class for two mornings a week over the length of the term; and we were therefore present in the school for four days out of five every week. Though our research was not intended to be ethnographic, we did become a regular feature of the classroom routine.

We began with a series of relatively open-ended discussions about the children's likes and dislikes in television^{iv}. These were followed by two more focused activities. The first

was a sorting exercise, in which the children were invited to categorise a broad assortment of programme titles (provided on cards) in terms of whether they were 'for children' or 'for adults' - although in practice, of course, many groups chose to have more than these two categories. The second exercise was a more complicated scheduling simulation. The children were given a similarly broad selection of programme cards which they were asked to fit into five programme slots on a week-day afternoon (between 3.30 and 6 p.m.) and on a Saturday evening (between 5.30 and 9 p.m.). In terms of their original scheduling, some of the programmes provided were aimed at an adult audience (that is, shown after the 9 p.m. watershed); some at family audiences (early evening); and some at children (morning/late afternoon). This activity therefore attempted to tap into the children's understanding of how childhood and adulthood are constructed within television schedules, and how far they challenged these definitions of space and time.

Throughout each of these activities, the children were invited to comment and reflect on their choices and decisions. They were also permitted to make changes as the discussion progressed. The activities were thus intended to facilitate discussion, rather than to accurately reflect children's viewing tastes or habits; and it is these discussions, rather than the 'results' (that is, the choices themselves) that we primarily focus on here^v.

What makes a children's programme?

In effect, our research activities deliberately set up the opposition child::adult and asked the children to negotiate it. For various reasons, they found this very difficult. New categories emerged such as 'in between' or 'for everyone'. The older group of children in particular were uneasy about defining their favourite programmes as 'children's'; while some of the younger children constructed the category 'babies' to differentiate their tastes from those of their younger siblings. In this respect, the process of classifying programmes explicitly served as a means of social self-definition. For example, when a group of Year 2 boys collapsed into laughter at the mention of Teletubbies, they were clearly distancing themselves from the younger audience for whom the programme is designed - and from the girls in their class who had appropriated its 'cuter' aspects. Similarly, when a group of Year 2 girls covered their ears every time football was mentioned, they were self-consciously constructing their own girlishness by rejecting the male world of football. In this respect, our activity effectively dramatised Bourdieu's (1979) famous statement: 'classification classifies the classifier'.

In the children's explorations of what makes a programme 'for children', a number of quite predictable factors emerged. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the strongest arguments were negative ones. Programmes featuring sex, violence and 'swearing' were singled out by both year groups as being particularly 'grown-up'. Likewise, children's programmes were predominantly defined in terms of absences - that is, in terms of what they do not include. By contrast, the most persuasive and insistent reason given for a programme being 'for children' was simply that they watched and enjoyed it. This definition had an unarguable logic; and it also allowed for more flexibility than a purely

institutional definition based on the schedule or on what actually appears on children's channels. Yet in these terms, many of the programmes that they liked and wanted to talk about were actually 'adults' programmes.

In the process of these activities and discussions, a set of loose oppositions emerged that were used by the sample to explain the differences between children's and adults' programmes. We have interpreted these oppositions as follows:

| | |
|---------------|-----------|
| parents | children |
| grannies | teenagers |
| old-fashioned | cool |
| boring | funny |
| talk | action |

These categories are broadly related to each other, with those on the right being associated with each other in opposition to those on the left. While we acknowledge that this kind of schema ignores the fluidity and the contradictions that this kind of discussion inevitably produces, it does provide a useful way of identifying how our sample defined the distinctiveness of children's taste.

Family dramas

Broadly speaking, the children argued for their preferences by articulating the criteria on the right of our schema and disavowing those on the left. Of course there were disagreements within groups about which programmes they preferred, but the reasons put forward for liking or disliking a programme were generally within this broad paradigm. For example, one group of girls disagreed about Coronation Street: two rejected it on the grounds that it was 'boring' and 'for grannies', while one defended it on the grounds that it had 'good stories' and that it was 'funny'. Despite the differences between them, there was considerable agreement about the basic grounds for judgment.

As we have noted, the most obvious criterion for selecting a programme as being 'for children' was that of personal preference (I like it, so it must be for children). Such expressions of preference often involved contrasting their own personal taste with that of parents, most noticeably in relation to news or current affairs programmes. However, this opposition between parents and children was often expressed in quite complex ways. In some cases, the children made a clear distinction between 'parents' in the abstract and their own parent(s). While parents in general were seen to like 'boring stuff' such as The News, talk about their own family lives often involved anecdotes about their parents watching and enjoying the same kinds of programmes that they liked. Two six-year-old boys, for example, referred to Mr. Bean in this way:

Daniel: My mum likes watching it and she's nearly 29.

Paul: My dad loves it, my dad laughs at it!

In the lived reality of these children's lives, then, the viewing preferences of the 'grown-ups' (parents) are not independent of the tastes of their children, nor do they necessarily correspond to what are seen as adult norms.

To a large extent, this could be regarded as simply a consequence of the daily routines and structures of family life: people (parents included) do not always choose what they watch, and they may decide to watch programmes together for the experience of companionship rather than because they actually prefer them. In this sense, the opposition between parent and child is not necessarily fixed and stable.

Aspirational tastes

This parent/child distinction had greater currency among the younger children, who were generally more inclined to accept their dependence on parental and adult authority. The ten- and eleven-year-olds, looking forward to adolescence and secondary school, tended to make more nuanced distinctions between ages within the category of 'childhood'. On the brink of becoming teenagers themselves, they associated particular programmes or types of programmes with this age group. These choices were clearly informed by a broader sense of a 'teen' lifestyle, to which many of them aspired, even though they didn't see themselves as teenagers quite yet. Being a teenager was seen to offer a degree of autonomy and control over their lives which was just around the corner. Thus, they recognised that programmes like Sister Sister or Sabrina the Teenage Witch might feature teenage characters, but they were quite clearly claimed as programmes for people like them. Unlike older people, however, it was felt that teenagers - the actual bearers of this projected future identity - might also share some of their own tastes:

Interviewer: Do you think it (Sister Sister) is a programme for teenagers?

All: No.

Int: Why is that? Aren't the characters sixteen?

Sharon: Yes, but they're the sort of age where, you know, we can understand...

Annie: I think teenagers can like it as well.

Certain lifestyle options were consistently associated with this slightly older age-group. Teenagers, it would seem, have social and emotional lives, characterised by boyfriends, girlfriends, fashion and music. During our group interviews, conversations around these subjects were frequent and unsolicited. These conversations clearly had a social, performative role and were used partly as a way of articulating their own (heterosexual) gender positions (for a fuller discussion, see Kelley, Buckingham and Davies, forthcoming). However, the identity of the teenager was not only differentiated through sexual and romantic knowledge; it was also about having greater access to the public world. In our scheduling exercise, when groups of older children were asked about what they would watch on a mid-week afternoon, discussion would frequently move on to other things that they did or would like to do at that time - playing football in the park, or 'hanging about' with friends. Spending more time out of the house was also something that they looked forward to and associated with being a teenager.

However, looking forward to being teenage was not at all the same thing as wanting to be grown-up. Certain programmes that were seen as the kinds of things that teenagers would like - notably Shooting Stars - were enjoyed because of their almost 'childish' silliness and rebellion against adult authority. For example, one boy singled out the character George Dawes as a particular reason for liking this programme, because he was a grown man dressed as a baby:

Int: What's so funny about him?

Simon: He's a baby and he plays the drums with his hand up and he says 'silly git' and everyone laughs on the show.

The juxtaposition between babyishness and adult humour and swearing is clearly a source of enjoyment to this boy. In cases like this, enthusiasm for the 'childish' and silly aspects of comedy were also combined with a sense of exclusivity. In discussion, it was important for certain children to show that they could 'get' the joke (as it were), in order to show that they were grown up and sophisticated.

In a sense, then, these were clearly aspirational preferences. As Liesbeth de Block (1998) notes, comedies like Friends and Men Behaving Badly seem to be particularly popular with children in this age group, partly because they allow them to rehearse a kind of adulthood that is both independent, autonomous and self-sufficient (living in your own flat with your friends, having control over your own space and time) while at the same time allowing irresponsibility, irreverence and immaturity (watching lots of television, getting into trouble with more 'responsible' grown-ups). Yet, unlike characters in more serious adult soaps or dramas for instance, the male characters in these comedies are not portrayed (or indeed perceived by children) as particularly mature. As de Block suggests, their appeal rests largely on the fact that they are men behaving like boys. Such programmes thus offer children a version of 'adulthood' that combines elements of autonomy and freedom with irreverence and irresponsibility.

It was these qualities, as much as the music or the clothes the characters wore, that defined such programmes as inherently 'cool', as opposed to 'old-fashioned'. As one boy with a particular self-esteem problem explained:

Luke: I have to admit this, but I'm quite - I'm not a cool guy. I don't watch Friends.

In this aspirational world of 'cool', there seems to be an almost narcissistic relationship between reader and text. It is partly that the qualities of the programme are seen to transfer across to the individuals who watch it; but also that one's existing qualities are somehow necessarily reflected in what one chooses to watch in the first place. In Luke's account, classification very definitely classifies the classifier.

How uncool can you get?

If the cultural identity labelled 'teenage' is characterised by fun, rebellion and sex, it was necessary for a contrasting identity to be constructed - as something that was none of these things, and indeed was actively opposed to them. This category was identified by

several groups of girls in particular as that of 'grannies'. Given the highly gendered nature of this classification, it is interesting that it was more clearly formulated by the girls. The identity of the granny was defined as boring, old-fashioned and censorious. The representative programmes associated with it included Songs of Praise, Ready Steady Cook, Countdown and The Antiques Roadshow:

Int: Why do you think it (Countdown) is so boring?

Annie: Because it's full of all these words that you have to make.

Int: Who do you think would like those kinds of programmes?

Julia: Grannies.

Annie: Yeah, grannies!

Likewise, 'grannies' or (more charitably) 'people in their sixties' were also seen as the least appropriate audience for the children's own favourite shows. This renouncement of old age was also used as a strategy in arguments about programmes. In a mixed group, one girl expressed a preference for the sit-com Frasier, only to be put down by one of the boys with the withering comment: 'What, old people living in a flat? That's not funny.'

In this way, certain types of adults and adult viewing are very explicitly rejected. Being old and female, it would seem, is the ultimate cultural stigma. Of course, this expression of cultural taste is not unrelated to questions of social power and status, not least as defined by the media themselves: when younger women are valued for their physical desirability, older women are frequently invisible - and, when they are represented at all, often serve as the butt of young people's humour (for example, in The Mrs. Merton Show). This might go some way to explaining why it was the girls rather than the boys who were so hostile to 'grannies' and all that they were seen to represent: on some level, perhaps, they recognised that they couldn't be Spice Girls for ever.

You've got to laugh

In response to our somewhat earnest questions about why a programme was chosen or preferred, the most common answer across both age groups was simply that it was 'funny'. Like most audiences, our sample enjoy television that makes them laugh. As one six-year-old girl related when talking about Mr. Bean:

Int: What makes it a children's programme?

Toni: Because I like it, because it's funny and I like funny things.

For the older children as well, comedy was a key reason for liking a programme and claiming it as 'theirs':

Int: Why do you like that (Sister Sister)?

Annie: It's just funny.

Sharon: Yeah, it's funny.

On one level, this kind of explanation is so obvious as to be banal. However, it is important to understand its significance a little more fully. In fact, comedy is one of the areas in which children's tastes are frequently seen to differ fundamentally from those of adults. Children's humour is often (revealingly) dismissed as 'puerile' or 'infantile'. Indeed, in our experience, the children's programmes that are the hardest for adults to watch are the highly stereotyped, slapstick comedies like the BBC's Chucklevision and To Me, To You - programmes that make Mr. Bean look like Jane Austen. Such programmes are often highly successful in the ratings.

As we have noted, contemporary debates about children's television tend to adopt a highly conservative notion of cultural value (e.g. Blumler, 1992; Blumler and Biltereyst, 1998; Kline, 1993). Children's programmes in the 'great tradition' of public service broadcasting are appreciated primarily for their social usefulness and aesthetic 'quality'. These critics do not deny that children's television can and should also be entertaining; but what gives children's television value is not the fun stuff (the cartoons and comedies) but the factual programmes, the literary adaptations and the 'socially relevant' contemporary drama. In this rather sanctimonious context, very few critics seem prepared to stand up for children's right to just 'have a laugh' - although, it should be noted, programme-makers certainly have.

While children's expressions of enthusiasm for comedy are, on one level, simply an assertion of 'personal' pleasure, there are also social functions in talking about what makes them laugh. Different kinds of comedy had different kinds of value in this respect. Mr. Bean or You've Been Framed are primarily physical, slapstick humour; although the children's accounts of them focused particularly on the subversive or 'carnavalesque' element of adults behaving like children and making fools of themselves. On the other hand, programmes such as Shooting Stars or Have I Got News for You were valued for different reasons. Central to their appeal for the older children was the idea that in 'getting the joke', they were gaining access to an exclusive world of irony and media-references, not suitable for younger children:

Andrew: Friends is - it's not a little kids thing. Like Shooting Stars is a show for older people.

James: Little kids don't have the patience to watch them.

Andrew: Yeah, someone younger won't find Friends or Shooting Stars funny.

For James and Andrew, the 'older people' identified here are implicitly people like them.

Talking about these kinds of programmes seemed to be more important for the boys in the group - which may reflect an aspirational identification with the men who tend to dominate these shows. Particularly in the case of programmes like They Think It's All Over and Have I Got News For You, the humour often involves a characteristically male form of 'banter' and one-upmanship. To some extent, being seen to be 'in on the joke' was more important than actually finding it funny. As one boy explained in relation to Shooting Stars and Have I Got News For You:

David: You see them maybe once and sometimes you don't get the jokes, but you still laugh because you know it's meant to be funny... But you don't really know why.

Laughing with the big boys, as it were, has the most social and cultural currency: this is what you should find funny. For one particular boy - who clearly saw himself as a taste leader in the class - this became apparent when he discussed the US sit-com Sabrina the Teenage Witch. As a less sophisticated, more girl-oriented show, he almost apologised for liking it:

Int: So what's good about Sabrina?

James: It's just good.

Alan: I have to admit, it's not the kind of thing you'd think is good. But it's good, it's funny.

Particular kinds of comedy, then, clearly have a social function, which is again associated with being more sophisticated and 'teenage'. To this extent, talking about comedy is a serious business: it can be used to mark out social status and knowledge as well as simply expressing pleasure.

If what is 'funny' was seen to be particularly appropriate for children, then what is 'boring' (and hence lacking in pleasure) was consistently equated with adults - and particularly with 'grannies'. For this group of six-year-old girls, being boring is a defining characteristic of adult programmes:

Int: So what makes it (The News) a grown-ups programme?

Toni: It's boring.

Int: So does that mean that grown-ups are boring?

Ruth: Yes, because they like the news.

Toni: I hate the news.

Int: Why do you think grown-ups like the news?

Toni: Because they want to know what's happening?

Int: And aren't you interested?

Toni: No!

News as a genre is inherently and essentially defined as adult. A group of Year 2 boys, for example, saw no clear difference between The Six O'clock News and Newsround, despite Newsround's very clear institutional status as children's television:

Int: What about The Six O'clock News, is that for grown-ups?

Fred: Yeah, sort of.

Jack: That's like Newsround, isn't it?

Int: Do you think there's any difference between them?

Jack: No, they're the same.

Michael: Yes, it's just that one's on later.

Here again, the criteria that were used to define a particular programme as 'boring' - and hence to proclaim one's dislike of it - were quite diverse; but the association

between what was 'boring' and what was identified with 'adults' was very consistent. Thus, for a group of girls in Year 6, Shooting Stars - which was a preferred programme among their male peers - is defined as boring, in part because it is associated with one of their parents:

Sharon: My dad would laugh at Shooting Stars... sometimes I think it's really boring.

Int: Is there anything in particular about the programme that makes it for grown-ups?

Sharon: It's boring. And it's -

Julia: They laugh about stupid, dumb things.

Being boring - while it means different things for different children - is thus a cardinal signifier of a lack of cultural capital. In contrast, being funny (and 'getting the joke') is seen to convey value on these children as individuals as well as on the programmes that they consume. In the process, the cultural hierarchy that elevates 'seriousness' and civic responsibility is effectively inverted.

Cut to the action

For the younger children in particular, one of the characteristics that was seen to make television boring was talking. Needless to say, perhaps, this resistance to talk extended to our research activities: sorting out programme titles on cards could be perceived as an acceptable game, but having to rationalise their choices in response to our questions was something that many of the children resisted. Talk is seen as the antithesis of action. As one of the younger boys explained:

Int: Why aren't soaps for children, then?

Andrew: Well, it's just that there are lots of conversations in them. Nothing happens, no funny things.

This opposition between talk and action was also a key dimension of responses to news:

Geoff: And I watched this really, really boring one (Newsround). All it was really - you didn't see any pictures at all - all you heard was talking, talking, talking.

Laura: (News) is boring for children because it's got no acting in it.

As in this instance, television talk is generally adult talk. Even children's news programmes like Newsround rarely feature children talking in their own right, whether as presenters or as participants in news events (Buckingham, 1997).

In contrast, programmes claimed as children's programmes would often be talked about in terms of their physicality and visceral appeal. Gladiators was described in these terms by children in both age groups:

Int: What do you like about Gladiators?

Toni: Well they do activities and stuff.

Ruth: And they wear -

Robyn: - bright clothes and stuff.

Toni: I'm going to be a Gladiator when I grow up. (Year 2)

Mark: I like to see how they, I just like the activities they have. I don't really care about the people, I just want to see how they do in the activities. (Year 6)

Typically, talking was associated with fact, while action was associated with stories or acting. However, this distinction was not necessarily the same as that between fiction and non-fiction. Programmes such as Gladiators or Wildlife on One are non-fiction, but because of their visceral and dramatic content, they were associated by these children with fictional action programmes like Hercules or Xena Warrior Princess. This preference for action, event and spectacle also underlines the popularity in ratings terms of programmes featuring sport - particularly football - and the National Lottery. Whether human, animal or environmental, action - often expressed through 'violence' - is a key criterion in determining these children's television tastes, for both boys and girls. Children, it would seem, like to see things happen.

Conclusion

On one level, children clearly do have distinctive tastes in television. Allowing for other social differences, they seem to enjoy things that adults don't, and vice-versa. And even where they watch the same programmes as adults, they often appear to be enjoying them for different reasons.

Psychologists would seek to explain these differences by recourse to notions of development. Thus, children's apparent liking for what we as adults judge to be simplistic narratives, stereotyped characters and crude humour would be seen as evidence of their cognitive and emotional limitations. More charitably perhaps, such tastes could be seen as a developmental necessity at a given stage: children, it might be argued, need to see the world in simple binary terms before they can learn to understand its full complexity. While outwardly quite different, psychoanalytic explanations would be inclined to take a similar form. Scatological and sexual humour, for example, would be seen as a necessary stage in the sublimation of the id and the development of the mature ego.

Such analyses have some truth, but they are unavoidably normative - both in terms of texts and in terms of audiences. Truly 'mature' viewers simply would not get excited by Gladiators or Xena Warrior Princess; they would not be amused by Mr. Bean or the silly behaviour on Shooting Stars; and they would simply refuse to watch You've Been Framed or Blind Date. On the contrary, their television diet would consist solely of Newsnight, Inspector Morse and perhaps the occasional glimpse of Coronation Street. Such normative judgments are, to be sure, partly about social class and gender; but they are also frequently defined and expressed in terms of age.

The reality, as we have suggested, is rather different. As 'adults' - albeit of different generations - the authors of this paper will confess to enjoying Shooting Stars, The Simpsons, Blind Date and Top of the Pops - although we would also confess to drawing the line at Mr. Bean, not to mention Chucklevision and Noel's House Party. Viewing such programmes is partly a professional necessity, but it is also something that we consciously choose to do in our 'real lives', insofar as we have any. This is not to say that we do not also watch Newsnight or Inspector Morse - although again we would probably draw the line at Antiques Roadshow and Countdown. The point is that, as 'adults', we have multiple tastes - and multiple subjectivities.

More to the point, these tastes are also socially defined. As we have attempted to show in this article, children's assertions of their own tastes necessarily entail a form of 'identity work' - a positioning of the 'self' in terms of publicly available discourses and categories. The labels 'child' and 'adult' are categories of this kind: they are defined relative to each other (and to other age-defined categories such as 'teenagers' and 'grannies'), and as such they are necessarily flexible and open to dispute. Definitions of what is 'childish' or 'adult' - 'mature' or 'immature' - are therefore subject to a constant process of negotiation. These definitions do not reflect some psychological or even biological 'essence'. On the contrary, the meanings of 'childhood' and 'adulthood' are socially and interpersonally constructed. And in articulating their pleasures - or displeasures - in relation to television, children are necessarily defining themselves in these terms.

Like the practice of film classification, which publicly defines 'maturity' in terms of age categories, social hierarchies of taste thus provide a scale against which children can calibrate their own 'maturity' and hence make claims about their identity. This is, as we have shown, partly a matter of aspiration - although for the children we have studied, this is clearly a matter of aspiration towards a 'teenage' identity rather than a fully 'adult' one. Yet it can also be a matter of subversion - a celebration of 'childish things' that self-consciously challenge or mock adult norms of respectability, restraint and 'good taste'.

This subversive option has also become increasingly popular for many adults (or at least young adults) in recent years. Just as some older children appear to want to 'buy in' to adulthood, so some adults want to do the reverse. The cult status of the BBC's new pre-school series Teletubbies among twenty-something clubbers; the camp nostalgia associated with 'retro' children's TV of the 1970s, currently being revived on cable channels; the child-like anarchy and game-playing of Chris Evans' Big Breakfast and TFI Friday; and the crossover success of children's hosts like Zoe Ball - all these phenomena point to the growing appeal (and indeed the commodification) of 'childishness' as a kind of style accessory. Childhood, it would seem, isn't just for children anymore.

Some academics and media commentators appear to be particularly disturbed by what they perceive as this infantilisation - or 'paedocratisation' - of the television audience (Hartley, 1987; Preston, 1996?). Television, they argue, increasingly addresses the adult audience as emotional, excitable and wanting to be pleased - characteristics more usually attributed to children. Yet there is a kind of puritanism about this

argument. One could interpret this phenomenon more positively, as a necessary process of recovering 'childlike' pleasures - in silly noises and games, in anarchy and absurdity - for which irony provides a convenient alibi. This kind of nostalgia for past pleasures could be seen to reflect the ambivalent status of television as a kind of 'transitional object', which plays a significant role in young people's transition to adulthood^{vi}.

Yet to pose this argument in such terms - as a matter of 'infantilisation' or alternatively as 'getting in touch with one's inner child' - is to resort to psychologistic interpretations. On the contrary, we would argue that this elevation of an apparently 'child-like' anarchy and irresponsibility as the ultimate in cool is a social and political act on the part of adults. The 'immaturity' of Shooting Stars or Never Mind the Buzzcocks is also a front for a kind of machismo; while the self-regarding enthusiasm for celebrity in T.F.I. Friday sanctions a barely-concealed contempt for the apparent inadequacies of its audience. Without being merely nostalgic, one could see such programmes as a kind of retreat from the public spaces which were partly colonised by more threatening forms of youth culture in previous decades.

Above all, it should be emphasised that this exchange is far from equal. When adults - or at least particular kinds of adults - seek to appropriate children's culture, they inevitably select the aspects that have resonance for their own privileged lives. In the process, there may be a risk of forgetting the material inequalities between children and adults, and the way in which children's autonomy is currently being undermined in the era of educational testing, curfews and enforced homework quotas. When children laugh at the incompetent child-like adult in Mr. Bean or the spectacle of adults humiliating themselves in You've Been Framed, it is partly because these programmes speak to their sense of their own powerlessness. In contrast, when adults revel in the faux children's television of Chris Evans and Zoe Ball, the irresponsibility invoked there is a conscious choice. Adults, it would seem, can choose to be childish. Children cannot.

NOTES

ⁱ Daily Mail 20.6.96.

ⁱⁱ For a fuller discussion, see Buckingham (1995b).

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Children's Media Culture: Education, Entertainment and the Public Sphere', based at the Institute of Education, University of London, and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council UK (award no. L126251026). Further material from this research is presented in Buckingham, Davies, Jones and Kelley (1999) and Buckingham (forthcoming).

^{iv} Space precludes a more detailed discussion of the research methodology. For accounts of similar studies, see Buckingham (1993) and Robinson (1997). These discussions and activities took place outside the classroom, in the library or a teacher's office. The groups were taped and the tapes were transcribed. Groups were selected on the basis of existing friendship groups and seating arrangements in

the classroom. Each child in both classes was interviewed at least twice.

^v Further interpretations of this data, focusing on different issues, can be found in Kelley, Buckingham and Davies (forthcoming) and Davies, Buckingham and Kelley (forthcoming).

^{vi} We owe this argument to Mica Nava, in a presentation at the Institute of Education in February 1998. The notion of television as a transitional object is drawn in turn from the work of Roger Silverstone (1994).