The Weight of Reality
by Jamie Bodie

GO INTO ANY public elementary school in the country and you'll find kids clad in advertisements. Dora, Spiderman, Batman, Power Rangers, Bratz, and a seemingly endless list of specially marketed merchandise aimed at the fidgeting bodies and pliable minds of elementary school kids—synergy in its most successful form. These kids don't just wear the clothes of their favorite characters; they have the movies, watch the television shows, play with the toys, video and computer games, eat the official food off the official plates, sleep on the sheets, decorate their rooms with their images and occasionally read the books. Their bedrooms may become shrines to their favorite characters, their free play a reenactment of the roles and attitudes those characters portray. I didn't quite understand how disturbing this was until I watched a preschooler pout her lips and sway her pint-sized hips in mock-sensuality as she sang Britney Spears' anthem to the guise of innocence, "Oops, I Did It Again." Seeing this elicited an entirely new hybrid emotion: protective sympathetic disgust. The kind of feeling that makes you want to simultaneously shake and hold a child. Then my own son grew past babyhood and I realized how ubiquitous this influence was, and how hard it is to control.

You may think it won't happen to your kid. But odds are, it will. One day, they'll be laughing with you as you chase them around a park, or listening intently as you tell them all about what mammals are, and then BAM! The next thing you know their faces are scrunched up in twisted agony because you refuse to buy them the newest action figure that comes with three guns, a cleft chin, and steroid-bloated biceps—or the entire action figure collection (with accessories) so they can reenact the same pivotal battle scene they saw in the latest superhero movie in their very own home, which happens to be your home. You may stand firm in your refusal, but come some Christmas or birthday they'll get that toy, or one like it, having managed, perhaps, to wheedle it out of an unsuspecting or thoughtless relative, and the battle will be lost. Some Benedict Arnold of a Grandma will beam as your child showers her with love and affection and eternal gratitude for giving him just what he wanted. Never mind the idyllic notions of raising kids free from the taint of commercialization and material-driven dreams. You never had a chance. When this struggle began with my son I quickly found myself practicing more censorship than the People's Republic of China.

Of course, forbidding something only gives it more power, and not wanting to drive my son into the actual arms of G.I. Joe, it soon became apparent that the only healthy way to curb his consumption would be by helping him to understand just why it was, exactly, that he wanted those things so badly, (along with helpful all-purpose phrases like: "That's too violent" or "That's inappropriate" or "Is it Christmas? Your birthday? Then no.") Setting guidelines and providing children with a well-rounded education is the traditional framework for raising informed and empowered citizens, right?! The problem is, the commercial culture is teaching them in a much more engaging way than most parents can teach, and the purpose of this secret but very effective educational campaign is not to produce healthy, secure citizens but to instead produce hungry, insecure consumers.

With the exception of sleeping, most kids born today will spend more time watching television than doing anything else. Over $15 billion is spent annually on advertising directed at children. It's no fluke that kids seem more intrinsically drawn to the lessons taught to them by the television than teachers and parents. Marketers have spent good money learning how to cultivate kids' most narcissistic traits. A whole industry has grown around applying theories of child development and psychology to the methods advertisers use to shape the way they market to children. Many, many books have been written on the subject. Books like Creating Ever-Cool: A Marketer's Guide to a Kid's Heart written by the "nationally recognized expert on youth marketing," Gene Del Vecchio. His book offers chapters brimming with insight, covering topics such as touching the boy's and girl's psyche, embracing their fantasies, gratifying their senses, and understanding their connection to "cool." On the jacket cover is the tender tribute to his own two children, who give him the "best kid credential" he has.

I wonder what Saturdays are like in the Del Vecchio family? I imagine a child's fantasy of soda-pop wishes and fast-food dreams realized, as their father conducts focus group-style daytrips to the mall.

"What do you like best about this doll, honey?" he may ask his daughter, handing her a Bratz doll whose eyes and lips are so big and sultry there isn't even room for a nose on her face. He watches his daughter's reaction, his notebook and pen at the ready.

"I like the way she dresses, and her pretty make-up. Can I get a midriff top and platform shoes, too, Daddy?"

"Not yet dear, but look, here's a t-shirt with her picture on it!" He scribbles in his book.

"OOOH! That's sparkly, pink and ruffly…"

Then Del Vecchio might give her $50 to spend on whatever she wants (you can't go very far with less these days, and besides for Del Vecchio, it's deductible), taking more notes as she reaches for the shellac-strength lip gloss.

Companies have been relying on the kid market a lot more in recent decades. In 1983 marketers spent $100 million on television advertising to kids; now they spend nearly 150 times that amount. This rise in spending coincides with the increased buying power of children. In 1984, children ages 4 to 12 spent
$4.2 billion of their own money on their objects of desire, while in 2004 that figure skyrocketed to $35 billion. But—and not coincidentally—the thing that came before the big kid-market boom was the deregulation of children's programming in 1984, eliminating commercial guidelines for children's television.

These guidelines were established in 1969 when a complaint was filed against ABC for airing the cartoon "Hot Wheels" based on Mattel's line of toys. The FCC decided that the cartoon was a 30-minute commercial and not a children's program, because it was

based…on a toy…that was currently available for sale in stores. The court, not surprisingly, upheld that definition. Those standards remained in place until 1984 when deregulating Reganomics reined supreme. At that point, the FCC lifted the ban on program-length commercials, giving birth to infomercials and product based shows—children's programming was no exception. The FCC report stated that "the existing regulatory scheme is no longer necessary to assure operation in the public interest." One does have to wonder what exactly changed in the makeup of children's minds to make that "scheme" necessary "no longer."

The result, of course, was the virtual merging of toy companies and children's television producers. In 1987, three years into deregulation, eight of the twenty top selling toys were developed before, or in conjunction, with a cartoon character. Back then it was Pound Puppies and ALF. Now, almost every cartoon or children's program is one long advertisement; they have so many corresponding accoutrements that it seems as if every conceivable aspect of a child's life is tainted with product placement. This doesn't just go for young kids, either. While cartoon icons may fall out of favor during adolescence, teenagers are still mercilessly marketed to.

Youth Marketing Systems consulting, the marketing company responsible for bringing candy M&Ms to life as personified characters who discuss how good their smaller, inanimate counterparts taste (who doesn't love a chocolate candy cannibal?) is also the self-proclaimed "future of youth marketing." It is, according to its website, "the only consulting company that specializes in the scientific, psychological foundations of child and adolescent development. Young consumers' needs, perceptions, capabilities, preferences—and ultimately their behaviors—are isolated accurately." An easy-to follow flow chart specifies that the marketing tools that work with teenagers aged 13-15 are the same as the previous 8-12 stage in many respects, e.g.: fast-paced stimuli and still more complexity and abstraction, anti-status-quo themes, edgier & darker themes, achievement themes, sports, dating themes and relationships, body worship, and cool, realistic characters. Basically the best way to reach these kids is through simulated sex, power and rebellion. Old themes, yes, but updated for the hyper-commercialized lifestyles they lead.

Because kids brought up on commercials might naturally rebel against the status quo that commercials seem to support, advertisers instead sell rebellion through hip hop artists, or market a product with a sarcastic or cynical tone, hyping conformity as difference. Carefully styled alternative and hipster stores like Hot Topic and Urban Outfitters sell $40 dollar t-shirts and $150 jeans with just the right holes to teenagers and twenty-somethings who've all decided to be "different" together. Of course you can easily find all three themes—sex, power and rebellion—wrapped into one in any form of media, especially popular music, the Internet and videogames.

Virtual icons on-screen replace tangible toys for adolescents, and the world these characters maneuver through is full of billboards and product placement, just like our real one. Tomb Raider's erotically disproportionate Lara Croft drives a Daimler-Chrysler Jeep; Atari's game, Test Drive Unlimited, features a Ben Sherman clothing store gamers can actually enter; and movie billboards, soda machines and fast food icons glow in the

background of many of the latest games. Product placement in the virtual world can only gain momentum: the 2006 Nielsen estimates state that in the U.S., 93.8 million persons two and older used a video game system for an average of 2 hours and fifteen minutes per day. Every entertainment medium is saturated with cross-marketing campaigns.

But unfortunately, product placement doesn't end there; it seeps into nearly every aspect of our society.

With diminishing funds, even schools have become reluctant champions of corporate interests. They often gain desperately needed money via partnerships with corporations. Coke or Pepsi vending machines line the corridors of junior high and high schools and name-brand snacks usually share the space. When I went to junior high school, we had both a Taco Bell and Pizza Hut Express available on campus for lunch. In return for direct access to this captive youth market, schools receive money for various programs, materials and discretionary spending. In fact, a study released in 2001 by The Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University indicated commercial activity in and around schools had increased nearly 500% since 1990.

School libraries promote reading by plastering posters of popular cartoon characters on the walls, parents are encouraged to shop at certain stores and buy products that give their schools "box tops" for points. And teachers, struggling to find a way to reach their over-stimulated, easily distracted, seasoned-consumer students often include television or movie characters in curriculum or conversation in order to inspire them to write an essay or even do an art project.

Corporations are so eager to gain access to the youth market that they create and distribute "supplementary" materials free of charge to willing schools in order to help educate kids on important issues. When you need straight facts about the environment, what better teacher than
Procter and Gamble, who at one time produced an educational kit which asserted that disposable diapers are ecologically sound? Of course!

Just in case the kids don't watch enough television at home, since 1990, Channel One, the commercial news show just for tweens and teens, has been offering every classroom a free television if the school agrees to air its twelve-minute news broadcast for the class every day. Actually only about 57% of those twelve minutes can be considered "news" while the rest is comprised of ads, filler, and oh, a "pop quiz" at the end to make it all seem educational and to make sure the students were paying attention, because if they paid attention to the news, they probably also paid attention—maybe more attention—to the ads.

But that's not all Channel One is selling. They also claim, oddly, to promote media literacy. Weird, though, to subscribe to media literacy education from a company that for $200,000 a pop also sells 30-second spots to companies like Nabisco and the U.S. Armed Forces. With each new classroom it adds to its inventory, Channel One can promise its advertisers 30 or 40 new viewers. There is hardly any experience an American child can

have that doesn't betray the taint of commercialism. This is why it is so important to teach children how to filter it.

Media literacy is the process of analyzing and understanding mass media (television, radio, magazines—channels of communication controlled by a few but distributed to large audiences) and the structures that create them. It helps kids guard themselves against advertisers, and should not be taught to our children by the very people whose business is selling the illusion. This would be like promoting monogamy at a swingers' bar, with all the same hypocrisy and lack of sincere intent. Media literacy, however, does urgently need to be taught to this generation of school kids. The commercial media influence dumped upon children today is so immense it requires an educational plan about how it works. Just as we teach children incrementally how to understand literature, or to solve an equation, we need to educate kids about the medium they are really most actively engaged in. This needs to serve as a sort of mental prophylactic, to guard kids against the side effects of unprotected, uncritical media exposure. We cannot be so naïve as to think that they don't need it, nor so irresponsible as to assume that they'll figure it out themselves.

Media literacy is not a new idea. It was first developed in 1930, but the current approach of discriminating within the media has been kicking around for over forty years—around the same time television started to become a staple throughout the modern Western world, and constructed messages began to be perceived as natural ones. According to the Center for Media Literacy, a nonprofit educational organization founded in 1989, media literacy education "provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy." The United States has lagged far behind other major English-speaking countries in introducing it. Australia, for example, has mandated media education in grades K-12 since the mid 1990's. Denmark has provided it since 1970, Sweden since 1980. The U.S. has made some strides in recent years, and now 48 states have some form of media education in their curriculum. Which may lead many to think the problem is already being addressed. But the problem "in some form" can take many forms. We need to hold it to standards, to maintain an expectation; otherwise it may just be taught through some corporate-sponsored program or minimally addressed as an extra-credit assignment.

It would be nice to think that kids in public education already acquire the proper critical reasoning skills needed to address these problems through the traditional public-school curriculum. But that assumption cannot be made. Somewhere along the line, the traditional methods of explicating important literature and historical events failed to produce the ability to transfer (or in some cases, even develop) the analytical skills necessary for understanding media. Perhaps the cause of this occurrence can be found in the piles of tests teachers now teach to, or in the low wages they typically earn. Or they could just as easily be found in the hand-held videogame consoles that are the constant companions for many students, or in the ever-glowing television sets in their homes. Whatever the reasons, the fact is that both parents and educators need to address the issue

of commercial media saturation seriously; it has become essential to explicitly teach media literacy in education. If we don't take responsibility for educating kids, we are tacitly agreeing to allow marketers and business interests to educate them instead.

The marketing bombardment of our kids is just one of the most repugnant examples of corporate dominance and influence over our culture. I know it's easy to blame faceless corporations for all that's wrong in America, but there is a reason why it's so easy. It's about time we all put away the fantasy of "trickle-down economics." The story that says we all benefit when the richest few get tax cuts and exemptions and that by allowing big business access to every facet of our lives, we create a strong economy— that this, indeed, is capitalism in its most successful form. That privatization will solve our healthcare system, our educational system, our social security crisis. We need to do away with the fantasy that marketers are here to better serve our preexisting needs and wants. These are myths masquerading as reality, earning credibility only because we allow them the weight of reality. And should we begin to doubt the validity of these myths and wonder why we can't perceive the benefits, or if we should question why the income gap is so wide and why an epidemic of ADD and narcissism plagues the kids of this country, well, there is always the relentless mass of advertisements to distract us — whispering the persistent need for more in all of our American dreams.

So maybe the four-year-old who memorized the Britney Spears song before she could spell her first word wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary. After all, a child's first method of learning is through observation and imitation. I could argue that she shouldn't have been exposed to Britney at such a young age, which is true, but exposure to inappropriate role models for kids isn't exactly rare. In fact, because the product of Britney Spears has so saturated every component of the mass media, it would've been hard for the average television-viewing child not to be exposed to her. The song the preschooler chose to sing captured the condition perfectly, "Oops! You think I'm sent from above. I'm not that innocent." The time kids are allowed to be innocent of our culture's hang-ups is rapidly decreasing. They are thrust almost at birth into the hyper-reality of commercialism and mass media, which effectively manipulates their desires and then encourages them to relentlessly fulfill them.

Perhaps here, too, Britney Spears can illuminate the situation, by providing a model for the paradox of our current culture. As a girl who attained stardom at a young age, pretty, fit, idolized and lusted after. She's been a Mouseketeer, a pop superstar, an actress, a reality-show subject, a brand label—a complete commercial success. But once she fulfilled all those desires—of her own as well as ours—she self-destructed. At twenty-five, Spears goes in and out of rehab, neglects her kids, shaves her head in public and smashes a photographer's car window while screaming, "Go fuck yourself!" Her downward spiral is a perfect model for what commercial excess without restraint will yield: an emotionally disturbed and misled culture that needs a better education and higher standards.

Reprinted from *KIOSK* Fall 2007
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