

# PULLING THE STRINGS: POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN SOME BRITISH TV SHOWS FOR CHILDREN<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** When the BBC was established in the 1920s it was believed that radio would bridge the dissociation between the mass of individual citizens and an increasingly complex society, enabling them to make up their minds on many matters. By the end of the twentieth century some children's TV shows such as *The Wind in the Willows* in the 80s and *The Teletubbies* in the 90s still acted on those principles, instilling political conformity and social submission into the young viewers. Thus this paper discusses how beneath an ostensibly liberal approach to education may occasionally lurk a conservative ideology of class and nation. A sample analysis is included, suggesting that similar approaches can be applied to other so-called "children's programmes" today which are also fables of adults' anxieties about the future citizens' conformity.

**Key words:** Cultural studies, British culture, critical pedagogy, discourse, infant shows, TV studies.

**Resumen:** La BBC se fundó en los años veinte bajo la creencia de que la radio tendería un puente para salvar la disociación entre la masa de ciudadanos y una sociedad cada vez más compleja, capacitándoles para formar su opinión sobre muchos asuntos. A finales del siglo XX algunos programas infantiles de televisión como *The Wind in the Willows* en los años ochenta y los *Teletubbies* en los noventa seguían respondiendo a aquellos principios, inculcando conformismo político y sumisión social a sus jóvenes telespectadores. El presente artículo argumenta cómo, bajo un enfoque educativo aparentemente liberal, acecha a veces una ideología clasista y jerarquizante. El artículo incluye análisis ilustrativos, y apunta la posibilidad de aplicar enfoques análogos a otros programas para niños que también constituyan fábulas de la preocupación de los adultos por el conformismo de los futuros ciudadanos.

**Palabras clave:** Estudios culturales, cultura británica, pedagogía crítica, discurso, programas infantiles, televisión.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF INNOCENCE

This paper aims to suggest how politics is at work on TV even within infantile programmes. It originated when its author, watching British puppet shows with his young son, noticed how certain episodes seemed to teach their unsuspecting viewers certain political ideas, such as the differentiation of social groups as classes and the role of the monarchy. It is not written from any very specific ideological position, but it does acknowledge what

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Stuart Hall called “intellectual practice as politics” (Hall 1992: 284). David Walton has explained Hall’s dictum as meaning that “cultural criticism is not only politically *informed* but can be understood as being linked to political *action*” (Walton 2008: 200; emphasis as in the original). Therefore, if what follows may sound politically biased, it is because it takes its stand against the political manipulation of children by the media. The action would consist in identifying those manipulative contents, a previous stage to understanding, isolating them, and, either counteracting them, or simply enjoying them detachedly, from a safe distance, for what they were supposed be, *innocent* entertainment with a mild pedagogical point about social compliance.

The subject of British TV for children has been comparatively neglected in cultural studies, though an internet history of Puppetry on British TV (Burford-Jones) begins by stating that “Puppets are deeply embedded into British society.” In contrast, the new media literacy movement, which is in some ways an offshoot of the largely U.S.-based critical pedagogy movement, has been working with young viewers for some time, arguing the possibility to improve, according to Trend (1994: 235) “the ability to mediate dominant readings and spectator positionings in media”, and teaching them “to use the media for their own ends by actively interpreting how it functions and how to read it.” While there seems to be no such systematic or coordinated movement for the study of British film and TV for children, corporate Disney’s universe has been under scrutiny practically since the 1930s (Wasko 2001: 119). It is significant that, after about fifteen years challenging the ideological assumptions of schooling and educational theory, Henry Giroux (1997, 1999) should have turned his attention to Disney’s “pedagogy of innocence”, in order to fully acknowledge the direct connection between the media, commercial culture and national identity in teaching children specific lessons through pleasurable, beguiling entertainment.

## 2. BRITISH PUPPET SHOWS: PULLING CHILDREN’S STRINGS

The work that critical pedagogy has catalysed on the political economy of schooling, the state, and education may be more relevant to the U.S., but their parallel interest in the politics of representation, discourse analysis, and the construction of student subjectivity offers models for a wider application, and they have a bearing on UK culture. The principles of the BBC that Sir John Reith, its Director until 1938, set out (1924) seem to have persisted for long in spite of successive administrative and ideological developments in the corporation: radio would bridge the dissociation between the mass of individual citizens and an increasingly complex society, enabling them to make up their minds on many matters. The way TV has manipulated British public opinion was studied in the late 1970s by the Glasgow Media Group (Eldridge 1995), and from the early 1980s by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Hall, Hobson, Lowe, and Willis 1980). Yet scarce attention has been paid to how TV also attempted to indoctrinate children through suave educational programmes or entertaining shows.

In Britain puppets have been a favourite means to pull children’s ideological strings ever since TV became the dominant mass media. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the days of revived domestic ideology, Andy Pandy and Teddy’s rag doll Looby Loo offered “a nice early sexist stereotype for children”: she only came to life when her masters were not

home, to dance, play, and sweep and dust their house (Wandham-Smith and Clift 1999: 2). A comprehensive survey of the various British TV puppet shows, including animated toys, is beyond the scope of the present article, but it shall deal with two episodes from very contrasting series, one from *The Wind in the Willows* of the mid-1980s, which stands for what we might call a classic modern story type, and a Teletubbies film of the later 1990s, which may be considered as a model of the postmodern discourse type. As the latter is a more sophisticated text, it will also require a more detailed analysis.

### 3. FROM EDWARDIAN TO THATCHERITE BRITAIN: *THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS*

There is a triple context to account for *The Wind in the Willows* as a conservative fable. In the first place, Kenneth Grahame's original book of 1908, on which the film is loosely based, a classic of Edwardian children's literature containing the public school values forged since the late Victorian period; secondly, the 1984-1987 TV production (based on a 1983 film) for children, which should be understood in the context of the Thatcherite era's attempt to reassert those educational values, against, among other things, the political irreverence of the satirical puppet show *Spitting Image*, which had been launched in 1984; finally, the present videotape, distributed by Past Times shops, which specialise in trading with nostalgia for the British past. The analogue style of animation, which consists in animated toy animals, the faded colours of the films, and the childhood associations of some of its potential buyers all seem to contribute to arouse such nostalgic sentiments. All of this would be appreciated by adults rather than children. But it is still possible to analyse the film in terms of the "order of discourse" (Foucault 1981; Mills 1997: 69-72) that was at play when it was shown on TV in the 80s, in the episode called *Paperchase*, written by Brian Trueman (1983).

In this version we meet Grahame's four main characters (Rat, Mole, Toad and Badger) together at Toad Hall, Toad's stately home, where the host himself shows immoderate manners gobbling cakes and then trying to impress children (a little crowd of younger River Bank animals) by lying about the age and value of the stained glass they have just broken with their ball, for which the judge-like Badger corrects him at once. As the children are being unruly, however, the heroes decide to lay down the rules and organize a proper game for them. They decide a paper-chase (a game in which runners follow a trail marked by torn-up paper) will maintain their sportive spirit while keeping them busy in a constructive way. The healthy fun is about to be spoiled by the wicked Weasels and by shameless Toad, who are all up to cheating in order to win. Nonetheless, in the end the rulers catch out the tricksters and reward the law-abiding Bunny who was third but did not cheat. It is hard not to notice an English conservative moral behind the story: the values of being a gentleman, competitiveness, youthfulness and fair play used to be called "constants of English character" (Giles and Middleton 1995: 55-63), and were all instilled at public schools. The values might be comparable to their adult representation in Hugh Hudson's film *Chariots of Fire* (1981), a film which is said to embody the Thatcherite ideology (Carter 1983).

#### 4. A BASIC MODEL OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Rob Pope's (1998: 58) didactic model of discourse analysis can be applied to *Paperchase*. The model is primarily aimed at undergraduates or young adults, but if we just rephrased the questions in adequate ways, we might also enable children to deal with them. The following questions are addressed to the audience.

First, what ways of saying and seeing the world are being assumed or asserted? An answer could be the discourse of traditional English social class. The aristocratic Toad is mildly satirised, like when the Victorian intellectual Matthew Arnold (1966: 98-128) spoke about the English upper class as "the Barbarians" in his book *Culture and Anarchy*. But the Badger, who is also upper-class, though of a more meritocratic kind, sounds an authoritative voice. The Water Rat is the man of action, the poet and the outdoors sportsman, in short the public school type, and the acquiescent, meek Mole who always complies with the other tree is a middle-class type. The children outside are a little like Arnold's "Populace", they are disorderly, in need of instruction, tending to become a mob, and they include dangerous subversive elements among them, here embodied by the Weasels.

In the second place we may ask: what power relations are in play within and around the text in context? It is indeed the relation between traditional English classes and their educational role towards children and the populace, deploying discourses aimed at preserving their hegemony over those subversive instincts in the population. These power relations are, of course, also at work between the film and its potential consumers, British and other English-speaking children.

Thirdly, what alternative ways of saying and seeing the world are thereby marginalised or ignored? The children are not supposed to know how to create their own rules or enforce them. Women are also excluded from this homosocial world, still a reflection of early twentieth-century uncertainties about masculinity. In addition, there is a covert racial discourse centred on the Weasels, whose sharp physiognomy suggests a different ethnicity from the rest of characters. In *Paperchase* the father Weasel and his son (both of whom look much the same, as "foreigners" are supposed to do) speak with a broad working-class accent. In a subsequent episode a Weasel actually speaking with a foreign accent and finally shown dressed in a kind of Russian Soviet coat tries to cheat Toad out of his fortune.

Fourth and last, what if the whole text-in-context were said, seen and done differently? The way Giles and Middleton (1999: 178-187) site Grahame's characters in the context of Edwardian masculinity and latent homosexual relations exemplifies a gender perspective. Other versions of the story might imagine what the children would really have liked to play at, or allow Weasels to participate in laying down the rules. Such alternative readings, however, are not encoded in the film or encouraged by it. They would undermine the class and educational discourses sustaining its plot, which is why they are important for a critical analysis of its discourse.

#### 5. BIT HUG! MESMERISING CHILDREN INTO SUBJECTION

Our next example also seems to pre-empt any initiative on the part of the subjects of discourse, in this case the children acting in the film and those watching it. The Teletubbies

gained great popularity at the turn of the century and became immediately controversial. These whole-body puppets were accused of promoting anti-Christian global ethics (Kjos 1999), of showing a lifestyle that may induce morbid obesity (Damian 2004), of containing alarming allusions to homosexuality and drugs, of “dumbing down” toddler talk, and of crass commercialism aiming to sell merchandising (Howard and Roberts 1999). Although other viewers just find them “pure bliss” (Scribblingwoman 2004), the criticisms reflect an anxiety about the first television programme deliberately designed for children under two, as well as the perceived strong ideological contents in the series.

Our on focus will be on the episode about “the funny lady and the naughty crown” from their film *Big Hug!* (The Teletubbies 1999), compiled from previously transmitted programmes. The same questioning of its discourse could be done as with *Paperchase*, but it will suffice for the present purpose to point out its ingredients. The kind of discourse we find at work here is monarchic, a justification of the Queen of England’s role; the discourse also contains overtones of social class and of race, and children are, once again, the populace that should be ruled over. But the style of representation, as shall be seen, is very different from our former example.

The Funny Lady episode is one of the pieces of “reality” which appear in the futuristic puppet world of Teletubbyland when the teletubbies watch the screens on their bellies. Such sketches usually show real children doing exciting activities in the real world, for example feeding lambs in a farm, making a short trip on a train, or watching rabbits around their burrow. On this occasion, however, we meet a group of children in a kind of Alice-in-Wonderland scenery and colourful kitsch furniture. A middle-aged white woman dressed in a Royal Stuart tartan mini-skirt, and dark green woollen tights and cloak, tells the children that “today is King’s and Queen’s Day”; the king is a teddy bear sitting next to her, whose role is hardly less subservient than that of the current Duke of Edinburgh, and she is the queen. Her crown, however, refuses to descend on her head from some tall cypress trees behind her. To make the crown descend she utters a spell: “Where is my crown, where can she be, I hope she comes soon, because it’s nearly time for tea.” And then she chants “Crown, crown, where are you? Crown, crown, are you up, or are you down?”, and while she begins again “where can she be ...?” the children point at it coming down on her head. When the Funny Lady is crowned she begins to talk in mock-solemnity as if it were the crown itself, saying it sits “proud and high, near the clouds and the sky”, but as she adds “I sit all day in a very crownly way”, it says goodbye and soars up the old trees again. So the Funny Lady says it is a naughty proud crown, and begins to chant again “Crown, crown, where are you ...” with the children now joining in chorus. Now the lady adds “because it is nearly time for tea *and* biscuits”, so the crown descends again, utters its little speech and soars back. The third time, the lady adds cake to the offer of tea and biscuits, and the children chorus in excitement “Cake! Cake!” But the crown does not come down on this occasion, so the lady asks the teddy bear for advice and decides that the crown needs a special invitation, which she then takes out from her silvery handbag in a sealed envelope. They call the crown with the usual spell, the lady adding ice-cream to the former promises and the invitation. Therefore the crown comes down and stays on her head, and the lady can state that “everybody is happy and it is time for tea.” The children look overjoyed and eager to play at having tea and biscuits. The lady, now wearing the crown, hands them out

the cups and pretends to pour tea and give them biscuits. Finally, the crowned lady repeats that they are “all happy” and says goodbye; then we viewers go back to Teletubbyland.

The sketch is an exercise in pomp and circumstance for children. There are a number of details we can easily associate with the English monarchy since Queen Victoria: the blend of solemnity and condescending informality, the tartan, even the colourful kitsch. The queen approaches her subjects (rather than the other way round) and issues invitations to her exclusive company and table. Her authority *descends* on her from very old *evergreen* genealogical trees. Her subjects are a multiethnic group, a kind of commonwealth of children. She patronises the darker ones in particular, and in the episode there is a West Indian boy who is given a more central role than the rest, as the camera shows him more often and in close-up and even big close-up. The children look a bit restless but happily excited, and compliant. They seem to collaborate democratically in calling the crown, but all they do is follow the Funny Lady’s lead. In fact they are being submerged in what Paolo Freire (1970: 14) called “a culture of silence.” Above all the episode has a contrived mesmerism, a hypnotic quality in the *ritual* repetition of the spell praying for the crown to come down. In Peter McLaren’s (1999, 1993) words: “Ritual is a key facet of cultural production ... Rituals are ‘forms of enacted meaning’ which enable ‘social actors to frame, negotiate, and articulate their ... existence as social, cultural, and moral beings’ ... Rituals, in other words, are components of ideology, helping shape our perceptions of daily life and how we live it.” It is hard not to suspect that this is a lesson for the children to become obedient subjects of the Queen of England.

Yet the political discourse in *Big Hug!* is more subliminal than in *The Wind in the Willows*. The colourful visuals, the lullaby music, the nursery-rhyme phrasing, and the ritual performance of the Funny Lady sketch probably allow it to remain in the child’s mind longer than the plain story of the paper-chase. The educational aim is also more explicit in the Teletubbies (1999), which is advertised in the blurb of the videotape as “a landmark pre-school programme, specially designed to help young children co-ordinate watching with listening”; furthermore, they are “specifically designed to aid children’s speech development” (Wandham-Smith and Clift 1999: 2). Infants are thus enticed to enter a certain symbolic order. Funny Lady is the queen of a magic dream world which is, however, shown as a piece of reality when the Teletubbies watch it on their bellies and infants watch it at home on their televisions. The difference between the real and the simulacrum becomes blurred, and child play becomes political praxis. Rather than just a tale it tries to become a living experience. It is, in short, ancien régime selling itself to a postmodern infant audience.

## 6. CONCLUSION: HOW TO COUNTERACT TV’S IDEOLOGICAL POWER

As Foucault insisted, resistance is endemic in all power relations: “there is no power without potential refusal or revolt” (2000: 324). I hope our analysis of political discourse for children has illustrated at least the different forms it may adopt. There would remain a number of tasks to be done in order to turn this analysis into actual critical pedagogy. In the first place it would be necessary to analyse the children’s own views and reactions to such discourses. Then we would be in a position to show children how to question them, so as to become at least partial agents of their own identity-on-the-make, and not the mere

subjects that television programmes of “predatory culture” try to make. The arena today is in the dreamlike discursive strategy exemplified by the *Funny Lady*. As Peter McLaren (1994: 258) has put it, “Our postmodern imaginary must be placed in the service of dreaming beyond the acceptance of such violence and seek new forms of social, political, and ethical relations: in short, new forms of human community hitherto unimaginable.” The subjection begins in infancy, even before the school, so it must be then that the oppositional pedagogy of freedom should also start.

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