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Foreplay and Other Preliminaries

“A long time ago there were no toys and everyone was bored. Then they had TV, but they were bored again. They wanted control. So they invented video games.”

Victor Aurelio Bautista

According to my eight-year-old son, Victor, who is a reluctant moviegoer as well as our household Nintendo champion, the history of entertainment is driven by the pleasure principle—the alleviation of boredom and the pursuit of control or mastery. Cinema (which he omits entirely from his minihistory) is clearly expendable.

Apparently, postmodern kids like Victor need to be *sold* on the concept that movies still have an essential place in the entertainment system. Both Saturday morning television and home video games perform this job of selling by refiguring cinema not as a medium that is obsolete, but as what Beverle Houston calls “a prior discourse” that can be parodied, recycled, and mastered.¹ Thus, even *before* children go to the cinema, they learn that movies make a vital contribution to an ever-expanding supersystem of entertainment, one marked by transmedia intertextuality.

Intertextuality, Dialogism, and Sliding Signifiers

The term *intertextuality* was first introduced by Julia Kristeva, elaborating on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism. Ac-

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According to Bakhtin, “The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments.”² In contemporary media studies, intertextuality has come to mean that any individual text (whether an artwork like a movie or novel, or a more commonplace text like a newspaper article, billboard, or casual verbal remark) is part of a larger cultural discourse and therefore must be read in relationship to other texts and their diverse textual strategies and ideological assumptions. As Robert Stam puts it, “In the broadest sense, intertextuality or dialogism refers to the open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated, and which reach the text not only through recognizable influences but also through a subtle process of dissemination.”³ Thus, even if the author or reader of a particular text is not consciously aware of the other texts with which it is connected, those texts still help to structure its meaning.

In this book I will focus primarily on intertextual relations across different narrative media. As a means of structuring events within patterns of space, time, and causality, narrative creates a context for interpreting all perceptions. Narrative maps the world and its inhabitants, including one’s own position within that grid. In acquiring the ability to understand stories, the child is situated as a perceiving, thinking, feeling, acting, speaking subject within a series of narrative fields—as a person in a family saga, as a spectator who tunes in to individual tales and identifies with their characters, and as a performer who repeats cultural myths and sometimes generates new transformations. Ever since television became

pervasive in the American home, this mass medium has played a crucial role in the child's entry into narrative. My study explores how television and its narrative conventions affect the construction of the subject.

In assimilating and redefining that "prior discourse" of cinema, both Saturday morning television and home video games cultivate a dual form of spectatorship. They position young spectators to combine passive and interactive modes of response as they identify with sliding signifiers that move fluidly across various forms of image production and cultural boundaries, but without challenging the rigid gender differentiation on which patriarchal order is based. Although the meanings of all signs tend to be multiple and slippery, by *sliding signifiers* I refer specifically to those words, images, sounds, and objects that—like the pronouns *I* and *you*, or the adverbs *here* and *there*—blatantly change meaning in different contexts and that derive their primary value precisely from that process of transformation.

This combined mode of spectatorship helps to account for the extraordinary success of that commercial supersystem of transmedia intertextuality constructed around Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, those ultimate sliding signifiers who transgress every important border, except gender. Within this Turtle network, young players are encouraged to define themselves not in opposition to the alien Other but as voracious consumers—like Pac-Man, who defeats enemies by eating them. Thus, like the protean Turtles, who imitate old masters (both the Italian Renaissance artists after whom they are named and the Japanese ninja warriors whose martial arts skills they practice), children are learning to function as transformative mutants.

In adapting both this transcultural legacy and themselves to a new supersystem in which they prove their own mastery, the Ninja Turtles dramatize the interrelated processes of *as-*

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simulation and *accommodation*—concepts central to Jean Piaget's theory of genetic epistemology. Piaget claims that "in order to know objects, the subject must act upon them, and therefore transform them"; in turn, the subject is transformed, in a constant process of "reequilibration."⁴ In this book I will demonstrate how children's television and home video games construct consumerist subjects who can more readily assimilate and accommodate whatever objects they encounter, including traditional modes of image production like cinema and new technological developments like interactive multimedia.

Consumerist Interactivity

We are now on the verge of an interactive multimedia revolution that is already placing cinema, television, VCR's, compact disc players, laser videodisc players, video games, computers, and telephones within a consolidated supersystem combining home entertainment, education, and business. Journalists are prophesying that "through the marriage of computers and film," soon "people will be able to pick up the fiber-optic phone line, access any listing, say, in the Paramount or ABC libraries, punch in a code and, within minutes, have *Singin' in the Rain* or a documentary on civil-rights violations flash across a wall-sized, high definition screen."⁵ The latest developments in interactive media (such as Compact Disc Interactive, developed by Sony and Philips, and Digital Video Interactive, developed by General Electric and Intel Corporation) promise consumers that, with the purchase of an electronic device (which, like a Nintendo home video game system, can be hooked up to any television set) and the use of a remote control unit or "joystick," they will be able to access and combine a wide range of graphics, video images, sounds, words, and data bases. The vast range

of applications for this cutting-edge technology in science, business, education, and entertainment can already be seen and played with at interactive multimedia galleries like Tech 2000 in Washington, D.C.

We have already seen the rise of popular interactive TV programs like "America's Funniest Home Videos," the success of which was made possible by the wide availability of affordable video-8 camcorders of high quality. On this show the audience not only votes for their favorite video, but also provides the entertainment by documenting their own experience. Like public access programming on cable television, such developments have the potential to democratize the video medium—a potential most fully realized in the recent Eastern European revolutions, where populist video both documented and participated in the making of history. In the United States, roving spectators with camcorders are increasingly documenting the impromptu violence they happen to witness in urban streets (as in the case of black motorist Rodney Glen King, whose severe beating by several policemen in Los Angeles in March 1991 was captured by a passing observer and broadcast on national television—an instance of video *vérité* that led to charges being brought against some of the officers and a bitter political struggle to force Police Chief Daryl F. Gates to resign). Yet on American prime time, this democratic potential is being used primarily to document comical pratfalls staged in the home for prizes, fame, and fun. Although home video and pirate radio have been celebrated in such recent films as *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) and *Pump Up the Volume* (1990), where they function both as masturbatory fantasy and as a means of politicizing depressed housewives and teens, in the United States the democratic potential of interactive mass media has largely been appropriated by commercial interests.

In an analysis of interactive television of the 1980s,

Andrew Pollack concludes: "So far, the only interactivity that appears to be developing into a successful business is the simplest approach, requiring no special equipment in homes . . . allowing viewers to order merchandise on shopping networks, by calling an '800' telephone number or to respond to questions on television by calling a '900' number." Although he focuses on quiz shows like *Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune*, which encourage viewers to play along, prize competitions in which one predicts the next music video or the quarterback's next call, and viewer voting contests for the best outcome of a mystery show or the funniest home video, he acknowledges that interactive television may have a better chance in the 1990s because "years of exposure to video games and computers mean that consumers now are more acclimated to interactivity." Pollack nevertheless warns that the success of these systems will be determined by "how well such services can attract and serve advertising."⁶

The more experimental interactive developments in modern media are beyond the scope of my project. Rather, I will focus here on how Saturday morning television and home video games, and their intertextual connections with movies, commercials, and toys, help prepare young players for full participation in this new age of interactive multimedia—specifically, by linking interactivity with consumerism.

Cognitive Theory and the Gendered Spectator/Player

To theorize about these new interactive media, we cannot restrict ourselves to the passive models of spectatorship rooted in psychoanalysis (which have tended to dominate film studies) but must also consider cognitive theory. To this end, I will use Piaget's theory of genetic epistemology, which foregrounds the interrelated processes of assimilation and

accommodation in the cognitive development of the child; the empirical work of Arthur Applebee, which applies this model (as well as the cognitive theories of L. S. Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner) to the child's interaction with narrative; and the writings of Seymour Papert, who applies Piaget's model to the child's interaction with computers.

In *The Child's Concept of Story: Ages Two to Seventeen*, Applebee describes two modes of responding to narrative that can be found in early childhood and that develop collaboratively through later cognitive phases. This combination evokes the dual player/spectator position constructed for children by Saturday morning television and home video games. According to Applebee, in the "interactive participant role" (already observable in the infant's earliest dealings with the physical world), the child as perceiving/acting subject responds "piecemeal" to narrative discourse, and visual and verbal representations generate immediate concrete action, enabling the infant to handle, survive, or control events. In the "spectator role" (observable by age two and a half), the various systems of representation become fully involved and integrated as an "aesthetic" experience; the perceiving subject now responds to the whole.⁷ Like Piaget, Applebee assumes that "as children mature, they do not pass out of one mode of response into another, but integrate their older structures into a new and more systematic representation of experience."⁸ Although focused primarily on the spectator response, his study suggests that the interactive participant role is what drives the major shifts to later cognitive stages.⁹

Piaget's theory of genetic epistemology distinguishes four principal stages of cognitive development, which follow the formation of sensorimotor intelligence:

After the appearance of language or, more precisely, the symbolic function that makes its acquisition possible

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(1½–2 years), there begins a period which lasts until nearly 4 years and sees the development of a symbolic and preconceptual thought.

From 4 to about 7 or 8 years, there is developed, as a closely linked continuation of the previous stage, an intuitive thought whose progressive articulations lead to the threshold of the operation.

From 7–8 to 11–12 years “concrete operations” are organized, i.e. operational groupings of thought concerning objects that can be manipulated or known through the senses.

Finally, from 11–12 years and during adolescence, formal thought is perfected and its groupings characterize the completion of reflective intelligence.¹⁰

Within each new cognitive stage, Piaget claims that “the fundamental factor of development” is *equilibration*, which he defines as “a sequence of self-regulations whose retroactive processes finally result in operational reversibility.”¹¹ According to Piaget:

A mental operation is reversible when, starting from its result, one can find a symmetrically corresponding operation which will lead back to the data of the first operation without these having been altered in the process. . . . If I divide a given collection of objects into four equal piles, I can recover the original whole by multiplying one of my quarters by four: the operation of multiplication is symmetrical to that of division. Thus every rational operation has a corresponding operation that is symmetrical to it and which enables one to return to one’s starting-point.¹²

These self-regulations involve a constant rebalancing of the assimilation of sensory input with the accommodation of the subject and his or her developing mental structures for grouping data. This ongoing process leads “from certain states of equilibrium to others [that are] qualitatively differ-

ent” and requires the subject to “pass through multiple ‘non-balances’ and reequilibrations.”¹³ Applebee suggests that the collaboration between the unifying tendencies of the spectator mode and the analytic tendencies of the interactive mode facilitates this process of reequilibration.

In allowing space for ideology (or what Applebee calls the social structuring of the subject’s “construction of reality”), this cognitive approach acknowledges the cultural production of differences in gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Yet unlike the psychoanalytic model, it does not perceive gender differentiation as the linchpin to subject formation within the patriarchal symbolic order—an assumption that has been essential to much of the best feminist film theory over the past fifteen years. Although some might claim that this “omission” helps to clear the way for transition to a more equitable coding of gender, I believe that it actually only “naturalizes” patriarchal assumptions, which continue to flourish in postmodernist media like computers, video games, and television.

The acknowledgment of gender differentiation in subject formation is crucial to the software I will be examining here (video games, TV programs, and movies), where traditional gender roles are increasingly reinforced rather than transgressed. In analyzing the mass toy market as “one of the strongest early influences on gender,” Susan Willis observes:

There is much greater sexual division of toys defined by very particular gender traits than I’d say has ever existed before. . . . Walk into any toy store and you will see, recapitulated in the store’s aisle arrangement, the strict distinction and separation of the sexes along specific gender lines: Barbies, My Little Ponies, and She-Ras in one aisle; He-Man, the Transformers, and ThunderCats in another.¹⁴

Unfortunately, these same divisions are also found in Saturday morning television programs and commercials and in home video games and arcades. I will therefore position this cognitive approach within a larger framework of poststructuralist feminism, which explores the specific ways in which the gendered subject and his or her representations of reality are constructed within a social field. In so doing, I hope to avoid the indifference to feminist issues that is sometimes associated with cognitive theory and postmodernism. For I strongly agree with Lynne Joyrich that “it is only by calling attention to the specificity of gender and a gendered spectatorship (even while exploring the numerous practices and discourses that impinge upon and complicate this notion) that we can avoid the apolitics of an indifferent post-feminism.”¹⁵

Toward a Synthesis of Psychoanalytic and Cognitive Theory

I accept Applebee’s assumption that “theoretical argument” is a form of transactional discourse: we must respond to it interactively, challenging individual arguments and judging it piecemeal instead of embracing it whole, as if it were a poetic discourse. I will argue here for an interactive dialogue between psychoanalytic and cognitive theory—that is, for the appropriation from both models of ideas particularly useful for theorizing this dual form of gendered spectator/player positioning at this moment in history. Although, like David Bordwell, I believe “that principles of cognitive psychology and rational-agent social theory could cooperate to produce a constructivist theory of interpretation,” I agree with Edward Branigan that such a theory is not necessarily incompatible with certain key principles from the psychoanalytic paradigm, particularly those that have been formative in the development of feminist film theory.¹⁶ Like Louis Althusser,

I draw only on that part of the Freudian/Lacanian model that theorizes subject formation within the social context of the nuclear family under patriarchal capitalism (a perspective that exposes the ideological implications of subject positioning not generally addressed by cognitive theory).

In his highly influential essay "Freud and Lacan," Althusser credits French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan with developing the semiotic potential in Freud's writings—by emphasizing Freud's discovery of the "discourse of the unconscious" and by going even further to claim that the unconscious is "structured like a language." According to Althusser, then, the primary object of psychoanalysis is the way culture structures the unconscious (the way it transforms the "small" animal into a gendered human adult), and Lacan's "most original" contribution was to give us a "conceptual hold on the unconscious" by showing that this "transition" from biological to human existence is achieved within the "Symbolic Order" (or what Althusser calls "the Law of Culture").

Lacan demonstrates the effectiveness of the Order, the Law, that has been lying in wait for each infant born since before his birth, and seizes him before his first cry, assigning to him his place and role, and hence his fixed destination. . . . This is the beginning . . . even where there is no living father, of the official presence of the Father (who is Law). . . . So the Oedipal phase is not a hidden "meaning" . . . [or] a structure buried in the past. . . . [Rather it] is the dramatic structure, the "theatrical machine" imposed by the Law of Culture on every involuntary, conscripted candidate to humanity.¹⁷

When combined with the historical perspective of Althusser's own Marxist paradigm, this Lacanian theory of subject formation comes to explain the primary function of

ideology: the “interpellation” of individuals into a symbolic order that constructs them as human gendered subjects who will bear their father’s name and who will unconsciously help to reproduce the existing power relations of their culture.

Ideology . . . “recruits” subjects among the individuals . . . or “transforms” the individuals into subjects . . . by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” . . . [If] the hailed individual . . . turn[s] round . . . , he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was “really” addressed to him, and that “it was *really him* who was hailed” (and not someone else).¹⁸

As many of Althusser’s critics have observed, the subjects he describes are entirely passive—a condition that belies his own questioning of ideology and its operations.

The dual spectator/player position I am presenting here contradicts this Althusserian notion of a totally passive subject. In some ways it is analogous to the ambivalent stance that Lacanian film theorist Christian Metz adopts in his influential essay “Story/Discourse: Notes on Two Kinds of Voyeurism”: “the ambivalent coexistence of this anachronistic affection with the sadism of the connoisseur who wants to break open the toy and see into the guts of the machine.”¹⁹ Yet whereas Metz sees the active mode of spectatorship as suited for a sophisticated analyst like himself, Piaget conceptualizes it as operative in the early acquisition of narrative; to him it is an essential component in the continuing process of cognitive development and an important vehicle for assimilation and accommodation.

Although many cognitive theorists tend to dismiss psycho-

analytic premises because they have not been empirically verified, Applebee seems to accept the synthesis of the two models. For example, in discussing an empirical study from 1963 based on 360 stories collected from two- to five-year-old children in a New Haven nursery school, Applebee reports that "the original investigators analyzed these [narratives] from a neo-Freudian perspective, using them as a means to explore latent theories or crises of developmental importance." Without in any way challenging the study's findings, Applebee supplements them with a cognitive analysis of the children's assumptions "about what a story is, how it is organized, and how it can be 'used' or varied in response to different problems."²⁰ The implication is that, because of the different kinds of questions raised, the two paradigms address the material at different levels of inquiry; yet both make valuable and compatible contributions to theories about the child's physical and mental development. In a sense, then, psychoanalysis (like cinema) is treated as a "prior discourse," which is being assimilated within an interactive cognitive model.

This process of assimilation is more explicit in Seymour Papert's popular *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas*. Although firmly grounded in Piaget's model of genetic epistemology, Papert's study also draws on Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory of transitional objects (which mediate between inner psychic reality and the external world) and on theories of computation and artificial intelligence, to explore how the computer (that "Proteus of machines") can challenge our standard assumptions about developmental psychology and learning. In the narrow sense, Papert defines artificial intelligence (AI) as a branch of advanced engineering, which aims at "extending the capacity of machines to perform functions that would be considered intelligent if performed by people." Yet he uses the term in the broader

sense—that is, as a cognitive science, like linguistics and psychology, but one that “draw[s] heavily on theories of computation [of how mathematical and logical operations are performed or of how large masses of coded information are processed] . . . to give concrete form to ideas about thinking that previously might have seemed abstract, even metaphysical.” In contrast to deductive and knowledge-based approaches, he claims that computation theory provides “a dynamic model” for how intellectual structures change, and that “while psychologists use ideas from AI to build formal, scientific theories about mental processes, children use the same ideas in a more informal and personal way to think about themselves.”²¹ Thus it is hardly surprising that he also attempts to give “concrete form” to certain psychoanalytic ideas about child development.

At one point Papert speculates that the oedipal crisis (so central to psychoanalysis) might actually accelerate the child’s development of *conservation* (a crucial cognitive ability theorized by Piaget). Usually acquired around the age of seven, conservation enables the child “to understand that objects or quantities are ‘conserved’ and remain constant despite changes in their appearance (e.g., one cup of milk is the same amount whether poured into a tall, thin glass or a wide, shallow bowl).”²² Observing that such changes in appearance are frequently generated by new contexts or operations that require constant reequilibration, Papert applies these cognitive dynamics not only to abstract numbers and concrete substances like milk, but also to members of the nuclear family:

Conservation might even be derived from the model of a father not quite succeeding in imposing order on the family. It is possible to speculate, though I have no evidence, that the emergence of conservation is related to the child’s

oedipal crisis through the salience it gives to this model. I feel on firmer ground in guessing that . . . it is related both to structures that are firmly in place, such as the child's representation of authority figures, and to germs of important mathematical ideas, such as the idea of "cancellation."²³

By implying analogic relations between the mathematical idea of cancellation and the oedipal fear of castration, Papert positions the opposing cognitive and psychoanalytic models within a new, larger structure that nevertheless "conserves" Piaget's crucial notion of equilibration. In this way Papert helps us to see the essential role that conservation plays in subject formation, particularly in a culture that fetishizes protean change.

A synthesis of psychoanalytic and cognitive approaches is also attempted in *Narratives from the Crib*, a fascinating collection of nine complementary analyses (by a linguist, a psychoanalyst, and several developmental psychologists) of the presleep monologues of a two-year-old girl named Emily, as well as of the dialogues she has with her father just beforehand.²⁴ Taped by her parents over a fifteen-month period (between her twenty-first and thirty-sixth months), these amazing discourses reveal the "special status" of narrative "in the integration of affect, cognition, and action"—a conclusion with which all nine analysts agree, despite their theoretical differences.²⁵

Reenvoicement and the Sleep-bargaining Genre

Integrating linguistic, cognitive, and psychoanalytic perspectives, John Dore provides the broadest and most provocative analysis in *Narratives from the Crib* in a chapter titled "Monologue as Reenvoicement of Dialogue."²⁶ Exploring the social function of Emily's monologues in the context of the nuclear