IN FRONT OF THE CHILDREN

Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences

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HOME ALONE IN THE 90s

Generational War and Transgenerational Address in American Movies, Television and Presidential Politics

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> We are headed for a generational war, with the young against the old!
>
> Paul Tsongas, at the 1992 Democratic Convention.
>
> A blurring of the distinctions among children, teens, and young adults has taken place as children become increasingly more sophisticated and mature in their choice of entertainment.
>
> Standard and Poor's 1990 Industry Survey of the Toy Market.
>
> Television discourse addresses its viewers as children. . . . The bigger the target audience, the more it will be paedocratized.
>
> John Hartley, 'Invisible Fictions' (1989).

On election night in 1992, shortly after the Democratic candidates had been declared winners in the US presidential campaign, Vice President-Elect Al Gore announced that their victory represented a change not only of parties but also of generations, for this was the first time candidates born *after* World War II had been elected to occupy the White House.

A few days later, the President of MTV was asked if he could explain why the youth vote (those from 18 to 21) had overwhelmingly switched their support from the Republican to the Democratic party, a question he was supposedly qualified to answer since (as Bill Clinton would later acknowledge at the MTV inaugurative ball) his station 'had a lot to do with the Clinton–Gore victory'. He replied that the switch was due to the 'generational imagery' of the campaign. While he was referring to stunts like Clinton's performance on the popular late-night Arsenio Hall television show with saxophone and shades, I will argue that the Democrats were appropriating a marketing strategy that had already proved successful in the late 1980s and early 1990s – an exaggeration of generational conflict that paradoxically serves as an effective form of transgenerational address.

This chapter is a sequel to my earlier article on the 1988 US presidential campaign, 'Back to the Future in the 80s with Fathers & Sons, Supermen &

PeeWees, Gorillas & Toons',[1] where I argued that voters in that election had matched father-and-son pairs to pick from. Voters could elect either the formerly wimpish Bush appearing patriarchal and presidential next to his vapid young Quayle, or the diminutive Dukakis playing the successful son of poor Greek immigrants next to the tall, fatherly, experienced Bentsen. That essay positioned those reversible pairs against a cluster of optimistic oedipal comedies of the 1980s in which fathers and sons change places – films like *Big*, *Like Father, Like Son*, *Vice Versa* and *The Back to the Future* series. But in 1992 the voters were choosing *between* generations – between that supposedly unique generation of baby boomers whose development continues to be so doggedly tracked by the media and those aging veterans of World War II who are becoming increasingly obsolete. This choice, I will argue, should be read against those blockbuster comedies of generational warfare from the early 1990s, *Home Alone* 1 and 2, as well as MTV's successful children's cable television network, Nickelodeon.

In the 1992 presidential campaign the 46-year-old Clinton purposely accentuated the generation gap between himself and the 68-year-old Bush by picking young Gore as his running mate – that is, by using generational redundancy rather than balance to privilege that issue over those of class, regionalism, race, ethnicity, gender and ideology. This generational discourse was further underscored by the 62-year-old independent candidate Ross Perot, with his vice-presidential choice of the elderly Admiral Stockdale as running mate.

Clinton's campaign further emphasised generational conflict – by acknowledging that he was a fatherless son who had stood up against his alcoholic stepfather whenever he tried to abuse his mother or younger brother, and by picturing him now as a loving father doting on his daughter and as the husband of a woman who is a strong advocate for children's rights. Both in his television commercials and in his speeches, he frequently repeated the refrain, 'Unless we change, our children can become the first generation of Americans to do worse than their parents.' Both his and Perot's constant emphasis on the nation's staggering deficit led political commentators to use phrases like 'fiscal child abuse' and 'generational war'.[2] Shortly after the inauguration, the controversial issue of cutting entitlements was split along generational lines, with rumours that Clinton's new economic policy would guarantee *all* children free immunisations and would tax the social security benefits of comfortable seniors. Increasingly the media began to dub these two generations the 'needy' and the 'greedy' respectively, regardless of race, ethnicity, and class.

Like the juxtaposition of the three epigraphs that opened this essay, the Democrats' use of this generational imagery seemed to be contradictory or at least dialectic, for it suggested that the best way to prevent the 'generational war' was to exaggerate both the difference between baby boomers and their greedy elders and their over-identification with needy youngsters. As Clinton put it in his inaugural address, 'We must do what no generation has done before . . . we must provide for our nation the way a family provides for its children.' Thus, it was hardly surprising that young

Home Alone star Macaulay Culkin appeared at the inauguration-eve party (broadcast on CBS), quipping, 'This is the first inauguration party I ever attended and, I've been told, the first such *Democratic* event to occur in my lifetime!' The camera quickly cut to a close-up of the youthful Clinton and Gore laughing at his remark, as if this child star were somehow emblematic of their own meteoric rise to power. What such imagery and rhetoric achieved was a sense of dynamic change in the face of glaring continuities. In fact, one of President Clinton's first acts was to appoint the fatherly Bentsen (with all his traditional baggage) as Secretary of the Treasury. The issue of generational choice helped gloss over the fact that in the 1992 election, as in the past, voters were still choosing exclusively among matched pairs of white Anglo heterosexual males.

This generational strategy is commonplace in American commercial television, which, as Hartley has argued, tends to address its spectators as children precisely to avoid troublesome divisions of class, race, gender and ethnicity.[3] I will argue that this convergence of generations moves in both directions – not only are adult spectators 'paedocratised' but also young spectators are encouraged to adopt adult tastes, creating subject positions for a dual audience of infantilised adults and precocious children. These subject positions seem to provide an illusory sense of empowerment both for kids who want to accelerate their growth by buying into consumerist culture and for adults who want to retain their youth by keeping up with pop culture's latest fads. While this strategy appears to exaggerate generational difference, it actually constructs a transgenerational address that is profitable to sponsors, for (as Standard and Poor suggest) the same product (whether it is Macaulay Culkin, Ren and Stimpy, or Clinton and Gore) can be simultaneously marketed to both constituencies.

One might ask: what is the advantage of this simultaneous exaggeration of generational conflict and conflation? If a product appeals both to the young and the old, then why not simply omit any reference to generational conflict whatsoever? Such an alternative would fail to privilege 'transgenerational appeal' as a functional difference that distinguishes the 'product' from its rivals. Thus within this consumerist logic it is apparently more profitable to exaggerate generational warfare so that transgenerational address can come to the rescue. In the case of Clinton, that means solving an accelerating problem (like the generation gap or national deficit) which was not only ignored but also exacerbated by the Reagan-Bush administrations.

Yet, as if to complicate the dialectics, the popular press has recently highlighted not only the wonders of transgenerational address but also its potential dangers, suggesting that it threatens to erode the formerly 'naturalised' boundaries between adults and minors, parents and children, and the patriarchal laws and incestuous taboos that are propped on these distinctions. Nowhere were these dynamics more apparent and disturbing than in the Michael Jackson case (when he was accused of molesting a young boy), in the Woody Allen scandal (over his affair with Mia Farrow's adopted daughter and his alleged sexual abuse of his own child), and in

the Amy Fisher trial (the teenage Long Island Lolita whose attempted murder of her lover's wife was the topic of three network TV movies). In all three cases the destabilised definition of childhood made it even more difficult to determine the innocence and complicity of the precocious children and the stunted adults who collaborated in these transgressions, and it was precisely these ambiguities that were emphasised in the media's obsessive coverage of these events. Similar ambiguities were also involved in the rise and fall of PeeWee Herman (the comical stunted manchild who rose to television stardom by hosting a Saturday morning kids show with subversive transgenerational and homoerotic appeal but then got 'caught' masturbating in an X-rated movie theatre) as well as in the discourse surrounding Madonna, that weather vane of popular culture. These stars have created personae that conflate the precocious child with the stunted adult – a conflation that disavows sexuality in these infantilised men (PeeWee, Michael, and even Woody) while intensifying it in the waifish woman (be it Madonna or Amy Fisher). Thus, if the manchild proves sexual or the childwoman plays innocent, the power of their representations is destabilised, a dynamic which triggers volatile emotional reversals in the transgenerational audiences they address.

Consider, for example, a recent *McCall's* article titled, 'How to Protect Your Kids from Madonna', in which Ron Taffel (a New York family therapist and the magazine's 'parenting columnist') perceptively describes Madonna's transgenerational address and then sternly warns parents against its dangers.

> Unfortunately, with her mass-market approach Madonna also blurs the boundaries between parents and children. Think about it. When was the last time parents and kids shared the same sex symbol? But that's what has happened. As 150,000 copies of *Sex* were sold to *adults* in the first day, Madonna's message was being delivered to our *kids* through MTV, videos and CDs. This unprecedented mass marketing has two effects: First, it puts children and parents in the same soup. In this way Madonna reflects and contributes to the blurring of the hierarchy children need to feel secure. Second, it guarantees that parents will be unable to act like parents – to monitor and supervise what kids are exposed to.[4]

In order to counter these alleged dangers, Dr Taffel grossly exaggerates the generational differences between Madonna and her young fans.

> Madonna's (and her publishers') intentional challenge to parental authority . . . comes out of another era, in which oppressive religious and familial mores made *some* children feel powerless and bad. But it doesn't fit today's upside-down world. Today's children have trouble not because they are oppressed and stifled by a rigid environment – just the opposite: they're let loose too soon, out on their own too early.

So convinced is Taffel of the immutable power of generational difference that he concludes that Madonna's transgenerational address will ultimately lead to 'her own demise': 'The more adults latch on to her, the less interested kids will be. *They* understand the need for differences between parents and children.' Yet the Clinton campaign and a wide segment of pop culture apparently do not agree with this analysis, for their discourse demonstrates that the exaggerations of generational conflation *and* difference go hand in hand.

Home Alone at the Movies

No films demonstrate these combined dynamics of generational war and transgenerational address more powerfully than *Home Alone* and its sequel, *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*. Both films are action-adventure movies that display a formidable mastery of stunts or special effect – a genre whose fantasy of empowerment appeals both to precocious children like Culkin and to powerless childlike adults who are threatened by unemployment in a global market rapidly being restructured by new technologies. Usually identified with George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, this transgenerational supergenre has generated Hollywood's biggest box-office successes over the past decade. *Home Alone*'s cumulative domestic grosses for 1990 and 1991 reached nearly $300 million, almost equalling *Batman*'s record for 1989. In 1992, *Home Alone 2* was second only to *Batman Returns*; by April 1993, it pulled ahead (grossing over $172 million, as opposed to the $162.8 million earned by *Batman Returns*).[5]

Despite these impressive box-office figures, according to a recent story in the *Los Angeles Times* called 'Honey, They Shrunk the Movie Audience', there has been a disturbing 12 per cent drop in admissions for American moviegoers between the ages of 12 to 29 over the past two years, which has led to a continuing overall decline in the number of tickets sold (964 million in 1992 as compared with the all-time high of 1.2 billion in 1984). Presumably lured away by videogames, VCR's, and cable television, 'the young moviegoer, who typically goes to the movies 12 times a year, is no longer the largest segment of the audience. That age group has been surpassed by a baby-boom-generation moviegoer, age 25 to 50, who typically goes to the movies only four times a year.'[6] *Variety*'s market analyst Art Murphy claims the prognosis is dire: 'It's absolutely dangerous for the continued health of the theatrical business if the under-25 audience is not lured back. . . . This is the weak link of almost 100 years of younger people continually replenishing and driving the film business.' Since this under-25 age group has managed to keep the American box-office thriving through the 1980s (in contrast to the sharp decline experienced virtually everywhere else in the world) and since entertainment media are currently America's second leading export, this decline could have serious global consequences.

On the other hand, this situation exposes the tremendous power of youth culture, for it can have a decisive effect not only on the American presidential election but also on the global economy and the balance of

trade. Hence Hartley's perception about American television's strategy of 'paedocratising' audiences can easily be extended to American movies, particularly in the world market where the advantages of displacing ethnic, linguistic and cultural difference are far higher and where MTV is already helping to produce a global youth culture whose members are still avid consumers of Hollywood products. The more optimistic industry leaders are now reconceptualising American movie theatres as merely a 'test market' for worldwide multimedia distribution. As Jack Valenti, President of the American Motion Picture Association, puts it, American theatrical exhibition is now a 'platform' to other markets that now include 'about 3 billion persons watching the very movies that first appeared in the cinema.' Yet if American youngsters are turning away from movie theatres, can global youth culture be far behind? In any event, there is a strong incentive for the US film industry to 'lure' kids back to movie theatres.

David Fox reports that most Hollywood studios are now coping with this decline in theatre attendance by relying primarily on transgenerational address, that is, 'to make broader appealing films with stars that appeal to multiple age groups.' This refers not only to global superstars like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and Harrison Ford (who are associated with fast-paced action and violent spectacle) but also more surprisingly to children's cult heroes from other media like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (who first rose to prominence in comic books, action figures, and video games)[7] and Super Mario Brothers (from Nintendo's video games and television series) and even to a young unknown like Macaulay Culkin (who experienced an overnight rise to stardom in *Home Alone*). What helps give both sets of stars their transgenerational appeal is their ability to combine violence and humour – a tradition that has its filmic roots in American silent comedy and cartoon farce and that is absolutely central to the *Home Alone* movies.[8]

The *Home Alone* films have essentially the same David/Goliath plot: young Kevin McAllister (Macaulay Culkin) is accidentally separated from his large family during the Christmas holidays and through wit, courage and bricolage transforms common household items and electronic toys into formidable weapons that enable him to defend his suburban home (or a luxurious New York toy store) from two invading burglars. In both films his initial separation is triggered by a power failure (brought on by an electrical storm or a battery recharge). As a means of phallic empowerment, the abandoned boy uses his Talkboy tape-recorder and joystick to appropriate the soundtrack of a gangster movie on a VCR and to record his uncle's castrating threats from the shower so that he can simulate the murderous Voice-of-the-Father in his own oedipal scenarios. In both adventures, the only family member he truly misses is his mother.

On the one hand, the *Home Alone* films are children's domestic farce or live-action loony toons, genres that assure audiences of a happy ending and the victory of its precocious superstar over his dim-witted adult adversaries. The villains' behaviour is bumbling enough to be comical and to disavow the painful consequences of the violence, as in any Road Runner

or Bugs Bunny cartoon. On the other hand, the plot also evokes violent vigilante movies that are popular with adult males and that frequently star Clint Eastwood, Chuck Norris or Bruce Willis. Moreover, the narrative structure features repetitive bouts of accelerating violence that are commonly found in video games. This strange combination turns *Home Alone* into a third-grader's *Die Hard* or a second-grader's *Straw Dogs* – a transgenerational hybrid that enables kiddy spectators to grow into the more mature action genre and their parents to enjoy a non-saccharine children's film with a cutting edge.

As if young Kevin's main bout with the burglars were not enough, the film's transgenerational address is further accentuated by several other generational skirmishes of the oedipal variety, none of which is focused on the boy's actual father. In fact, in *Home Alone 2* Kevin gets on the wrong plane because he mistakes someone else for his dad. In the first film, these displacements include Kevin's conflicts with his bullying older brother and his nasty uncle, and a subplot involving a lonely old neighbour and his estranged son, whom Kevin helps to reconcile. The sequel adds a running battle with a snooty concierge (played by Tim Curry), whom Kevin humiliates by using his pirated patriarchal tapes to position him as a voyeuristic homosexual 'pervert'. As in the Clinton campaign, most threatening conflicts are displaced onto the generation war.

Despite this one homophobic flourish, the primary displacements in the *Home Alone* films are conflicts of class and ethnicity – between the charmed well-to-do middle-class Anglo family and the ethnic criminal have-nots.[9] Although the ethnicity of the burglars is not emphasised, Harry is played by Joe Pesci, who is usually cast as an Italian-American gangster, and (playing against the 'shrewd Jew' stereotype) Daniel Stern is the moronic Marv, who wishes himself happy Chanuka as he steals the Christmas Eve takings from the toy store. Moreover, at the low point of the McAllisters' Christmas vacation the family crowds around a TV set in a tacky motel room on a rainy morning in a hispanicised Florida, watching *It's a Wonderful Life* dubbed in Spanish. Meanwhile the fair-haired Kevin wallows in luxury at the New York Plaza with his dad's credit card. These latent conflicts of class and ethnicity help explain part of the film's appeal to yuppie parents who may feel powerless against urban crime and guilty over raising latchkey kids. Adult viewers can identify both with young Kevin as he bests the bigger, darker, dumber, poorer bad guys and with the distracted yet loving, affluent parents who are relieved to discover that their youngest child can survive on his own – even in a dangerous decaying city like New York. Thus they are encouraged not to worry about the 'other guy' – whether it's the under-class or the next generation.

As if to acknowledge the class discourse that was suppressed from the first film, in *Home Alone 2* the lonely old neighbour is replaced by a pigeon lady in Central Park. Yet, since her homelessness is attributed to a broken heart rather than to social conditions, Kevin ends up giving her his friendship rather than food, shelter or money. As if to provide more evidence of the film's social consciousness, the money that Kevin saves at the toy store

is destined for sick kids at Children's Hospital, who may not be poor but who are still needy. Yet ironically, it is Kevin and his affluent family who receive the biggest donations – a complimentary suite at the Plaza and a truckload of extravagant Christmas gifts sent by the rich old owner of the toy shop.

Kevin is much more confident in the sequel, for he takes great pleasure both in his luxurious homelessness and in the repeat bout with the bandits which proved so profitable in *Home Alone 1*. In fact, he lures them to his uncle's house, which (like the basic plot) is under reconstruction, a ploy designed to accelerate the violence. Thus the sequel is still a displaced generational fantasy in which a precocious rich kid (who will probably grow up to be Kevin Costner) beats up low-life infantilised burglars.

The fantasy dimension was highlighted by an actual case in a Chicago suburb, where David and Sharon Schoo were prosecuted and convicted for having left their 9 and 4-year-old daughters 'home alone' at Christmas while *they* enjoyed an eight-day vacation in Acapulco. A cover story in the *National Enquirer* ends by quoting the 9-year old: 'The movie *Home Alone* makes it seem like fun for little kids to be left alone by their parents. But I know it's not fun at all – it's a nightmare'.[11]

More recently, similar accusations have been made in the popular press against Macaulay Culkin's real-life family by his former nanny Kimberley Frank. A cover story in the *Globe* titled 'Tragic Mac's Home Alone – & Terrified!' also exaggerates both the similarities with and differences from the movie. On the one hand, it claims: 'It's absolutely amazing that the cute kid who's made so many millions in the *Home Alone* movies is actually left home alone quite often in real life'.[12] Yet, on the other hand, Mac's response is portrayed as being just the opposite from Kevin's for, instead of fighting back against his 'monstrous' dad, Mac goes 'wild with fear'. There's also the suggestion that part of the reason the 'raging drunken dad' is so abusive is that he cannot accept the generational reversal in the family's economic situation: 'he likes to play the big shot, throwing his money around . . . [but] everyone knows it's money Mac has earned.' Thus we are led to believe he recuperates his patriarchal authority through physical abuse. As if to strengthen this implication, the nanny brings in as moral authority the voice of Michael Jackson, reporting that when she answered his phone call to Mac, he told her, 'You sound like a really nice person. I know they need someone there to take care of things.' Thus before his own scandal tarnished his image, Michael functioned as a pop *deus ex machina*, for it was well known that he and his siblings had suffered similar abuses from their father and that he had subsequently become the world's most popular advocate for children's rights – a mission that was prominently featured in his performance at Clinton's inauguration-eve ball where he allegedly met Macaulay Culkin.

Clearly the abuses within the Schoo and Culkin families would never have received extensive media coverage if not for the popularity of the *Home Alone* movies. Like the Michael Jackson, Woody Allen and Amy Fisher cases and Dr Taffel's stern warnings against Madonna, they call

attention to the dramatic contradictions between the fantasy conflation of generations being portrayed in texts like *Home Alone* and the actual anxiety and deep moral rifts being generated by the increasingly ambiguous boundaries between children and adults. Such anxieties have been most intense in the popular discourses around latch-key kids and child molestation, issues that raise troubling questions like 'Who's Old Enough to Stay Home All Alone?'[13] particularly in an age of working mothers and inadequate child care; or what is the proper age of sexual consent, particularly since it varies so widely in different nations and decades?

Nickelodeon – The Children's Network

The pairing of generational war and transgenerational address is even more pronounced on Nickelodeon, the successful national cable station owned by MTV which promotes itself as 'the children's network'. Most of Nickelodeon's schedule is devoted to syndicated reruns of classical television series from the 1950s and 60s, which are presented in a new parodic setting for a new generation of viewers and also (as *American Demographics* puts it) for 'baby boomers who still carry fond memories of their childhood indulgences . . . [and who] want to recapture the feelings of comfort and security they had as children'.[14] According to Marshall Cohen, MTV's senior vice-president for research, 'It's really two different networks. During the day, Nickelodeon is aimed at kids. After 8 p.m., we become "Nick at Nite – Programming for the TV Generation".'[15]

Yet these borders are permeable, for (at the time of writing) Nick's weekday mornings start at 6 a.m. with *Mr Wizard's World* and *Danger Mouse*, classics with nostalgic appeal, and close in the wee hours (from 5 to 6 a.m.) with *Mr Ed* and *Dick Van Dyke*. Moreover, in 1992 Nick started scheduling some of their children's shows on Saturday night prime-time (what they call 'Snick').[16] In fact, many of Nick's shows are aired in several different time zones, as if implying they can or should be read differently by different generations. Thus just as MTV exposed the commercial nature of all American television by obscuring the boundaries between commercials and regular programmes,[17] Nickelodeon exposes the generational dynamics that dominate (what Hartley calls) 'the paedocratic regime' of American commercial broadcasting – an exaggeration of generational conflict that actually functions in the marketplace as transgenerational address.

Nick's strategy seems designed to tap the dramatic increase in the 'kid's market' – which, according to *Zillions* magazine (a children's version of *Consumer Reports*), now has $8 billion a year to spend – and the simultaneous decline in children's Saturday morning viewing, the traditional way of targeting it. Between 1986 and 1991 Arbitron reports a 15 per cent decline, and Nielsen confirms this trend for the period 1990–91, showing a 13 per cent decrease in Saturday morning viewing for children aged 2 to 11.[18] According to Simmons Market Research Bureau, 29 per cent of children in this age bracket 'watch TV before dinner' as compared with 24 per cent who watch on Saturday morning. Yet since 'children spend the most time watching prime-time TV', Simmons concludes, they 'are an

audience worth targeting . . . but reaching them with television commercials is rapidly growing more expensive and less efficient.'[19]

While some advertisers are turning to children's magazines (many of which are modelled on adult classics like *Sports Illustrated* or on popular TV shows like *Sesame Street Magazine*, Fox's *Kids' Club* and *Nickelodeon*),[20] others use TV with a transgenerational address that assures kids that *they* are the privileged target – even though these same shows and products can also be enjoyed in a different way by older consumers. Though this strategy is central to Nickelodeon, it is also being used increasingly on other networks.

On 13 February 1993, Fox Broadcasting pulled ahead of the other major networks (CBS, NBC and ABC) in the Saturday morning time zone with *X-men*, an animated adventure series based on one of Marvel's most successful comic books. This show appealed not only to kids between 2 and 11, but also to teenage boys and even to adult fans of the original comics. Yet the Saturday morning time-slot showed kiddies that they were still the primary target. According to Daniel Cerone, Fox's success was 'inevitable' precisely because of their generational strategy, which differs sharply from that of the other networks and (I would add) closely follows the Nickelodeon model.

> Unlike the other networks, Fox lets kids toon out six days a week with blocks of *Beetlejuice!*, *Tiny Toon Adventures* and *Batman: The Animated Series*, among others, on weekday mornings and afternoons – during which the network can plug its Saturday morning lineup. The other networks and their affiliates generally aim for adults on weekdays with network news programs in the morning and soap operas and syndicated talks shows during the afternoon.[21]

Thus, as Cerone observes, the other major networks can promote their children's shows only on Saturday mornings. This applies not only to NBC (which has dropped its Saturday morning cartoons and turned to live-action shows aimed at teens) and to ABC (which lost its popular Disney series), but also to CBS (whose successful children's series, such as *The Little Mermaid, Garfield and Friends* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* are ghettoised within the Saturday morning time zone). In contrast to CBS, which 'rose to No. 1 in prime time primarily with sophisticated adult series,'[22] Fox scored its greatest success with *The Simpsons*, a prime-time animated series with enormous transgenerational appeal, and with *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, a daytime live-action series (aired daily both mornings and afternoons) whose young multicultural shape-shifting heroes have overtaken the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in cult status and promotional tie-ins within the lucrative children's market. According to Judy Price, vice-president of children's programme and daytime specials for CBS, this transgenerational approach gives Fox a tremendous edge over CBS with young viewers: 'Fox has the best of all worlds. It's a kid-friendly network to begin with, with a prime-time schedule that's very

youth-oriented.'[23] Yet even CBS is beginning to emulate this transgenerational strategy. For example, after the 30 January episode of their animated *Back to the Future* series broadcast on Saturday morning at 10, the station ran a promotion for its surprisingly popular prime-time family show, *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman*, that ended with the tag line, 'And kids, you can let your parents watch, too!'

This line evokes some of Nickelodeon's best station promos, which go much further than those for any other network in exaggerating generational difference. One warns children not to let their parents watch Nick because adults are untrustworthy; they wear deodorant and ties, they shave under their arms, they watch the news and do other disgusting things frequently depicted in television commercials. Another amusing promotional spot for Nick's syndication of old series shows a silhouette of a parent and child with clasped hands over an image on a TV set, with the tag line: 'Watch Nickelodeon together, because if you don't tell your children about television's heritage, someone else will.' Thus television history is represented as a 'dirty secret' like sex, one that controls reproduction – of the culture, if not the species. This promo has it both ways, for it parodies the generation gap as well as transgenerational togetherness.

Nick's generational discourse reminds viewers how frequently kids appropriate adult conventions (or vice versa) while insisting that *their* version is different and superior. These dynamics are particularly strong in the cereal commercials aired on Nickelodeon just before the 1992 election. For example, one showed a young blond kid imitating Clinton by campaigning in front of a sign reading 'Greg for President', yet what he was promising was to keep Trix cereal 'just for kids'. In an Applejack ad, a 10-year-old boy is shown eating a bowl of cereal with his friends while his mother complains that it doesn't have any apples. After lip synching one of her lines, he complains, 'Parents . . . they just don't get it!' In a commercial for Frosted Flakes, we see a yuppy executive in an expensive suit obsessively eating cereal before hearing the tag line 'the adult cereal with the taste that never grew up'. While one might find these same commercials on other stations, on Nickelodeon they call attention to the generational strategy of the whole network as well as to the medium and culture.[24]

The same dynamic works in the syndicated reruns. Take, for example, the 'Aesop & Son' cartoon segment within *Bullwinkle's Mooserama Show*, which is usually framed by a conversation between father and son. In one episode the father complains that Mother Goose stole all his stories and thus forced him to turn to fables. Despite this father/son bonding against the mother, the two generations compete over who can come up with the best moral for the patriarchal tale. Although the story is taken from the past, it is adapted for a new generation which produces a fresh, improved reading. This is precisely the structure of how Nickelodeon treats its syndicated series and how Clinton ran his campaign.

Nick's original shows use similar dynamics, for most of them are merely children's versions of popular adult genres – quiz shows like *Nick Arcade*, *Family Double Dare* and *Wild and Crazy Kids*; teenage soaps like *Hey Dude*;

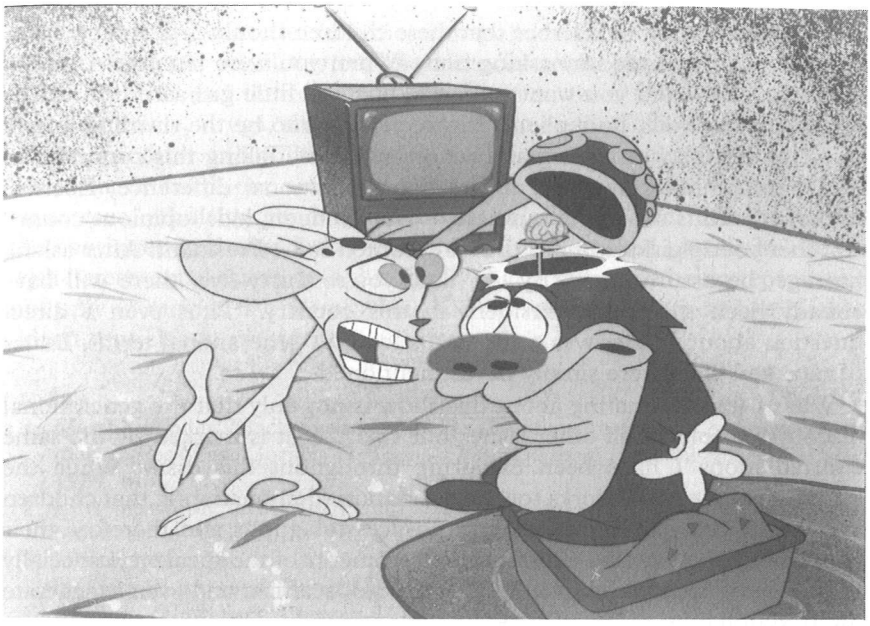
situation comedies like *Salute Your Shorts* and *Clarissa Explains It All*; satiric variety shows like *You Can't Do That on Television* and *Round House*. Like the reruns, they reproduce the same old shows with a 'functional' generational difference that disavows the simulation.

Nick's most successful original shows are the Nicktoons, three half-hour cartoon series currently broadcast at weekends. *Doug* features a good-natured, homely teenage boy who (the promo tells us) is 'a kid just like you . . . who is trying to make the grade, the seventh grade' but is 'plagued by grown ups'. Like *Muppet Babies* (which it immediately precedes on Saturday mornings), *Rugrats* is a domestic comedy from the infants' point of view, but the bossy older cousin Angelica is a villain (rather than a lovable narcissist like Miss Piggy) and their distracted Jewish elders are absurd and obtuse (rather than patient and wise like the Muppets' generic Nanny). Relying on a specific generational discourse, these two children's series are paired on Saturday mornings at 8 and again on Saturday evenings at 7.

The third series, *The Ren and Stimpy Show*, which is not generation-specific, has already become a cult classic with a wide range of audiences (particularly college-age males), partly because its brilliant hyper-animated drawings of emotional, scatological and violent excess give new meaning to the word 'animation'. On Nickelodeon it airs on Sunday mornings at 11 after *Doug* and *Rugrats*, but it is also strategically scheduled in prime-time 'Snick', on Saturdays at 9 p.m. – not too late for the kiddies yet not too early for the adults and teens. The success of *Ren and Stimpy* has led to generational crossover not only across Nick's own time zones but also across the channel; for the show can also be seen at a later hour on big sister station MTV and also on the episode of *The Simpsons* that first aired on 4 February 1993.[25] In this homoerotic father/son romance, Bart and Homer Simpson make each other jealous by adopting father and son substitutes, and use domestic buddy comedies like *Ren and Stimpy* (and 'Itchy and Scratchy') for transgenerational bonding with the surrogate. Since the homoerotic dimension is strongest between Bart and his 'Bigger Brother' Tom (whom the jealous Homer calls a 'floozie'), it is only fitting that they should be the ones who are happily chortling at *Ren and Stimpy*.[26]

Ren and Stimpy is the only one of Nick's new animated series that is strongly in the tradition of Warner's *Loony Tunes* – that is, cartoons whose verbal wit, sexual jokes, satiric edge, reflexive parody and frenetic violence make them as appealing to adults as to kids. In fact, Nickelodeon helped to revive the popularity of vintage *Loony Tunes*, for they are currently being broadcast three times a day on weekdays and in both the morning and the evening on Sundays. Within their new Nickelodeon setting, their original transgenerational address is privileged as the functional difference that distinguishes them from the more infantile, sentimental toons on the Disney channel – a dynamic that is similar to the way the sophisticated Fleischer cartoons used to function on *PeeWee's Playhouse*.

Partly because Nickelodeon's generational discourse is so blatant, one hardly notices that issues of race, ethnicity, class and gender rarely arise.



The Ren and Stimpy Show. Photo courtesy of Nickelodeon.

Perhaps these dynamics of displacement are most visible in the station's coverage of the 1992 election, particularly in a *Nick News* Special called, *Who Wants to Be President?* With the celebrated TV network newscaster Linda Ellerbee[27] as moderator and former President Gerald Ford as special guest, the show presented a group of academically successful children (of both genders and diverse races) asking questions about the presidency and responding to brief biographical presentations of the three leading candidates, which omitted their ideological and class differences. What the biographies did stress was the ages of the candidates and their generational differences, particularly in comparing Bush and Clinton. The Bush bio opened: 'He was born 68 years ago . . . At 18 he joined the navy and became a pilot, as so many in his generation wanted to do.' Of Clinton, we learn: 'He came of age in the 60s when many were concerned about the war.'

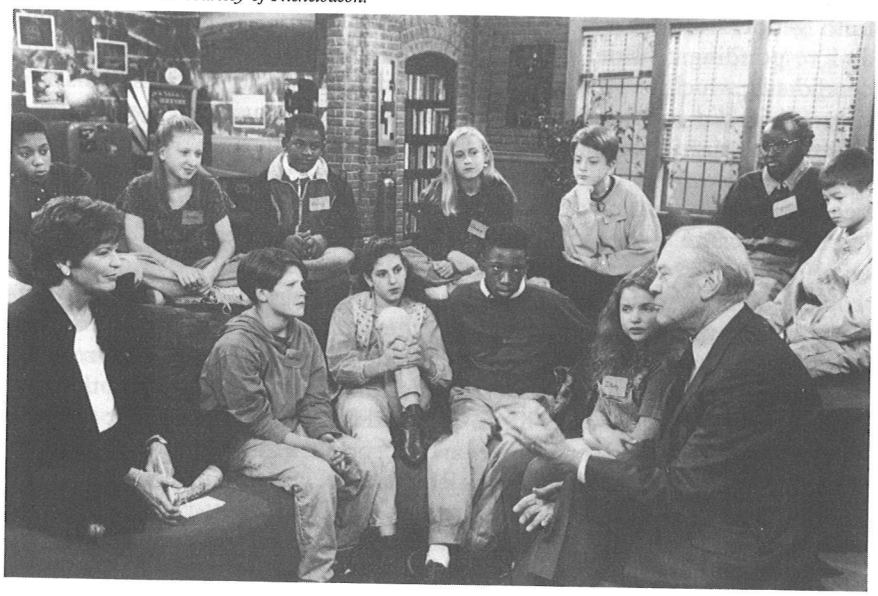
A parallel generational contrast was emphasised in the live-action question and answer frame. Throughout the show the 48-year-old Ellerbee functioned as a mediator between the elderly Ford and the children, for the former president usually spoke directly to her and referred to the kids in the third person. It was as if she qualified for this mediating role because of her gender (less powerful than a male president yet more empowered than pre-adolescents of either gender) and her age (young enough to be Ford's daughter, for his generation had kids in their twenties, and also young enough to be the children's mother, for the current generation, like the Clintons, is more likely to have them at thirty-something). At one point

in the show, Ford told Ellerbee that these children should urge their parents to vote; she responded by asking him, 'When you were ten years old, Mr President, what did you want to be?' When one little girl asked Ford why children can't vote, he replied: 'Eighteen seems to be the dividing line in this country, between being a child or an adult.' Taking this comment as a cue to remind viewers of the station's functional difference, Ellerbee remarked, 'Kids can't vote but here at Nickelodeon, kids' opinions count!' Another young girl told Ford that she wanted to be President. After asking her age, he assured her: 'By the time you're thirty-five, there will have already been a woman President in this country.' Thus even a direct question about gender was translated back into generational terms. Issues of race and class were simply never mentioned.

What I find fascinating about this show is not only that the generational discourse displaces all other issues but also that it is marked by the same contradictions I have been exploring throughout this essay. While the structure of the show works toward conflation (demonstrating that children are just as interested in the political process as adults and therefore their votes should be counted), the specific comments of the speakers, especially those of an old patriarch like President Ford, reaffirm and even exaggerate the traditional boundaries between generations.

I do not mean to imply that generational issues are trivial. Rather, in this essay I have argued that *when used as a site of displacement*, this emphasis on generational conflict in popular culture can have at least three unfortunate social effects that are closely interrelated. First, it leads to a marketing

Former President Gerald Ford (right) and Linda Ellerbee (left) on Nickelodeon Special Edition: Who Wants to be Present? *Photo courtesy of Nickelodeon.*



strategy that masquerades as a moral or political issue. Second, it suggests that generational conflict is our most crucial social problem, one that lies at the core of, and therefore has priority over, other disturbing concerns (such as crime, drugs, the dysfunctional family, and the national deficit) whose economic and political complexities are far more difficult to address. Third, it distracts our attention away from other important conflicts of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation and thereby justifies the continued exclusive focus on the white middle-class patriarchal family with heterosexual tastes. It is this family that is currently being reproduced not only in movies like *Home Alone* and on television stations like Nickelodeon, but also in presidential politics.

NOTES

1. Marsha Kinder, 'Back to the Future in the 80s with Fathers & Sons, Supermen & PeeWees, Gorillas & Toons', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 42 no. 4, Summer 1989, pp. 2–11.
2. I first heard the term 'fiscal child abuse' on *Adam Smith's Journal*, which was broadcast on KCET, the PBS station in Los Angeles, on 1 November 1992.
3. John Hartley, 'Invisible Fictions: Television, Audiences, Paedocracy, Pleasure', in Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson (eds.), *Television Studies: Textual Analysis*, (New York: Praeger, 1989), pp. 223–43.
4. Ron Taffel, 'How to Protect Your Kids from Madonna', *McCall's*, January 1993, p. 100.
5. *Daily Variety*, 12 April 1993, p. 10. Yet *Home Alone 2* was now second to Disney's *Aladdin* (which took in close to $197 million). An instant Disney classic based on an old oedipal tale, this new adaptation of *Aladdin* used the familiar voice of Robin Williams (another pop conflation of the precocious child and stunted adult who came fresh from his performance as Spielberg's Peter Pan) for the postmodernist genie, who was essential to the film's transgenerational appeal.
6. David J. Fox, 'Honey, They Shrunk the Movie Audience', *Los Angeles Times*, Calendar, 8 June 1993, section F, p. 1.
7. For an analysis of the successful supersystem constructed around Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, see chapter 4 of my book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991).
8. A recent *TV Guide* cover story called 'Arnold, My Hero' (in the journal's special 'Summer Parents' Guide to Children's Entertainment') praised Schwarzenegger, along with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and X-men, as wonderful role models for children because they use their muscle and mutant powers 'to fight for healthy causes'. The article touted Schwarzenegger's film, *Last Action Hero*, for showing that 'the violence in action movies belongs on the screen and not on the playground.' While admitting that Arnold's R-rated films like *Terminator, Predator* and *Total Recall* are 'not exactly kiddie fare', the article claims that 'much of the school-age population managed to see them anyway.' But we are told not to worry, for: 'Amazingly, what kids copied wasn't the violence, but the cartoonish quips: "Hasta la vista, baby" and "I'll be back!" Maybe that's Arnold's secret: He's the cross between a superhero and Garfield the cat.' Janice Kaplan, 'Arnold, My Hero', *TV Guide*, Summer 1993, p. 13. It's difficult to imagine parents being reassured by this article, particularly since no sources are cited other than Arnold himself.
9. This displacement of race and class on to the generational discourse is even

stronger in Universal's successful *Home Alone* spin-off, *Cop and a Half*, which opened in April 1993 and took in over six million in its first weekend (making it the top grossing film of the week, ahead of Disney's *Adventures of Huck Finn*, which opened the same weekend). The protagonist is a cute, eight-year-old African-American latch-key kid who is obsessed with being a cop. He has mastered the profession by watching television, especially the black and white cop team on *Miami Vice*. Thus, when the boy trades evidence about a dope ring for a place on the force, he chooses as his partner and surrogate father not the nice black officer but the more aggressive white cop played by Burt Reynolds. Conveniently for the film-makers, the kid lives with his grandmother, a strong, loving, desexualised nurse who raises no romantic complications with Reynolds. Avoiding these troubling racial dynamics, the film focuses instead on the generational conflict, which prevails both in the representation of the comical villain (a bumbling narcissist who loves to sing corny pop songs from the 1950s) and in the schoolyard scene that evokes the loudest cheers from young spectators. In this action sequence a group of racially mixed first and second graders of both genders not only beats up adult dope dealers but also gets revenge against the school's upper grade white bullies.

10. We can find a similar acceleration of violence in the 1993 movie version of *Dennis the Menace*, particularly in contrast to the live-action television series (which is now in syndication on Nickelodeon) as well as the animated series and the comic strip. Produced by John Hughes (who was also the producer of the *Home Alone* movies), this film seems designed to test the marketability of the generational war *without* the star power of Macaulay Culkin.
11. David Wright and Reginald Fitz, 'Real-Life "Home Alone" Kids Tell Their Own Story', *National Enquirer*, 19 January 1993, p. 8.
12. *Globe*, vol. 40 no. 21, 25 May 1993, pp. 6–7.
13. Gordon Monson, 'Who's Old Enough to Stay Home All Alone?', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 January 1993, section E, p. 1.
14. Brad Edmondson, 'Grown-Ups Just Want to Be Kids', *American Demographics*, vol. 9 no. 5, May 1987, p. 22.
15. Quoted in 'Grown-Ups Just Want to Be Kids', p. 22. According to this same article, in 1987 39 per cent of Nick's nighttime audience was in the 25–34 age bracket, 13 per cent between 12 and 24, 22 per cent between 35 and 49, and 26 per cent 50 or older. Moreover, 79 per cent of these adult viewers were homeowners, with 73 per cent making more than $20,000 per year.
16. For a discussion of this change in scheduling strategy, see Rich Brown, 'Saturday Night's All Right for Nickelodeon', *Broadcasting*, vol. 122 no. 21, 18 May 1992, p. 25. At the time of writing the 'Snick' line-up includes: *Clarissa Explains It All* (a female *Wonder Years*), *Round House* (a teenage version of *Saturday Night Live* or *In Living Color*), *Ren and Stimpy* (the most successful of their new Nicktoons), and *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* (a teenage version of *Tales from the Crypt* or *The Twilight Zone*).
17. For an elaboration of this issue, see my essay 'Music Video and the Spectator: Television, Ideology, and Dreams', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 38 no. 1, Fall 1984, pp. 2–15.
18. S. K. List, 'The Right Place to Find Children', *American Demographics*, vol. 14 no. 2, February 1992, pp. 46–7.
19. Ibid., p. 44.
20. For a discussion of the use of magazines to reach the children's market, see 'The Right Place to Find Children'. The most elaborate magazine-television marketing combination may have been developed by the Fox Broadcasting Company. According to Daniel Cerone, 'The Fox Children's Network, the umbrella organization under which all of Fox's children's programming falls,

runs a Fox Kids Club, which it says has swollen to in excess of 5 million card-carrying members. With Fox acting as a national "headquarters", spending $1.2 million a quarter to publish and mail fan magazines packed with Fox children's programming tidbits, Fox affiliate stations serve as local "chapters", holding community activities, meetings, and contests for the young viewers.' '*X-Men* vs. the Gang of Three: Animated Series Has Helped Fox Challenge the Other Networks on Saturday Mornings', *Los Angeles Times*, 20 February 1993, Calendar Section, section F, p. 1.

21. Ibid., p. 6.
22. Ibid., p. 6.
23. Quoted in ibid.
24. This transgenerational strategy is central to the popular success of network series like *Doogie Hauser, M.D.* (where a precocious doctor gives a unique adolescent perspective on a mature profession) and *The Wonder Years* (where a literary voice-over provides sustained adult commentary on adolescence).
25. As if in compensation for this promiscuous address, print ads tend to target a specific generation. For example, an ad in the *Los Angeles TV Times* emphasised the time slot as much as the show: 'Hey kid, don't miss Nickelodeon's Sunday animation treat. Tune in for non-stop action and side-splitting laughs on the *REN & STIMPY SHOW* each Sunday morning on Nickelodeon. *SUNDAYS AT 11AM.*' *Los Angeles TV Times*, 10–16 January 1993, p. 17.
26. While the *Ren and Stimpy* series consistently parodies consumerism (particularly in the hilarious commercials for logs), recent episodes have also mocked the inability of empowered adults to perceive differences between generations and species despite their claims to superior judgment. For example, in 'The Big Baby Scam' a hungry Ren and Stimpy pay off two nasty Baby Herman types so that they can take over their roles as infant twin brothers in a comfortable human household where, except for the praise won by Stimpy's prolific scatological production, their functional differences fail to be noticed by the doting mother or macho father, even in a three-generational family bath.
27. Linda Ellerbee is currently being celebrated in the popular press as the courageous TV personality who overcame a bad bout with alcoholism (at the Betty Ford Clinic) and a double mastectomy for breast cancer. She made her dramatic comeback via *Nick News* (which is produced by her small independent company, Lucky Duck Productions), particularly with a special called 'Conversation with Magic'. In a format similar to the one used with President Ford, she and a group of kids discussed the HIV virus with the basketball star, Magic Johnson. Not only did this show win the prestigious Cable ACE Award for the best News Special or Series, but it was taped only four days after Ellerbee had left hospital following her surgery. As she put it, 'A year ago, Nickelodeon didn't even have a news show, and now we beat out CNN for the big prize. And isn't it neat I'm still here to accept it?' Quoted by Claudia Dreifus, '. . . And I Lived!' *TV Guide*, 22 May 1993, p. 12.