

**Recognizable Ambiguity:
Cartoon Imagery and American Childhood in Animaniacs**

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In American society, there is assumed to be a natural fit between cartoons and children. The bright colors, odd characters, and strange narratives common to conventional animation seem ideal for kids whose attentions so often wander, and who seem equally at home in their imaginations as in everyday life. Still, there is nothing natural about this association. The enduring popularity of cartoons among adults in Japan, and the proliferation (and success) of prime time cartoon shows in the U.S. belie this simple equation. Yet cartoons continue to be produced “for” children -- and dismissed by critics and scholars because of it. Why? What is the complexity behind this seeming simplicity?

The visual flexibility of cartoon imagery provides a particular opportunity for those who create cartoons to explore expressive gaps between the visible world and the cultural categories set in language. Cartoons are not constrained by the requirements of realism (reflections of and on perception) or the linearity and structural rigor of linguistic formulations. In fact, the presumption is that the audience does not have sufficient knowledge of the world to even think realistically, nor enough mastery of language to see cultural categories as clean divisions within social life. This judgment makes it seem both unnecessary and perhaps unproductive to locate children's cartoons in a literal or real world. Between the possibilities of the medium and the definition of the audience, then, a space opens up for cartoons that allows unusual flexibility.

The problem with such flexibility within media, of course, is that uncharted innovation can easily become incomprehensible. Cartoons have the potential to be so surreal as to remove all reference points altogether. Some constraints are needed to produce socially shared systems of meanings. In live action drama, realism provides this framework; but if not realism, what do cartoons rely on? We want to argue that cartoon programs for children produce, depend on, and revel in a kind of “recognizable ambiguity.” Cartoons create shifting worlds in which space and time become so distorted that realism drops away as a meaningful referent, but at the same time partially stabilize the imagery by using familiar artistic conventions and reflexive forms, making the

imagery seem recognizable, if not entirely clear in its intended meanings. Objects transform in shape and significance (elephants fly or toys come alive); story-lines bring together characters or language from different times (a child goes into prehistory and finds an astronaut reciting Shakespeare).¹ Normal linguistic and narrative referents are undermined along with the realism, but the reminders of similar transgressions or transformations from past cartoons, and the expectation that cartoons will indeed contain jokes that the child can anticipate, help to place these images in a familiar context.² There develops a recognizability in cartoons that does not depend on their meanings (or forms) ever being truly stabilized.³

With this recognizable ambiguity, and the transgressive possibilities it offers, cartoons can address in a particularly complex and interesting way the difficulties of being a child. Children begin their lives as prelinguistic creatures who don't know how to recognize (or name) themselves, much less anything else in their environments. Still, they immediately encounter a world in which they are already meaningful social actors. Their crying means something to their parents long

¹ For the pleasure of these kinds of topsy-turvy in children's own expression, as well as the rhymes they love, see Kornei Chukovski, *From Two to Five*, Rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968)..

² For the transgressive qualities of early animation, see Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film, 1898-1928*, University of Chicago Press ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). And for the importance of transgression in popular culture for the sake of empowerment, see Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, 1st ed., *Texas Film Studies Series* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1995)..

³ For the importance of recognition in cognition, see Stuart K. Card, Jock D. Mackinlay, and Ben Shneiderman, *Readings in Information Visualization: Using Vision to Think, The Morgan Kaufmann Series in Interactive Technologies* (San Francisco, Calif.: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 1999).., particularly the introduction, which discusses what kinds of cognitive problems visualization systems can address.

before it means the same thing to them. They must learn their place as children within their culture; they must learn what their behavior mean to others when they do things; only then can they have the intentionality to become social subjects.⁵

How do children manage this complex assignment? The simplest answer is that Western societies construct social spaces for children, particularly adapted to their “natures,” in which children can learn what they are “naturally” supposed to be like. They encounter there the results of a long-standing tradition of Western age-grading in which children have become (and have been for centuries) defined as first-and-foremost naturally unlike adults. In systematically-engineered places and periods of social isolation (with other kids) in playgrounds, craft centers, sports leagues, and school rooms, they learn this fundamental distinction between themselves and their elders. They learn that they ought to be kept apart because they are naturally different. They also are confronted with their “natures” as playful, creative, physically active, and natural learners.⁶

⁵ See, for a good example, Michael Cole and Sheila Cole, *The Development of Children* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1989).; See Nicolopolou on children learning to fit their behavior (in this case, story-telling) to social categories; Ageliki Nicolopolou, "Worldmaking and Identity Formation in Children's Narrative Play-Acting," in *Sociogenetic Perspectives on Internatlization*, ed. Brian Cox and Cynthia Lightfoot (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997).

⁶ Iona Archibald Opie and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford Oxfordshire ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).; Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982).; Bennett M. Berger, *Looking for America; Essays on Youth, Suburbia, and Other American Obsessions* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971).; Gary Alan Fine, *With the Boys: Little League Baseball and Preadolescent Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).; Barrie Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993).; Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture, Rutgers Series in Communications, Media, and Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993).; Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja*

It is not that this lesson should be so hard to learn, since it seems just a matter of mapping cultural categories onto physical differences related to age -- children are like this, teenagers are like that, adults are like that. But in fact, the lesson is hard to assimilate because the world of childhood is far less coherent than we tend to assume. There are many definitions of children's natures -- at least in the United States -- that are often contradictory and have been accrued historically over quite different social periods.⁷ Children find they must learn to fit into a social category whose dimensions are historically layered, whose contradictions are intentionally (or at least effectively) blurred, and whose existence is regularly naturalized.

The recognizable ambiguity in cartoons provides a means for addressing the complexities of childhood because it can stabilize unclear categories, making them recognizable without requiring them to have a consistent meaning. Children can see in cartoons cultural themes that describe the child's nature, and how childhood works as a site of cultural conflict. The reflexivity within cartoons can be used to hold a mirror up against the contradictions of the culture, making a joke out of what could be seen as confusing or destructive to kids. Particularly those parts of children's cartoons that directly address what is culturally good for children can help make light of the fact that both what children are and what they need are contentious issues in contemporary America.

Turtles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).. See also Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). on the adult problem of learning parenting to fit with changing cultural conception of childhood.

⁷ For a discussion of this general problem, see Chandra Mukerji, "Monsters and Muppets: The History of Childhood and Techniques of Cultural Analysis," in *From Sociology to Cultural Studies : New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Long (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).; see also Nicholas Sammond's dissertation on the relationship between Disney's success and the development of modern social and psychological views of children. Nicholas Sammond, "The Uses of Childhood: The Making of Walt Disney and the Generic American Child 1930-1960" (dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 1999)..

In this essay, we will examine segments from Steven Spielberg's Animaniacs⁸ to see how they address some of the ambiguities in childhood that plague children, using laughter to reveal and lighten their burden. First, we will show how the program deconstructs definitions of children as natural beings, as the fundamental opposite of adults, as creatures with special needs. Then we will examine how this program re-enacts the long-standing tensions between the European Great Tradition and American popular culture, implicitly contrasting school-based education with socialization into American cultural life. Finally, we will consider how the program dissects the moral significance of childhood and the purity attributed to (and expected of) kids, which burdens children with a responsibility for morality in ways never shouldered by adults. By exploring these (and other) fraught issues, we hope to demonstrate how cartoons like Animaniacs provide children with surprisingly complex cultural tools for negotiating childhood: on the one hand, understanding and managing adult stakes in childhood, and, on the other hand, learning how to be children themselves (in spite of the confusion) and to find some satisfaction -- even humor -- in it.

Genealogical Analysis of Childhood

⁸ The Fox network first introduced Animaniacs, produced by Amblin Entertainment and Warner Brothers, into its Saturday morning line-up in 1993; in 1995, the program moved to Warner's new WB Network. During its five-year run, it was nominated for 16 Daytime Emmys and won 8. Reruns soon appeared on weekday afternoons on the WB, and later migrated to the Cartoon Network. Each episode was composed of several segments focused on an array of recurring characters. The most prominent were the Warners, who were often visibly marked as "the" Animaniacs; we will be using examples exclusively from their segments. Other segments included a group of mobster pigeons, a dog and a rambunctious little girl, and a giant chicken; the lessons drawn here, while not identical in the specifics, are applicable to the rest of the program -- and to much of children's television. For more information about the program, see <http://home.earthlink.net/~wbwolf/beginners.html> .

To unpack these themes in Animaniacs, we consider their sources in a cultural genealogy of American childhood. We take seriously the notion that cultures have genealogies; that while they undergo change over time, old forms may still be reproduced even as new ones are elaborated out of them, resulting in a culture which carries its history with it -- not in exact detail, but through identifiable (familial?) resemblances to earlier cultural constellations. The culture of childhood in the West has changed as adult preoccupations with children have shifted, resulting in new ideas about the nature of the child and the proper formation of childhood; but this does not mean that earlier notions of the child have died out. On the contrary, cultural conceptions of children build up in layers, new upon old, to form a kind of cultural laminate that seems singular but gains strength from its striate.

Genealogical threads between past and present find form in contemporary media not because producers necessarily know the history of childhood and want to tell and retell its story. When they think about what children will find funny, they generally remember their own childhoods, and think about jokes that made them laugh as kids. In this intuitive, psychologized search for the child viewer, adult media producers unwittingly reproduce and refashion the sociocultural dimensions of childhood, “improving” upon the past in ways that keep the lamination process of cultural accumulation active. With remnants of old views of the child finding new life in children's narratives, we can approach contemporary media for children -- not to determine their aesthetic importance, psychological fitness, or commercial value, but to trace out some relations between these persistent definitions of the child and consider how contemporary media make those definitions available as cultural resources.

In Western history, the changing adult interests in children have articulated childhood as a cultural category as a series of overlapping constellations of values and assumptions. Protestant reformers, worried about the vulnerability of children to sin while praising their Christlike qualities, helped to distinguish all children more clearly from adults by reference to their distinct moral

position.⁹ Enlightenment philosophers defined children as more “natural” than adults, arguing that they should receive an education that would allow them to explore the world through their senses, not just through books. By following their natural curiosity, they would be able to realize their natural virtue and use it to build a more utopian world.¹⁰ Moral reformers of the 19th century, still invested in the presumption of children's natural virtue, were horrified by child labor and the exposure of children to the dangers of urban streets during industrialization. They sought to protect children from adult corruption by more carefully delineating special spaces for children -- especially schools and playgrounds. They associated the goodness of children less with a moral nature and more in terms of their isolation from adult life -- particularly the economy.¹¹

⁹ See, for example, Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).. But compare to Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962). for the Catholic view of childhood in the same period. The differences in Christianity in this period had powerful consequences for children and childhood -- literacy was pressed in Protestant sects, but child's play was cultivated more in Catholic sites as a means of learning. Still, both emphasized the need for children to have an education that would actively constrain the wild impulses of children and make them ready to enter adult company without such a disrupting effect.

¹⁰ The most interesting views on this are in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).., where Plumb explains both the growth of ideas about child learning, the growth of classification as a cultural passion, and the growth of a commercial society in this period. In this sense, he captures more of the culture of the period as it weighed on childhood.

¹¹ Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).. This work was also connected to the politics of the material feminists who thought it was possible to build more utopian social worlds through

In the 20th century, social scientists translated Enlightenment views of children as natural learners into the psychology of child development, which focused on the acquisition of cognitive skills (inside child-friendly spaces). This work renaturalized children (and the distinction of kids from adults) but attributed slightly different natures to children of different ages.¹² This psychology of the child was partly paralleled and partly opposed by Freudian and post-Freudian accounts of the wild impulses in children -- a secular version of persistent Christian anxieties about child vulnerability. These different psychological traditions can coexist in the culture of childhood (although not always in Psychology departments) because childhood itself continues to be naturalized as an obvious time of life. The illusion of seamlessness is enhanced by the fact that all of these cultures of childhood emerged from their predecessors, without entirely supplanting them. As one part of the culture migrated in new directions, older parts survived in songs, stories, games, and the like -- practices that held the corners of the culture stable over time. So, as the culture of childhood developed, it was refashioned and maintained (at the same time), producing surprising contradictions in cultural definitions of what is natural or special about children.

The result is a culture that is hard to see because it has been naturalized in our own time, but nonetheless a culture that children must learn in order to negotiate a way through this part of their lives. It is a culture whose contradictions are surprising, yet are practically employed to manage day-to-day variations in children. A temper tantrum can be explained away as the inevitable monstrosity of the "terrible twos," while surprising intelligence can be the result of a child's natural curiosity. Parents and teachers can highlight one mode or another to represent any given child, or describe a the life of a child in naturalized terms that actually meander from one rationale to another.

design of places. See Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981)..

¹² Michael Cole and James V. Wertsch, "Beyond the Individual-Social Antinomy in Discussions of Piaget and Vygotsky," *Human Development* 39, no. 5 (1996).. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971)..

Adults rarely notice the seams that hold this odd heritage together because they take them for granted, but cartoons often tear them open for the laughter doing so produces. Images of the child, as they morph into animals here and robots there, raise questions about the very nature of childhood. Cartoons in their flexibility and sense of play both provide their viewers useful information about the mixed messages they receive from adults, and demonstrate ways to understand their lives, act in their worlds, and find pleasure in their confusion. Bringing a genealogical understanding of the history of childhood to media analysis helps reveal the historical depth of imagery that seems at first glance to be sterile and superficial. Held against older conceptions of childhood, many cartoons are revealed to be complex cultural artifacts, and lead us to entertain the unexpected possibility (nearly absent in the literature on children's television) that children in front of the TV are exposed not simply to vapid, exploitative nonsense, but to a culture of childhood with daunting historical and philosophical depth. What children look for (but adults would never assume to find there) are representations of what it means to be a child, and layers of childhood that can make better sense of the experiences they find disorienting.

Learning to be a Natural Child

Over the span of centuries, the child's fundamental nature, and the differences between children and adults, have been reworked in complex ways. Children are supposed to be defined by their nature -- something that makes them a group apart from their elders (whose acquire culture, bad habits, or affectations over time). By this definition, children have a simple task: to mature. But, of course, children do this in different ways in different cultures, since maturation is as much a cultural process as a physiological one. American adults are sure children in the U.S. are fundamentally natural, and will grow up well in a good environment, but they may not be clear what the nature of the child might be. Sporadic shocks to this belief system, like the shootings at Columbine, throw such presumptions into momentary distress; much of the cultural repair work that follow such events is precisely about recovering these beliefs by explaining away such

"aberrations". And children are in an even worse position, asked to reconcile such beliefs with their lived experience each and every day.

The evidentiary basis for treating children as a natural category seems straight-forward. Kids are small at birth and grow rapidly throughout childhood; they also begin with few skills and acquire them at a daunting rate as they mature. Children who do not fit the normal developmental profile, however, are a problem in the U.S. Those who refuse to learn naturally -- particularly ones who are disruptive because they do not act as they should -- are now diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and prescribed medication to help them recover their "natural" character. Those who seem prone to mischief are treated as unnatural (troubled), unless they fit the norms for "acting-out" and "testing limits" that are associated with each age.¹³

The combination of the firm assurance about children-as-natural and an absolute confusion as to how to get kids to fit that category makes the nature of children in America an area ripe for caricature, and one powerfully (and playfully) deployed in *Animaniacs*. At the very center of the show is an unresolved contradiction about the nature of the main characters, the Warners -- what are they? -- that reflects the similar ambiguity about what children are or are supposed to be. These creatures must be what their name implies: fundamentally animal (all natural vitality) but also wildly maniacal (unable to act naturally). The contradiction is exploited intentionally, utilizing the particular aesthetics of animation, to make it nearly impossible to classify and characterize them.

While many popular cartoons offer characters that are "not exactly" what they claim to be - Mickey not exactly a mouse, Bugs not exactly a bunny -- most are identified and identifiable as particular animals, an initial classification that is then troubled by the character's more human behavior. These creatures, representing children, locate them as natural beings, positioned somewhere between wild animals and real humans. But the Warners do not offer even that level of

¹³ Keeping children within such "natural" definitions requires intensive parenting, as Sharon Hays has documented, placing a huge burden on parents and children in this culture. Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*.

clarity. Their very species is left ambiguous -- purposefully, as we can see from a musical interlude called "What Are We?"

The sequence begins (significantly) in the office of a psychiatrist; Dr. Scratchnsniff, employed by the studio to keep the Warners in line, attempts to hypnotize the kids to make them less "zany" and more like "calm children." But the parlor trick fails (a deficit of attention, perhaps?), and the children happily bounce on his therapist's couch, assuring him that they are as normal as any other kid. Scratchnsniff, frustrated with their exuberance, insists they are "not normal," and demands that they tell him "what they are." The Warners, a glint in their animated eyes, "act naturally" and reply as performers (of their own nature) with a song that refuses to respond to the seemingly simple question. The song rhymes its way through various categorical possibilities -- dog, cat, horse, skunk, flea, electric eel -- and imagines the consequences. With each, the Warners visually morph into the animal they name; but before Scratchnsniff can respond, they have already leapt to another possibility. They turn the most fundamental of categorical assessments into a joke, eluding the kind of scientific certainty about their nature that American parents have relied on since the 1920s.¹⁴ The Warners become floating signifiers of seemingly endless ambiguity -- until the song ends with what seems to be an answer. Dot proclaims "Hey wait a minute, I've got it now" (like a scientist shouting "eureka!" at the moment of discovery). Scratchnsniff answers skeptically, "you do?" to which all three Warners sing in unison, "We're not bees and we're not cats, or bugs or horses or things like that, what we are is clear and absolute! What we are, dear doctor... is cute!" The doctor, crestfallen that youthful charm has displaced scientifically-verified character, can only respond, "I'm sorry I asked."¹⁵ By emphasizing another

¹⁴ See Sammond, "The Uses of Childhood: The Making of Walt Disney and the Generic American Child 1930-1960", particularly the first section of the dissertation on scientific child rearing.

¹⁵ In online discussions about the show, the regular participants put a moratorium on the question of what the Warners are -- because the question had been debated endlessly without any means of resolution, and perhaps in deference to the show's refusal to answer the question itself. The theory proposed at the end of that discussion suggested that the ambiguity of the Warner characters is a

aspect of the culture of childhood, their youth and innocence, they send the psychologist, who wants to tame their wild nature, headfirst through a brick wall.

The Warners pose both a challenge and an opportunity. Using the flexibility of animation, which frees them from real-world referents and their corresponding cultural baggage, they pose the question to children about their nature. In Animaniacs, identity is up for grabs, and that categorical ambiguity is crucial to the pleasure of the text. The Warners offer child-viewers the fleeting opportunity to experience life outside the categorical control of adults who use “what they are” as means of controlling them.

sly parody of the “inkblot” style of early American animation: solid black figures like Mickey Mouse, Oswald the Rabbit, and Fritz the Cat, who needed their names to mark their species because visually they were nearly indistinguishable. Many programs aimed at children have provided archetypal characters as vehicles for their young audiences, most commonly by designing a motley array of personas, like the Muppets or the Simpsons, to provide a typology of possible entries into notions of childhood. See Mukerji, "Monsters and Muppets: The History of Childhood and Techniques of Cultural Analysis,". Instead, the Warners exploit the ambiguity made possible by animation to elide all categories. What begins as a joke on their animated ancestors results in a kind of purification of the animal-child archetype; left with few distinguishing markers of type, they are only children, or only animal-children amalgams. Also, their gender is indicated, even emphasized, in their recurring introduction as “the Warner brothers and the Warner sister” and in the way the two boys regularly salivate over Dr. Scratchsniff’s curvaceous assistant. (The girl is emphatic about marking her gender, in a way that acknowledges an imbalance -- perhaps in the world of animation itself -- even as she attempts to correct it.) But beyond this, their “nature” is left ambiguous. This ambiguity offers an important space for children to experience these characters, and through them to experience childhood -- a time when they are feeling quite ambiguous about their own “nature,” unsure perhaps of what they are, and faced with often contradictory social definitions of what they are and should aspire to be.

This experience might be disorienting except that the Warners stand clearly in a legacy of animated characters that traditionally escape the control of their creators. Well before Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck wandered off the drafting table, Koko the Clown slid down the drawing board to show his creator, Max Fleischer, how to be a better artist. The celebration of characters who exceed control of the authority figures that produced them is a tradition animation has explored for its entire life as a cultural form. Knowing that the Warners resemble Mickey Mouse or Fritz the Cat, in appearance and attitude, does not solve the problem of their nature, but it does provide some benchmarks for recognizing them as tricksters on the drawing board. Leaving real categories behind through animation, the program replaces the lost referents with a world of drawings that defy laws of both nature and culture -- but do so with relative consistency. The representational ambiguity in children's cartoons, including Animaniacs, opens up space to explore the conflicted meanings of American childhood; the legacy of animation holds the enterprise together.

Children are not only required to be natural, but also to be the opposite of adults. This categorical boundary is fiercely patrolled, and reproduced with such vigor that the transition to adulthood is deeply disorienting for most teenagers. This cultural dichotomy is troubled not only by the dynamic quality of childhood when seen as a series of developmental stages (making it hard to counterpose a generic kid with a generic adult), but also by the contradictory purposes of the dichotomy itself. Do grown-ups need to be protected from children (to get peace and quiet or a serious workplace), or do kids need a safe world of their own separated from the corrupting influence of adults? Do kids need their own rooms, schools, toys, and play areas in order to bring out their natural virtue, or do they need to be isolated and protected because of their vulnerability to dark forces? American middle class children are sent to “their rooms” both as a form of punishment and to put them in an environment in which they can naturally grow.

Take, for example, the boundary between childhood and the “adult” world of consumption, a boundary American children are both urged to heed and invited to cross. Even though economic exploitation and corruption were presented as threats to childhood innocence in the 19th century, educational consumer goods for children have been part of the world of childhood since the 18th

century. In fact, J. H. Plumb has argued that Enlightenment views of childhood actually depended on the growth of a consumer society. Children could have special needs and qualities only when there were consumer goods to supply them; their consumption of material goods became markers of the cultural capital of their parents. Still, concerns about commercial corruption and industrial pressures have been a central part of 20th-century efforts to keep children and adults apart. No wonder, then, the role of commercial relations in defining childhood is explored in *Animaniacs*. In fact, it extends the fundamental ambiguity of the Warners as characters.¹⁶

The first episode of *Animaniacs* begins with a 1930's style black-and-white (but animated) newsreel that provides an origin story for the Warners;¹⁷ in a classic “inside Hollywood” glimpse behind-the-scenes, the newsreel tells of the moment when animators, working in “Termite

¹⁶ McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England.*; Tom Engelhardt, "Children's Television," in *Watching Television: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).; Ellen Wartella, "Electronic Childhood," *Media Studies Journal* 4 (1994).; Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture.* For evidence of the on-going importance of labor to the lives of children -- even at school -- see Paul E. Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Morningside ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).. Particularly for working class children, the separate world of childhood can seem like a trap and lie more than a good description of their lives. See, for an historical perspective on this, William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).; and for the "adult corruption in the separate worlds of young people," see Jack Katz, *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).; Jay MacLeod, *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995)..

¹⁷ This “newsreel” was then incorporated into many subsequent episodes as part of the program's introduction.

Terrace”¹⁸ on the Warner studio lot, first came up with the Warner characters. According to this sequence, the Warners were first drawn back in these early days of animation, but were deemed “too zany” (childlike?) for the times; in the newsreel, the Warners begin as sketches on a drawing board but quickly leap off the paper into sudden three-dimensionality, bouncing around the room and out the door.¹⁹ An authoritative voice-over reports that their nonsensical films were locked away in a vault, and the characters themselves were imprisoned in the watertower on the Warner Brothers studio lot. The studio has since disavowed any knowledge of their existence, until the present day, when the characters escaped their confines. Most Animaniacs episodes begin with the Warners

¹⁸ For those unfamiliar with the history of the animation industry, “Termite Terrace” was the nickname of the run-down shack on the Warner Brothers lot where most of the famous animated shorts of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, etc., were drawn. The name referred to the dilapidated quality of the building, and by extension the minimal interest the studio invested in animation at the time.

¹⁹ Interaction between animator and his creation is also a convention drawn from the traditions of early animation. Donald Crafton describes how the earliest animators would include themselves, literally or representationally, within the diegesis of the cartoon narrative -- Windsor McCay directing Gertie the Dinosaur to dance, Koko the Clown coming alive from the tip of Max Fleischer's pen. Crafton argues that the new aesthetic form was so striking and inexplicable that its “magic” needed to be secured by the visible presence of the animator. Crafton also notes that in most cases, the plot of these early cartoons has the animated character escaping control of the animator, a metaphor for animation itself, which always exceeds the cultural categories it represents. This convention has diminished over the course of the century, though the remnants can still be found (a famous example is “Duck Amuck,” where Daffy is being pestered by the brush of a mischievous animator, who turns out to be Bugs Bunny at an animator's table). The fact that the Animaniacs use a similar convention, but represent the studio as the progenitor of the cartoon characters, is telling -- another homage to the traditions of early animation, and a further indication that the Warners exceed control in the very way that the medium of animation itself does. Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film, 1898-1928*.

escaping from the tower and eluding a studio security guard, yet another adult figure bent on containing them but unable to do so.

Figure One: the animated "birth" of the Warner characters

According to this sequence, these children are not born of parental characters within the narrative, but are “produced” by the animators themselves, who stand in as surrogate parents.²⁰ And the sequence does not shy away from acknowledging that this artistic conception is deeply embedded in a corporate context and industrial process. The studio is in some sense their parent, as their very names suggest. This blurring of corporation and family is extended and complicated by the recurring character of the studio boss, Thaddeus Plotz, who regularly provides a comic foil to the Warners. Plotz seems to believe that he has some authority over the Warners, but is in fact both enraged by and terrified of the children and their excessive play. The characters, who are products of the studio but cannot be contained by it, provide an analogy to the idea of children: produced both by family (literally) and by the culture (symbolically), yet in the end uncontainable by either.

The complexity of this origin story is further extended in the Animaniacs theme song: “We’re animaniacs... we have pay-or-play contracts...” A dispute among fans centered on whether the words were pay-or-play or pay-for-play (it is somewhat difficult to make them out amidst the

²⁰ In the online discussions surrounding the show, animator / producer Tom Ruegger is commonly referred to as the creator of the Animaniacs, in classic auteur style. The patrilineage here is interestingly complex, as Ruegger has acknowledged in interviews that the Warner characters are loosely based on his own children (his youngest boy has even expressed disappointment at being transformed into a girl in the representation). So, in a sense the Warners are the children of an animator / father / employee of Warner Brothers studio; the representation of (actual) children is not just brought to us by the corporate animation industry, but intertwined into it from the very start.

orchestral cacophony).²¹ In fact, the Warners are “players” in two senses -- both as children and as performers / media celebrities. The ambiguity of their position as both excluded from the adult world and as necessary to the commercial relations therein actually points to some of the complexity of a child viewer's position in American culture. Paying or playing, or paying for playing, are actually meaningful differences in American childhood, and point to different layers of social relations between adults and children. In this moment of the cartoon, two notions of the child are represented simultaneously, ambiguously -- not as contradictions but as co-constituents of childhood.

Animaniacs allows children to work through the way consumer culture has complicated the relationship between children and adults. Industrial capitalism has for centuries included children as part of the commercial world -- if not always a source of cheap and docile labor, at least a distinct consumer group. Changes in notions of labor, which have largely removed children from the workforce of the Western world and redefined them as valuable assets,²² have not so much made childhood less commercial as they have confined children to a distinct social world of consumption. Children are urged to pay to play (buy toys, take classes, join sports leagues), and play for pay (get an allowance for being well-behaved or sell baked goods to fill their school's coffers); yet they have little or no power over the commercial world they encounter. When children are marketed to (as in the toy and breakfast cereal ads that accompany Animaniacs), they recognize their powerful position

²¹ This lyric in particular provoked significant debate in online discussions. The debate seemed -- on the surface at least -- simply a matter of fact; indeed, it was settled by participants familiar with the history of Hollywood (and thus the existence of a “pay-or-play” contract), and others who contacted producers of the show for confirmation. The vibrant debate could be dismissed merely as evidence of the meticulous nature of fans, but the dispute settled on a particularly complex and culturally-telling phrase that highlights the contradictory status constructed for the Warners as commercial entities.

²² For a thorough consideration of this process, see Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children..*

within the discourse of consumption; but this discourse regularly collides with competing cultural interests seeking to shelter childhood innocence from the contamination of commercialization. Children experience this conflict whenever they are addressed by adults: parents that distrust the commercial desires of their kids because they do not acknowledge their own, teachers who struggle to exclude commercial products and narratives from the intellectual world of the classroom, television that relies fundamentally on commerce even as it celebrates its attempts at educational content. Most representations of childhood assume a separation between these worlds that is rarely achieved in the lived experience of children. The Warners live out this contradiction when they, although valuable stars at the studio, find themselves continually chased and contained by the executives and guards of the corporation that carries their name.

Children enter a social world where these and other definitions of childhood are all made available, rarely explicitly, and never sorted out. The Warner characters dissect and confront the complexity of this world for children, allowing child viewers an opportunity to explore the implications of these different yet competing paradigms of childhood. The zaniness of the animation captures and satirizes the dislocating quality of this world, representing childhood as both relatively recognizable and explicitly ambiguous; rather than a coercive tool of socialization, animation helps here to generate a narrative vehicle suitable for children to navigate the uncharted waters of their own childhoods. In the sequences already discussed, Animaniacs confronts and playfully inverts the efforts adult society makes to classify, contain, and isolate children into a separate world of their own. The production of adult knowledge about children, be it parental, scientific, or corporate, cannot fully contain the meaning of childhood. The program is premised on the escape of these wild, uncontainable figures from that carefully designed world of childhood, invading the adult world and overturning, deflating, and revealing its expectations.

Cultural Identity and American Childhood

Children must learn not only how to act naturally as kids, but must also come to terms with a complex cultural field as part of being a child. Childhood is meant to be a time for learning, a period of socialization, a time when natural learners confront a confusing mass of symbol systems employed in quite subtle ways. The difficulty of this task provides plenty of fuel for cartoon humor and visual reversals in cartoon imagery. Children's cartoons often have a particularly important relation to the learning process; many kids who spend most of their days in school come home to watch television as relief from it. They are quite prepared to laugh at what they have just finished experiencing, and to gain some perspective on what it means for children to learn.

The segment of Animaniacs called “Hooked on a Ceiling” provides a fine opportunity for some of this work. It is structured at first to look like an educational film strip. Over a map of Italy, a patronizing John Houseman look-alike describes the Italian Renaissance as a period of unprecedented achievement in art. We pan across a wall of paintings by various Renaissance artists, as Mussorgsky's “Pictures at an Exhibition” plays in the background; the narrator intones the great artists of the period, “Leonardo, Michelangelo...” But suddenly the Ninja Turtles (all of whom were named after Renaissance artists) pop up onto the screen. The narrator reacts in horror, then banishes them from the screen, saying it is time to recuperate the real Renaissance artists from an obscurity rendered by popular culture.

The educational film mode is revived as a static building calms the visual field, followed by the words: Rome 1512 AD (is it a history lesson, documentary, Hollywood epic, or all three?). The Mussorgsky begins again, and the narrator-teacher introduces the Sistine Chapel, its famous ceiling, and the great artist himself, Michelangelo. This sequence quickly locates “Hooked on a Ceiling” as a reexamination of the lessons that children face at school, and an opportunity to take pleasure in the struggles for cultural primacy between classical art and popular culture, education and entertainment, past and present. For all the children who have been reprimanded for being hooked on TV, the thought of being hooked on high culture, on the Sistine Chapel and its famous ceiling, is a tantalizingly subversive treat. Why are some cultural forms better than others, anyhow? How are

they supposed to recognize the differences? And how are they supposed to use Renaissance art rather than cartoon narratives and characters to address their lives-as-children?

The narrator introduces Michelangelo as a genius, but he is depicted as a kind of small-brained, big-jawed, muscle-bound he-man in a toga, acting like a loud-mouthed lout. No sensitive artist, he is certainly temperamental enough, firing his assistants for being “incompetent fools.” As he implores his muse for assistance, the Warners magically arrive, politely introducing themselves as though they were innocent sources of useful labor, not trouble-making kids. Michelangelo seems a testy but rather ordinary man with a deadline for getting the Sistine Chapel ready for a visit from the Pope. He may be the greatest artist of the Renaissance, but he is playing for pay too, and what he needs now is help. We know (and presumably he does too) that young children are themselves supposed to be natural geniuses, whose fundamentally creative impulses only need a little helpful guidance to come out. According to these cultural assumptions, his problem should be solved, so he lets them get to work. By cartoon conventions, however, children are wild cards; they can do anything, and he is in for trouble.

The particular nature of that trouble is interesting for understanding the complexity of the problem of cultural learning faced by American kids. This segment pits schoolbook learning and the European Great Tradition -- Michelangelo, the Italian Renaissance, the Sistine Chapel, and the Pope -- against the pleasures and excesses of American mass media. The Warners bring with them all the power and pollution of American popular culture to make up for the weakness of Michelangelo's work. He is too tormented to paint; he can't find good help; he runs out of ideas; and he can't meet deadlines. He is frozen, but they are all action. They are children; he is adult. He is the past; they are the present. Using a tune reminiscent of auto-painting advertisements run on late-night television, they sing, “To renovate your ceiling, come to us!” and offer their price: \$29.95. To the Warners, it is just a ceiling to paint, something to do, not a crisis of man or culture. As if this “discounting” of Renaissance artwork were not disrespectful enough, their song cuts to a nightclub shot in which Dot sings “Ceilings” to the tune of the popular hit song of the 1970's, “Feelings.” For sentimentality, popular culture has its forms too.

The he-man artist summons up all the cultural authority of the Great Tradition to holler pompously back that he is the great Michelangelo and this is the Sistine Chapel. But it has little effect. They are kids, and he is just another adult yelling at them. Michelangelo finds himself shuttled out of the building, locked out. When he knocks, a Warner dressed in a green guard's uniform pops his head through the door, telling him (in a quote from the Wizard of Oz) that no one gets to see the Wizard. American popular culture is too powerfully flexible, particularly in the hands of children, to overcome. Back in the Chapel, Michelangelo finds the ceiling painted completely white: the Warners lament that they had “a heck of a time covering up the naked people.” The artist howls that the ceiling was supposed to have pictures, so they are off again, energy incarnate, this time painting the ceiling with the most crass icons of American popular culture: dogs playing poker, Keene-type children with huge wide eyes, and a Vegas-style portrait of Elvis.

“Hooked on a Ceiling” ends as the Warners restore most of Michelangelo's masterpiece, but not before they have also revealed some common threads of hypocrisy behind both popular and elite culture -- adult hypocrisies about teaching culture and protecting children. Dot reprimands the artist for painting nudes on his ceiling -- in church and in front of kids -- suggesting obliquely the hypocrisy of censoring contemporary representations of sexuality while celebrating classical ones. Then the kids use paint-by-number outlines to restore the masterpiece, showing how degraded artistry has become for contemporary kids caught in the maze of consumer goods available to them. But these issues are not dwelt upon; more important narrative ones are at stake. The center of the ceiling is still empty, and the "His Eminence" is due to arrive. The kids reassuringly tell Michelangelo to “go say hi” while they “finish up,” and the great Renaissance artist grovels before his patron, turning his back on his own painting to do so. He has reason to regret the decision. When he looks up to the ceiling again, the Warners have filled the center not with the picture of God's hand outstretched to man, but ET's glowing finger stretched out to touch his young friend. Michelangelo is once again furious, but “his Eminence” likes the work. The Pope turns out to be none other than Spielberg himself, who says to Michelangelo and the audience, “Painting is like show business; you have to know your audience.”

The tensions between the European Great Tradition and American popular culture have collided, and become an opportunity to laugh at adult corruption and to marvel at the child's willingness to tolerate and embrace ambiguity. But it is more than that. It locates American children in a cultural dilemma, where they must manage to be both children and American. They must learn the Great Tradition in school, and absorb its values, but they cannot hold it as their primary sensibility. For Americans, the Great Tradition has always been partially suspect, a remnant of colonialism and a cultural game that Americans could only lose. Popular culture, on the other hand, has been a great success both in the US and as an exported representation of what is distinctively American. Kids learning to belong to the world of the American child, then, are presented with an odd way of respecting and disrespecting both the Great Tradition and the US little tradition of mass culture. The Great Tradition is better, but not relevant. Mass culture is degrading, but vibrantly alive and distinctively American.²³ This is not a lesson that most adults want to articulate, particularly since they often have interests in modifying it for their own purposes -- depending on whether they are acting as parents, teachers, advertisers, or TV producers. This episode of *Animaniacs*, then, stands as a humorous guide to this cultural complexity; for children it is a revelation cloaked in chaos and laughter. In the way the Warners help erase, replace, reproduce, and refashion the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, they reproduce some of the contradictory lessons in culture American kids receive over the course of a day and make it recognizable, if not stable and clear.

Childhood as a Moral Category

While by Enlightenment standards the primary task of children is to realize their human nature (as natural learners), and according to 20th century psychology they need to mature and acquire the skills to take on their culture, by Christian tradition, children are more importantly moral actors. In fact, the moral status of children is just as central to the constraints placed on children and

²³ For the problem of finding and defining American culture in youth culture, see Berger, *Looking for America; Essays on Youth, Suburbia, and Other American Obsessions..*

the passions driving adults to shape the world of childhood. The moral life of America is in many ways negotiated around or imposed on kids.

There are at least three competing views of morality and children that permeate American culture, and that have a role in Animaniacs. One is the tradition of charivari: the use of youth as moral regulators for adult society. Young men in late medieval and Renaissance Italy were given the charge of tormenting adults who violated the rules of their societies. They were seen as morally above adults and capable of enforcing rules that adults were too corrupt to impose on one another. In this Catholic tradition, older children had a moral virtue and social role that made them good judges of their elders. To this day, children are often seen as having a moral clarity that adults can no longer afford to keep, free from the passions that defile adult morality. The Protestant view of children also defined them as morally distinct from their elders, but also as more prey to the influence of the devil. This meant that children could be conduits of evil into adult society. Children might be born more Christlike by nature, but they were potentially dangerous moral beings who could corrupt adults. The direction of moral influence is reversed in this second cultural constellation; the vulnerability of adults in Catholicism, and of children in Protestant theology, made these two perspectives on childhood and morality distinct, while clearly related genealogically.

The Enlightenment view of childhood built on these notions of childhood virtue and vulnerability, but made it less a matter of heavenly order and more a matter of the child's nature. Children were vulnerable to adult corruption, so they required protection from adults in order to keep their natural virtue alive. But with education they could avoid the moral degradation born of adult passions, and could make a better future by sustaining their natural virtue into adulthood. With this turn of the culture, children were made repositories of hope for the culture. They needed to be moral and keep their virtue intact in order to realize the future dreams of their societies.

All these versions of childhood morality are reproduced in cartoons, sometimes in quite distinct forms that mirror quite accurately their origins, sometimes in blended forms that obscure the lineage but keep its complexity alive. We can see moments in Animaniacs in which the Warners confront moral issues and unpack their contradictions. It probably goes without saying that the

Warners themselves continually challenge the moral as well as social order in most episodes, helping to underscore in this simple fashion the centrality of childhood as a moral category full of contradictions and open to contest.

A more morally-loaded view of children's education and the media is presented in an episode of Animaniacs that focuses on censorship and violence in children's programming. "A Valuable Lesson" follows the linked but dual problem of containing and controlling those ebullient cultural constructs -- kids and cartoons -- by keeping them both under keen adult supervision. As the episode begins, a familiar cartoon chase is already under way. Attila the Hun is after the Warners, using his looming rage and physical heft to frighten the resilient kids. They retaliate with those weapons still allowed in children's cartoons (because kids could not possibly use them aggressively in real life): a piano that falls from the sky, an anvil that follows, and an absurdly large cannon.

But as the cannon fires, the narrative is abruptly interrupted by a man and a woman in gray suits carrying briefcases: the network censors. They ask the Warners what child viewers are supposed to learn from this cartoon, and the kids respond, "use a big cannon?" Horrified, the censors escort their young charges to see some "decent" children's programming. In a small theater they are shown a Disney-Smurf amalgam in which respectful animal-children sit in a colorful forest, listening to a lesson about the dangers of anger from their grandfather. The censors weep; the Warners snooze. This scene clearly demonstrates the way these adults idealize children, in hopes of stabilizing the boundary between adulthood and childhood. Purifying childhood through cartoons gives them a sense of mission; exercising power over children by managing the media gives them a sense of efficacy; letting out their child-like wishes for a perfect world evokes longings so profound they are moved to tears. The Warners recognize a cliché when they see one, and promptly fall asleep.

To continue the lesson, the network officials take the Warners to research labs where children are being tested for media effects. First, they are shown a boy and girl who have watched the officially sanctioned programming; they sit quietly, speak carefully, and spontaneously offer to

share their toys. Behind a second window are children who have been exposed to Animaniacs-style programming; identical to the first pair (perhaps they are generic children?), they too sit calmly, smiling. But when a labcoated researcher urges them to share, they smash him over the head with their toys, in classic cartoon style. The myth of media effects is reenacted -- but the Warners know how to use this to their advantage. Asked if they learned anything; they request with the mock sincerity of model students a review of what they are not allowed to show on TV. The censors act them out, hitting each other first with their briefcases, then escalating the violence until together they are squashed by a falling elephant. At this point Attila, who has still been pursuing the Warners, trying to complete his narrative of cartoon violence, arrives. The censors try to stop him by suggesting he is really not so naughty, but he is infuriated and attacks the censors for their audacity. Safe for the moment, the Warners wisely stand aside, summing up the lesson they've learned from the show: censors come in handy. Clearly, such supervisory figures transform violence between adults and children into conflicts among the authorities controlling the culture.

Attila the Hun is a historical figure, a real model of adult violence children learn not from TV but from “good” media objects, history books; at the same time, he is a figure in a classic cartoon narrative, the over-sized bully who must be outwitted by clever animal-children. As the first, he stands for a historical violence that cannot be denied simply by purifying the stories we offer children; everyday adult violence directed toward children remains unrelenting in spite of the cultural norms against it. As a cartoon character, he is pure id -- more childlike than the children. He is precisely what the superego-censors are designed to stop. Untamed desire tangles with the institutional forces attempting to tame it, a narrative follows from the conflict, and our protagonists are left unscathed. The Warners have learned at least one valuable lesson. At the beginning of the program they thought the solution to the problem of childhood vulnerability was to have a big cannon; now they know it is to compel adults to direct their passions toward each other so kids can be entertained by human weakness rather than victim to it.

This story also suggests that children should recognize that powerful emotions are at stake when adults (be they Huns or censors) patrol the boundary between childhood and adulthood.

Deep truths about human nature are supposed to be revealed when children are left natural, yet so much cultural work goes into saving them from adults and their corrupt peers (creating a separate world of childhood) that the category seems much more a cultural accomplishment than a fact of nature. The Warners treat the boundary as merely an interesting part of a game they play with adults. In the opening sequence, they are “caught” playing with the Hun -- obviously a very bad influence on little kids. Attila wants to restore the “natural” age hierarchy by regaining authority over the Warners, but he has only his physical superiority as an advantage, and the kids can easily outwit him with their imaginary weapons. They use him in a game of taunting and chasing, which he can play because, although he is nominally an adult, he is as unrestrained as a child. The line between adult and child has been blurred, chaos (or is it fun?) results, and Attila is further incensed by the reversal of power relations.

All this chaos is too much for the censors who also want to restore adult authority, but they have more complex cultural tools at their disposal: television programs. They hope to expose the Warners to a “better” world of children's programming where smurf kids listen to their grandpa, and children are quiet, polite, and like to share. Ideal children clearly must inhabit a separate world of childhood, where they are protected from bad models of behavior. For the Warners the lesson from this is not at all clear; children are both good and bad, quiet and wild, sometimes sequestered from adults and sometimes placed in contact with them. Enforcing a singular nature or way of life on children seems unnatural to them, and a concern exclusive to adults.

The valuable lesson here is about the depth of desire and will that governs adult efforts to keep children separate from and subservient to adults. Attila uses force to keep the Warners under control and out of his hair. The censors expect to isolate children when they are young and train them to be good using idyllic fictional models of family life. The Warners recognize both strategies as familiar, if contradictory, adult techniques for constraining children that kids themselves need to recognize and negotiate for their own well-being. In their cartoon world of identifiable narratives and unnatural environments, network censors can interact with Attila the Hun, demonstrating both the contradictory cultural constellations that each presents to children and the similar passions

guiding adult efforts to shape children to fit childhood. This is, as the title of the episode suggests, a very valuable lesson.

Wheel of Morality

In nearly a quarter of all the Animaniacs episodes, the Warners close the show by consulting “the Wheel of Morality.” Once again chased by the studio security guard, they abruptly interrupt the game to pause for the Wheel of Morality, a gaudy gadget they pull in from off-screen. The Wheel looks much like the one on the game show Wheel of Fortune standing on its edge, with colorful wedges representing various choices: numbered morals, dollar amounts, expensive vacations. The wheel spins as lights flash, finally landing on a moral, which is ejected as a printed message like an automated fortune teller at a traveling carnival. Yakko reads the message to his siblings; they comment on it, shrug, then resume the chase as the security guard nears.

Figure Two: the Warners face the "wheel of morality"

Closing the show in this way satirizes the common trope of closing children's programs and narratives with a moral -- a trope as old as fairy tales and religious catechisms. But these are far from traditional morals. Spinning a wheel makes morality into something arbitrary, random. Fairy tales, and the children's television that has emulated them, always implied that the moral being taught was somehow connected to the story that had been told -- the imposition of an interpretation for an audience of children presumed to be incapable of reaching the correct conclusions on their own. The morals that spew out of the Warners' wheel have nothing to do with the preceding segments. In fact, they tend not to have anything to do with anything. Sometimes the morals are worn out platitudes, vacated of any significance except as icons of moralization: “Don't be a fool, stay in school.” (episode #66) Others subvert common sayings, often relocating them within popular culture: “If you can't say something nice, you're probably at the Ice Capades.” (#24) Other morals

are actually decontextualized commercial phrases, sayings that kids would have come across in their daily experience as received wisdom: “Lather, rinse, repeat.” (#64) or “Do not back up. Severe tire damage.” (#58) Occasionally there is no moral at all; in episode #47 the wheel stopped on a trip to Tahiti.

This is not an educational lesson attached to a narrative for the purpose of the personal and moral growth of the child. Instead, it is an ironic representation of the hodgepodge of platitudes and pop culture expressions that surround American children, set in the context of a game show with all its glitz and its arbitrariness. The Warners are justifiably perplexed by the wheel -- while Yakko seems to think it is his duty to face this task, the others are reluctant to interrupt the chase, accepting it like an unwanted chore or homework assignment. As Yakko intones the moral with the dressed-up authority of an older brother, the others fidget and comment sarcastically on what they are being asked to learn. Only the trip to Tahiti garnered any real excitement; most morals elicit a wry remark before all three tear off, eager to be back in the game.

On one level, the Wheel is a clever jab at the various regulations recently imposed on children's television. Current concerns for the educational value of children's programming raised by parents, politicians, and regulators, and recently embraced by the FCC,²⁴ urge networks to

²⁴ See in particular the Children's Television Act of 1990 and its overhaul in 1996. The definition of “educational and informational programming” cited in these documents is as follows: “any television programming that furthers the educational and information needs of children 16 years of age and under in any respect, including children's intellectual / cognitive or social / emotional needs.” The final phrase, appended in 1996, does not actually narrow the definition in any way, but instead provides more ways for broadcasters to successfully justify programming that offers the bare minimum of educational value. For explanations of the good reasons for educational television, see Gerald S. Lesser, *Children and Television: Lessons from Sesame Street*, [1st] ed. (New York,: Random House, 1974).; Richard M. Polsky and Aspen Program on Communications and Society, *Getting to Sesame Street: Origins of the Children's Television Workshop* (New York,: Praeger, 1974)..

include a specific number of hours of children's programming that serves some educational value. The FCC definition of educational programming, left intentionally vague, has been interpreted in a variety of ways by broadcasters. No doubt, the producers of Animaniacs would not claim that the Wheel of Morality makes their show educational (they may make such a claim, however, about the songs that are part of the Animaniacs repertoire, which often work history and science lessons into the humor); rather, this Wheel may be a scathing critique of those producers and regulators who believe that a vacant platitude appended to a cartoon somehow makes it educational. The quick fix is shown to be arbitrary, useless, forced, empty -- and Animaniacs suggests that kids see right through this, either ignoring the moral or using it as fodder for more humor, before dashing away to return to more childlike pleasures.

But the Wheel of Morality is indicative of the broader critique that Animaniacs is making about and amid American childhood. As a trope it is the ideal closer to the program, a program that works for its young audience by articulating and navigating the complex ways children are addressed by American culture. Just as the Warners' various adventures express a complicated array of definitions of child and childhood, so the wheel combines contradictory modes of address -- the commercial, the moral, the educational, and the disruptive -- into a single mechanism. Morals pop out like magic from the inner workings of the machine, but neither the Warners nor the audience can predict whether they will be a moral admonition, a commercial appeal, or a sarcastic insight.²⁵

The unspeakable truth of American childhood is that the relevant categories, while they are often treated as coherent in public discourse, are in practice fractured, multiple, and incoherent.

²⁵ Interestingly, several fans noted in online newsgroup discussions that the actual animation of the spin is itself a fiction; to more efficiently re-use animation cels, the makers of Animaniacs use the same blurred spin for each sequence and draw new cels only for where the spin ends. Even the spin proves to be arbitrary. The security of believing that the spinner landed somewhere because of friction is proven to be a convenient falsehood, just as the security of believing that being a child is as simple as the culture claims is proven also to be a convenient falsehood.

Various definitions of child and childhood are at play simultaneously in American culture -- often contradictory, rarely fully articulated, and sometimes hotly contested. When expressed to children, both in the way they are addressed and in what is expected and demanded of them, the ambiguity and complexity of these cultural meanings are overlooked. The problematic friction between different modes of address is erased from the discourse -- though it is left for the child to sort out with limited available resources. Childhood as a coherent, singular category is a cultural fiction; the Wheel of Morality, with its polyvalent structure, its arbitrariness, its inexplicable intrusion into the narrative, embodies and exposes this cultural fiction for the sham that it is -- as randomly random as spinning a game show wheel.

Children are treated, when they watch Animaniacs, to a kind of relaxation -- not of intellectual demand, but of the force of cultural categories and any claims of their coherence or stability. They are given a world filled with recognizable ambiguities: childhoods filled with mixed expectations, child-adult relations fraught with contradictions, multiple cultural heritages that keep undermining one another. They are shown ways to laugh at the ambiguities and contradictions patterned into their lives, so they don't have to either ignore, refuse, or accept them. They are confronted, in short, with a clearer picture of the problem American children face in learning and navigating childhood -- where the rules of membership and definitions of the group are themselves confusing. The more clashes and contradictions in the cultural categories, scripts, and models for children, the more laughter for the program -- because laughter addresses the problems children face that others seem to ignore. Cartoons hold children between the experiences in their lives and the words that are supposed to make sense of them, constituting a mobile space between language and the perceived world in which ambiguities in the culture of childhood, so hard for them to learn, are cracked open.

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