<u>Universal Childhood: The Global Trade in Children's Television and Changing Ideals of Childhood</u>

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Abstract: While the technical capacity for television programs to reach worldwide has existed for decades, the attendant cultural challenges of global television have proved more formidable. Nevertheless, a handful of program genres seem to be able to overcome these cultural barriers. This paper examines one such genre, children's television animation, the processes of program development and trade, as well as the assumptions about children's viewing pleasures that these industrial processes encourage. While these assumptions about what is "universal" in the experience of childhood have a certain plausibility to them, they are nevertheless ideological, in the sense that they carry particular ideas about race, gender, age, class, and other forms of social grouping and identity that not only reflect but also act upon the world we live in. As some of the most powerful gatekeepers of contemporary popular culture, these industry insiders are deeply involved in imagining prevalent ideals of childhood in an increasingly globalized world as well as the kinds of children and cultures that do an do not fit these ideals.

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While the technical capacity for television programs to reach worldwide has existed at least since the 1967 satellite broadcast of "Our World," the cultural challenges facing the export of programming beyond the boundaries of the nation-state have proved more formidable. Indeed, mainstream economic models of international television trade include a "cultural discount" in their formulae, while international communication scholars assume that various "cultural proximities" exist among nations that trade in television programs. Nevertheless, a handful of program genres seem to be able to overcome these cultural barriers, including action-dramas, documentaries, melodramas, and blockbuster films. What accounts for the seemingly universal appeal of these genres, and what are the broader practical and theoretical implications of the fact that certain programs can escape the limitations of their cultures of origin and find relevance with viewers across the globe?

This paper examines the global children's television animation industry and the processes of program development and trade, as well as the assumptions about child viewers' pleasures and identities that these industrial processes encourage. We begin from the premise that theories about viewers' preference circulate among industry insiders and provide crucial guidance about what kinds of programs to produce and purchase, how to market them, and how to schedule them, even though these theories are often only tacitly understood. While they often have a certain plausibility to them, these theories are nevertheless ideological, in the sense that they carry particular ideas about race, gender, age, class, and other forms of social grouping and identity that not only reflect but also act upon the world we live in. In fact, as perhaps the most powerful gatekeepers of contemporary popular culture, these industry insiders are deeply involved in imagining prevalent ideals of childhood in an increasingly globalized world as well as the kinds of children and cultures that do an do not fit these ideals.

The argument of this paper is not that television industry executives impose their ideals of childhood on anyone. Instead, those ideals draw upon, rework, and recirculate certain definitions and not others. Moreover, the definitions of childhood that circulate in the children's animation industry derive from and reinforce particular institutional practices and economic arrangements. Consequently, this article begins with an overview of contemporary business practices in the children's animation industry, focusing in particular on the processes of program development, sales, promotions, and merchandising. Thereafter, we will see how these business practices lead to particular conceptions about the universal experience of childhood that help producer, distributors, and broadcasters decide what segments of the children's audience to target and how to target them. Finally, we will examine how changing industrial practices may lead to different imaginings of what it means to be a child in today's world.

Global television and the idea of childhood

Much of the critical research on children and television examines national-level phenomena of representation, reception, and institutional or industry practices (Buckingham, 2002; Hendershot, 2004; Seiter, 1995). Given the protected legal status of children in most Western and Western-influenced societies today such national-level analyses are appropriate. Whether television broadcasting was organized on a commercial, public-service, or mixed system, concerns about the influence of sex, violence, and consumerism on children, the educational possibilities of the medium, and questions about how best to increase the positive and diminish the deleterious effect of the medium have all best been handled in national regulatory frameworks. Moreover, despite the growth in transnational channels in recent years, television production remains a predominantly national affair, with most countries exporting and importing only a small fraction of their overall television output (Steemers, 2004). Importantly, children's television is one of the most commonly traded forms of television programming, and children's channels such as Nickelodeon, Discovery Kids, Cartoon Network, and Disney have been at the forefront of channel transnationalization. In the wake of these and other examples of worldwide commercial media aimed at children, an extensive literature on global youth culture has grown up since the 1990s, including a number of studies about the reception and uses of transnational television programs targeted at youths and children (Lemish, et al, 1998).

While national-level studies are crucial for influencing regulatory debates regarding children's media, the definitions of childhood, which circulate among adults, has long been a transnational phenomenon. Philippe Aries (1962) has shown how modern Western ideas of childhood as a distinct stage of life, in which children have identities and cultures that differ from adults, became prevalent in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries throughout Europe. Definitions of children as amusing, innocent, helpless—even uncivilized—simply weren't common prior to the modern age because the idea that children and adults were different wasn't widespread. However, due to the increasing social power of the clergy and their emphasis on moral education of the young in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, childhood began to become a pervasive concept throughout the West.

Of course, the influence of television globalization on social definitions of childhood is probably far less profound than were the changes that took place in the transition between medieval and early modern Europe. Still, we have only begun to experience and analyze the shift from national to post-national electronic cultural environments and their influence on perceptions of human identities and communities. All indications are that the forces of technology and corporate capitalism will continue to resettle populations and rework imagined social bonds in ways that diverge markedly from the national identities and cultures that have predominated for most of the modern period.

Animation and global television trade

Different sectors of the television programming industries have experienced varying degrees of globalization. Generally speaking, television, unlike theatrically-released films, remains a largely domestic national affair, with imported programs rarely appearing during in prime-time hours on most nationwide broadcasters. However, certain genres, dayparts, audience segments, and specialty channels exhibit greater degrees of international collaboration and exchange. Children's programming—and especially children's animation—is one such genre, due primarily to technological innovations since the mid 1990s and certain features of the genre that facilitate transborder trade. Tschang and Goldstein (2004) report that the global market in animation, including television, films, merchandising, internet, and gaming revenue, is estimated to grow to $124 billion by 2008 (2). Television remains the main driver of this industry, as popular animated television series encourage spending on related merchandise, games, and films. Of course, films can also serve this purpose, such as the Pixar hit *Finding Nemo* (2003), which led to merchandising and computer game spin-offs. Television, however, provides less costly productions with smaller promotional budgets the opportunity for such tie-ins and additional revenues.

With respect to technological changes, the advent of massive, cheap digital storage capacity, computer animation, and global telecommunications networks have decentralized the process of producing children's animation. Animation is a labor-intensive process, though computer technology has greatly increased the speed at which animators can work by mechanizing the processes of outlining, inking, and painting individual frames (Tschang and Goldstein, 2004, p. 6). Consequently, much of the production process of animated children's television is outsourced to nations where animation labor costs are low, such as the Philippines, India, South Korea, and Taiwan ("Title Fight," 2004). Moreover, the development of telecommunications networks that can transmit large data files quickly has increased the capacity for managerial oversight in distant locales, thus further encouraging the outsourcing of animation planning, pre-production, and post-production (Miller et al, 2005, p. 125; Tschang and Goldstein, 2004).

In addition to the technological reasons behind the globalization of the animation production process, certain features of children's animation make it well-suited for global circulation and consumption as well. To begin with, dubbing animation is much easier than dubbing live-action programs. Most children's animation is dubbed when exported to different language communities, because of concerns that children might not be able to read subtitles. However, given the fact that lip-synching, even in the original language, is fairly loose in animation, the dissonance between visual and audio tracks that dubbing causes is minimized. Moreover, recent improvements in dubbing technology, which allow minute adjustments of pacing in the audio track to better match the visual, have largely overcome any of the typical shortcomings of dubbing. Furthermore, the tendency to feature non-human characters in children's animation helps the genre overcome racial and ethnic differences among exporting and importing cultures.

Finally, children's animation, much like the rest of the television programming industry, has experienced a good deal of globalization due to changes in broadcasting regulations, especially in Europe, which along with new technologies of distribution have increased the sales outlets for animation and the creation of new kinds of channels that offer different types of animation than traditional public service broadcasters. In the wake of privatization and deregulation of broadcasting and the explosion of cable and satellite channels worldwide in the mid- to late-90s, channels targeting children's audiences have flourished throughout Europe, Latin America, Asia, and North America (Gelman, 1997). Despite the increase in channels devoted to children's programming and rosy estimates of young people's buying power, however, advertisers" prices for children's channels remained well below those of general entertainment channels, causing almost all of the dedicated children's channels to rely primarily on bought-in animated series, especially from the international program markets ("Getting the Picture," 1996).

While the major Hollywood studios continue to dominate the global animation market, in television, their dominance trails well behind their box office leverage. Certainly, the Hollywood studios take advantage of the popularity of their blockbuster films worldwide to create program "packages," which require buyers to take several less desirable properties, including children's animated series, in order to get rights to broadcast blockbusters. In addition, many of the global broadcasting powerhouses in children's animation, including the Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, Fox Kids, and Disney's international channels are affiliated with major studios and supply a pipeline for their product as well as added revenues. According to a 2001 *Screen Digest* survey, forty-six of the approximately 100 thematic television channels aimed at children were owned by one of these four channel operators (Westcott, 2001). However, general broadcasters with timeslots devoted to children's animation still paid the highest prices for animated imports, more than ten times what their cable and satellite counterparts paid.

The growth in international buyers since the mid-90s, combined with decreases in production and distribution costs, have eaten into Hollywood's dominance in the genre and opened the global markets to independent producers from around the world. A *Screen Digest* survey of 89 children's channel in 1999, for instance, found that nearly 70 percent of surveyed channels were introduced between 1996 and 1999. Most of these channels relied heavily on imports to fill their broadcasting schedules. In 2001, Japanese animators exported 25,000 hours of animation (Hara, 2004), and in 2004, they claimed that their programs accounted for sixty percent of all animation broadcast worldwide (Tsuneo, 2004). Meanwhile, European animators, who have traditionally struggled to produce programming for the international markets, have begun to find more international outlets for their product, especially given growing concerns among buyers that consolidation in the US animation production market has led to increasingly US-centric shows that don't perform well in overseas markets (Deneroff, 2002).Finally, despite a spike in nationwide and region-wide children's channels in Latin America, the channels imported ninety-five percent of their animated television programs in 2000 ("Children's Television," 1999; Roman, 2000).

Industry lore and the organization of the global animation market

The growing market in animated children's programming has led to the development of a vibrant business culture of children's television merchants, who meet several times per year at various markets and competitions. Specialized trade publications such as *Kidscreen* carry news and interpretations of the global children's market and its changing tastes, while more generalized publications such as *Channel 21* devote sections or issues to the global children's market. Lay theories about why children watch television, what they enjoy, and how and why their tastes differ from or converge with children in other parts of the world circulate through these publications and meetings, providing merchants the essential conceptual tools necessary for the smooth operations of trade.

Ideas about the universal preferences of children form part of a larger discourse among television industry insiders that shape business and production practices. Todd Gitlin in his book *Inside Prime Time* was one of the first scholars to recognize the role that industry lore plays in the business operations of the US television industry. More recently, scholars have identified the increasingly global nature of that industry lore, as programs travel further and further overseas and the program production, distribution, and exhibition sectors become more transnational and interconnected (Havens, 2002; Mosco, 2004).

Industry lore does not, however, appear out of nowhere, nor is it simply imposed by the powerful in the global television industry. Rather, it is a form of material discourse, which derives from and acts upon other material processes of the television business, including political-economic forces, industry organization, and day-to-day business practices. Due to the global nature of the children's television market today, industry lore is also multi-discursive, or including ideas drawn from different culture and different material business practices. Industry lore is not, however, a level playing field where all ideas compete on equal footing; instead, the economic disparities of the business shape and are shaped by discursive disparities. In this paper, I am primarily interested in the dominant discourses of children's textual pleasure that circulate within the global television business.

Before exploring the transnational industry surrounding animated children's series, we need to understand the general business practices that those discourses arise from, give meaning to, and organize. Any such characterization is inherently partial, given the diversity of firms, markets, and practices that the phrases "global," "transnational," and "international" denote. This summary comes primarily from overviews of the market at MIPCOM Junior 2005, the premiere international market for children's television programming. MIPCOM Junior began in 1993 as a screening day for children's programming prior to the general international television trade market, MIPCOM. In the past thirteen years, MIPCOM Junior has expanded to a two-day affair featuring screenings, sales, networking, and industry conferences. In 2005, MIPCOM Junior attracted more than 800 participants representing nearly 500 countries from 53 nations ("About Mipcom Junior," 2006). Given the market's location in Cannes, France, the majority of participants come from North America, the EU, and Australia. In 2005, for instance, only about 18 percent of participating companies were based outside these three regions. While this small fraction continues to make MIPCOM Junior the most international children's television market, it also casts a necessarily Western bias on this market overview ("List of Companies," 2005).

The costs of producing animation, combined with fragmenting audiences in the US, Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere have led to heavy reliance on international partnerships, pre-sales, and syndication revenues for producers other than the Hollywood studios. Despite decreasing costs of storage and production due to computerization, animation remains fairly expensive to produce, especially given its generally limited age appeal and potential ad revenues for broadcasters. However, entry costs to pitch one's ideas to distributors, toy manufacturers, and broadcasters around the world are generally low, and numerous people each year make the trek to Mipcom Junior and other markets and competitions in hopes of securing funding deals. Such deals are difficult, but not impossible. They require producers, or the distributors they employ, to navigate a complex web of interwoven industries, including broadcasters, retailers, and toy manufacturers. This process tends to limit successful properties to those that fit with prevalent business practices and industry insiders' views of what transnational children's programming should look like.

The global television broadcasting landscape is probably the least concentrated of the various industries that producers need to navigate in order to get their programming on air. The dominance of four children's channels in the US market—Nickelodeon, Fox Kids, Disney, and the Cartoon Network—has essentially closed the US market to nonstudio animation producers (Westcott, 2001; Wooding, 2006). European animation producers fare somewhat better, given government subsidies for local productions and international co-productions, but in many territories, large broadcasters such as the BBC, France 3, and ZDF produce or co-produce a good deal of their animated programming, keeping the market for independent producers tight ("Getting the Picture," 1996). For both North American and European independents, then, international and multi-territory channels are crucial to production funding. In 1997, Neil Court, a consultant for animation producers in Europe, estimated that approximately twenty-five percent of revenues came from sales to specialty and pay-per-view channels, which pay license feeds only about one-tenth those of terrestrial broadcasters (Gelman, 1997; Westcott, 2001). Due to the continued expansion of channels associated with digitalization, the percentage of revenues earned from specialty channels has likely only increased in the past nine years.

Independent animation producers looking to find financing for their projects must therefore stitch together pre-sales, co-production, co-financing, and distribution deals. Retail outlets and global advertising firms complicate that task even further. Retailers, in particular Wal-Mart, rule the children's animation market because fifty percent of total revenues for an animated series come from program-related merchandise, and eight-five percent of merchandise sales come through Wall-Mart stores. Although Wall-Mart has a growing international presence, its influence of children's animation abroad is more subtle than its domestic influence. Wal-Mart does not directly deal with animation producers in the US or abroad; instead, producers must convince toy manufacturers to develop product lines based on their series, and manufacturers will place the products with retailers. Worldwide, the toy manufacturing industry is at least as concentrated as the children's animation market. In 2000, Nintendo, Mattel, Hasbro, and Sony accounted for more than thirty-five percent of worldwide toy and gaming sales. Most of these toy manufacturers are interested in recycling current ideas rather than seeking out new ones, so it becomes even more difficult to convince them to risk investing in untested animation properties. Moreover, these global toy manufacturers derive a disproportionate amount of their revenues from the US, Japan, and Europe. In 2000, toy manufacturers earned $35 billion from US sales, $9 billion from Japanese sales, and $22 billion from sales to Australia, Canada, and EU nations ("Consoles Cruise," 2001). Regardless, then, of the territories in which producers hope to secure funding and sales, they will need to develop merchandising that can sell in Europe, North America, and Australia. Again, given Wal-Mart's dominance of the US retail market, it is difficult to convince a toy manufacturer to produce product tie-ins for animated series without interest from Wal-Mart.

Few commercial broadcasters, even the smallest, are likely to pick up a property that doesn't already have backing from a toy manufacturer, as product tie-ins not only lead to advertising sales but also create more loyal fans who will come back to the program over and over again. Still, because of the wide variety of animated product available in the pre-production phase and the highly uncertain performance of children's animation, no broadcaster wants to miss the next *Pokémon* or *Powder Puff Girls*, so many of them are willing to put up some pre-sale funding for promising series. Several of these deals together can be enough to approach a toy manufacturer with suggestions for product tie-ins, especially smaller and educational toy manufacturers.

Race and gender biases in industry definitions of "universal" childhood

The inordinate importance of North American and European markets for global children's channels, toy manufacturers, and retailers shapes dominant perceptions of children's viewing preferences in the animation industry. In addition, the segmentation of the children's market by global advertising firms creates industry lore about the universal preferences of children in various age groups. Finally, the continuing equation of the children's market with the boy' market means the perceptions of children's tastes draw primarily from boys' culture. Therefore, the "universal child" that emerges from industry lore is predominantly a Western, middle-class boy whose tastes derive from his developmental stage rather than the influence of his culture.

The segmentation of the children's audience is a primary influence for the developmental model of children's tastes that prevails in the global television industry. Katalin Radoczy the general manager of the children's cable channel Minimax Hungary, explained that children under two prefer formless animated character with a good deal of sound and music, while children 2-5 prefer simple storylines, recognizable characters, and non-violent educational programs and older children under twelve prefer more complex stories and less educational content (Radoczy, 2002). Compare these comments with the following from the director of animation for Cartoon Network UK bemoaning the inability of European animators to create popular series for 6-11 year olds:

> We have a tendency to gravitate towards 'the educational' when dealing with children's television. There is definitely a place for learning within

> animation - and it's called pre-school. When kids of five years upwards get home from school, they want escapism (Lennard, 2004).

In both instances, these executives identify the same tastes and same categorization of children, namely the lack of appeal of education programming for children 6-11. Interestingly, Radoczy has little background in children's development or in media, and can only have picked up her perceptions from other in the global children's animation business, such as Lennard. Moreover, this depiction of childhood is obviously biased toward Western and Western-styled cultures where formal education begins at age six, and is directly opposed to fun.

Barbara Wooding (2006), who owns her own international distribution company that focuses on children's animation and has worked in children's programming for twenty years, draws a nearly identical portrait of the breakdown and the tastes of the children's viewing audience. According to Wooding, children 0-2 have limited attention spans and require a good deal of sound and music, two- to five-year olds want prosocial, educational animation. "As kids' minds develop, programming kind of follows with it—where they are mentally, socially," Wooding explains.

These instances reveal that advertisers' segmentation of the children's audience is fundamental to industry discourse about children's viewing preferences. Without these designations operating in markets around the world, buyers and sellers of television animation would have a difficult time agreeing about what children want from television, and the kinds of multinational pre-sale financing deals that are crucial to production funding would be nearly impossible. In other words, the developmental model of child psychology and the routines of the advertising industry combine to create plausible and profitable discourses about what unites children beyond cultural differences. Again, however, this developmental model is based upon different experiences that children have at different ages, and those experiences derive from Western nations.

The gendered aspects of industry perceptions of children's viewing tastes become visible when insiders talk in more depth about older audiences. It seems that for babies and toddlers, the industry does not make gender-based distinctions among child viewers, but beginning about age six, such distinctions become important. Nevertheless, the child most insiders imagine when talking about the "universal" aspects of children's culture is male. Take, for instance, Daniel Lennard's observation that six-eleven year olds "want excitement and adventure. They want loveable characters doing stupid things. They want fighting and farting. Not edutainment and certainly not blatant 'moral journeys." These observations obviously refer primarily to what boys want to see, not girls.

Boys' preferences find their way into a variety of industry lore about what appeals to children across cultures. In another example, an advertising executive from J. Walter Thompson, Kate Eden (2000), identified five themes that can reach across cultural and linguistic differences among European children: "mastery, up-ageing, belonging, bravery and morality." She calls these "enduring themes" because "they're such a fundamental part of a kid's pysche that they endure across time and across geographical boundaries." The explanation of each of these five themes makes clear that we are, in fact, discussing boys most of the time, particularly white boys, rather than boys from minority groups in Europe. The examples of mastery and up-ageing provide good examples of these biases. Mastery, according to Eden, is universal because

> children's existence within an adult-run world often leaves them feeling powerless, so they end up fantasising about power and achievement. This fantasy can take many forms, such as feeling smart about knowing something; mastering a skill; or winning.

Despite her use of girls’ examples from European countries, this idea of fantasizing about power seems highly gendered towards boys. Moreover, fantasizing about dominance in the arenas of power and knowledge are highly gendered fantasies that are most prevalent among those who are likely to achieve such mastery one day, particularly white boys in Western societies.

The idea of up-ageing is that children like to pretend they are older than they are. Eden writes that this idea “stems from the fact that kids are largely dependent upon older authority figures and, therefore, fantasise about being more grown-up and independent. It's all about taking on 'older' experiences and thereby distancing themselves from so-called 'kids'.” This idea may be less gendered than mastery, but it is also steeped in dominant white cultural attitudes as opposed to minority cultures. In many nonwhite cultures, various rituals exist that distinguish children from adults, as well as distinguishing among children. In the absence of such rituals, white children in Western societies use clothing, culture, and behavior as a means to try to distinguish themselves from younger children. Such efforts are unnecessary in cultures where age differences are performed through more formal rituals.

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