

Imitations of Immortality

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Mom and Dad don't have to get it," a Chuck E. Cheese commercial preaches. "They just have to get you there." In one phrase, a frenetic pizza parlor is elevated to an esoteric, kids-only experience, and parents are relegated to being mere facilitators. And what in fact do parents do? Many merely facilitate. Indeed, many of us are grateful when it is still possible to impress our children for the price of pizza, a few video games, a Beanie Baby, or a pack of Pokemon cards—whether we like and understand them or not.

In her book *The Nurture Assumption*, Judith Harris argues that culture is transmitted, not from parent to child, but from peer group to child.¹ I am certainly willing to concede that this is true in the case of popular culture, having, after all, stood fast for my own right to "Be Here Now!" years ago. But the language of popular culture—bare midriffs or bell bottoms, rap or acid rock—is not the only language that our children need to learn. Dovetailing the transient with more enduring truths is also worthy of a conversation, and it is one that children need parents and educators to lead.

When our children were little, they were fluent in these deeper languages. On long car trips they would grill us about everything from the mechanics of traffic circles to philosophical concerns, listening with shocking patience to even

the most long-winded answers. Those conversations were not sparked by a pressing interest in turnpikes, but by the eagerness for any information to decipher the mysteries of adult decision making and behavior. They luxuriated in the experience of having adults be thoroughly willing to clue them in.

I also luxuriated in this storytelling, for it was my invitation to help them take stacks of data and weave it into meaning. It forced me to clarify and articulate my own perspective, not just on lane-changing technique, but also on broad ideas about how a meaningful life is led, what human connection entails, and what is significant and beautiful and right. Yet as Kay Hymowitz illustrates, I am not the only one who has noticed my children's quest for insight and who hopes to be turned to as a major truth-teller. I face fierce competition from sophisticated storytellers whose very existence depends on their ability to coach my children on how to act, what to wear, how much to weigh, what to find sexually attractive, and what to value.

Our culture's most vivid and ubiquitous stories are not told by great writers or people and institutions that care about our children. They are told by entertainers and corporations that want to sell them something, and they are designed to cultivate and motivate them as consumers, period. To do so, television shows flatter young children by giving

them roles alongside the teenaged stars, and they attempt to solidify what is no doubt hoped will be their life-long relationship with Disney and other media megacorporations. Advertisers following the advice found in *Creating Ever-cool: A Marketer's Guide to a Kid's Heart* use their knowledge of children's emotions to "create brands that touch children's hearts, thus satisfying the eternal needs held within."² To children, all this thrilling possibility can represent entrée to an abundant universe limited only by the stinginess of their unhip parents, whom they are encouraged to dismiss as irrelevant (unless transportation is required). In reality, that dismissal is an important part of their training as consumers and a giant step toward reducing them to that consumer role alone.

Parents who are brave enough to control the pursestrings in this environment may feel a sense of security in knowing that they can help or force their children to resist certain products. However, although it may be possible to deny specific purchases and television shows, it is virtually impossible to block the messages that they carry. The popular culture's reverence for style, celebrity, and gear is, in the words of Stuart Ewen, part of the "ether."³ It is present in stereotyped personalities offered as role models by television and movies, child rock stars promoted by the Disney and Fox channels, teen magazines that arrive

with their monthly reminders for girls to fret over beauty flaws and boys. It dominates every conversation at the mall.

Jean Kilbourne says that this immersion in media has led to an “impoverishment of the imagination”⁴ in young women, and she notes that a large proportion of them list losing weight when asked to enumerate their greatest hopes in life. Younger imaginations are even more vulnerable. Constantly encouraged to scan the airways and their peer groups for information about what’s hip and important, children are alienated from their own internal compass, their own sense of creativity and judgment. Not only are their choices of gear limited to whatever is deemed cool for the moment, but their choices of “ways to be” in the world are limited to the superficial, stereotyped, commercial images that are provided by the media.

All media oversimplifies—there is no room in any of it for the revelation of a thoughtful inner life. Thus, ads present a succession of images, perfect moments that make normal lives lackluster by comparison. We cannot know of the model’s interest in the classics, music, or art, or what kind of friend she is. We know only how her body looks and what she wears. If that image is linked to a product, it proffers a sale and reinforces the idea that consumption instantly solves problems. Lost to consideration is the fact that what the model does between poses has more bearing on her happiness than what she has or how she looks.

Commercial media teaches our children to settle for the pose. It offers images of success out of the context of work, beauty out of the context of personality, sex out of the context of relationship, and in the case of teenybopper rock videos, even sexiness out of the context of sex. It promotes a blasé, self-absorbed kind of “cool” that “elevates personal taste into a complete ethos in which you are what you like, and what you therefore buy . . . without requiring any tiresome study or practice.”⁵ It equates consumption with creativity, action, resourcefulness, and worth. It presents a world where making the correct purchase choices is the most existentially meaningful act there is—and where striking the right pose will instantly convey that you are whatever grandiose self you want to be.

Rilke advised his young poet that “everything is gestation . . . patience is everything.”⁶ Indeed, creativity and life itself are all process and context, and they usually do require practice, boredom, and plain old slogging-through. The effective tools for that task are passion and investment, not disengaged “cool.” Our challenge as parents and educators is to lead children beyond the shallow poses sold by the media to the processes of a truly engaged life. It is, after all, the capacity to think deeply and independently that will lead to true accomplishment and the clearest expression of who they really are.

One way to accomplish this is to put the media and the values of consumption back into perspective for children, not by attempting to police access, but by resigning from our chauffeur assignment and reclaiming our role as the most truthful storytellers, the most reliable sources of information about the big picture. Recently, I was asked to design a program helping my daughter’s friends earn the Junior Girl Scout self-esteem badge. Because the well-documented plunge in adolescent girl self-esteem seems to me so unmistakably linked to the exacting demands of popular culture, I included work on the Girl Scout media patch in our workshop as well. As we analyzed teen magazines, ridiculed outrageous advertising claims, and imagined the teams of artists and technicians that were required to make each commercial pose look perfect, some girls understood for the first time that the market’s agenda is often at odds with their interests. One girl lit up the room with her revelation, saying, “Oh, I get it! If the magazines make me feel bad about myself, I’ll buy more stuff!” At the next meeting, empowered by newly critical eyes, the girls were bursting with derisive reports of ads that had struck them as absurd: “This orange juice is supposed to bring bliss!” “How can perfume make you free?”

In putting together our girls’ program,

I found wonderful academic writing on media influences, but not nearly enough material to help me translate those adult concepts into a curriculum that would speak to children. And although there seems to be a broad consensus that media literacy programs are helpful, there is little sign that a systematic approach is under way in American schools. Certainly, leadership in this regard will never be available on commercial newsstands. One positive sign is that the federal government finally took a policy role in this field last October when Secretary of Education Richard Riley and National Endowment for the Arts chairman Bill Ivey announced nearly \$1 million in grants to help school districts and arts-based organizations teach students how to examine and interpret media messages. Another is that organizations such as the Center for Media Literacy are making teaching resources available via catalogs and the Internet. That kind of attention ought to encourage parents, educators, and volunteer organizations—those who know children best and work with them the most—to focus their expertise on developing their own narratives that will help children grow beyond popular culture’s deceptive, pared-down world. Doing so will demonstrate that we are the ones who hold the most expansive vision of who they are.

Notes

1. Judith Rich Harris, *The Nurture Assumption* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

2. Gene Del Vecchio, *Creating Evercool: A Marketer’s Guide to a Kid’s Heart* (London: Pelican, 1998), 9.

3. Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 3.

4. Jean Kilbourne, *Slim Hopes* (videotape) (Media Education Foundation, 1995).

5. Dick Pountain and David Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 168.

6. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., revised edition 1954), 29.

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