

TIME FOR TELETUBBIES: CHILDHOOD, CHILD PARTICIPATION,
AND THE STRUGGLE FOR MEANING

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The children’s television program *Teletubbies* and its concomitant controversies are analyzed along with the media attention surrounding the program. A textual analysis is presented, including the methodologies of narrative theory, semiotics/structuralism, and poststructuralism. The context is also analyzed, using a cultural studies and historical reception approach, in order to chronicle and analyze the show’s controversies and elucidate how these arguments have affected reception and interpretation of the show. Following textual and contextual analysis, a social science approach is utilized, reviewing literature and research that supports or refutes the arguments at hand. Finally, the results of a qualitative, ethnographical study are presented in order to include the child’s perspectives on the show and inform the larger, cultural issues of childhood.

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CHAPTER 1

“OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY”: AN INTRODUCTION

I'll tell you the story of Jimmy Jet—
And you know what I tell you is true.
He loved to watch his TV set
Almost as much as you.

He watched all day, he watched all night
Till he grew pale and lean,
From "The Early Show" to "The Late Show"
And all the shows between.

He watched till his eyes were frozen wide,
And his bottom grew into his chair.
And his chin turned into a tuning dial,
And antennae grew out of his hair.

And his brains turned into TV tubes,
And his face into a TV screen.
And two knobs saying "VERT." and "HORIZ."
Grew where his ears had been.

And he grew a plug that looked like a tail
So we plugged in little Jim.
And now instead of watching TV
We all sit around and watch him.

-“Jimmy Jet and His TV Set,” by Shel Silverstein

On March 31, 1997, a new children’s show, aimed at an audience of children as young as one year old, appeared on BBC television in Britain replacing the time slot of another popular children's show called *Playdays* (Boehm 21). The new show opened and continues to open on each consecutive episode with shots of a green, hilly landscape complete with fantastical, oversized flowers, which are complimented by very large, fluffy, real-life bunnies running about. On the horizon of this scene, a computer-

generated sun begins to rise, superimposed with the round face of a real, chubby-cheeked baby, sporting only a nominal amount of teeth. He or she (no one's really sure) smiles and, as it rises in the dawn colored sky, a voice over begins, "Over the hills and far away..." The camera moves over a hill of this lush landscape to reveal, in the distance, a large spinning pinwheel and a somewhat futuristic looking, grass-covered geodome in the foreground. Out of the top of this dome jumps, one at a time, four plush, unclassifiable figures known as the "Teletubbies."

From this point, these creatures which resemble, according to some, a colorful cross between a baby and an alien, begin a dance as the opening music introduces them more fully. They are Tinky Winky, the tallest of the "Tubbies" and purple in color; Dipsy, the next tallest, who is a bright, almost neon, green; Laa-Laa, who is yellow in color; and finally, the shortest of the bunch, Po, who is red. Not only are they different colors, but their face coloring also shows differing shades, with Dipsy showing the most marked difference with his tan face. All of the Teletubbies have rectangular patches on their stomachs, which are meant to represent television screens, and distinctive protruding appendages sticking out of their heads, which represent varying television antennae.

After this lively introduction, complete with song, dance, hugs, and plenty of gleeful giggling, each program continues with short segments, usually featuring the Teletubbies engaging in simple activities ranging from eating their signature foods, Tubby toast and Tubby custard, to learning a new dance to playing with their toys. They are flanked in their environment, in addition to their dome, pinwheel, and bunnies, by a

vacuum cleaner named Noo-Noo, who dutifully cleans up after the childlike Tubbies, and by periscope-like "voice trumpets" that occasionally rise out of the ground to give the creatures instructions or to announce upcoming events, such as a computer-animated march of animals.

During the course of each program, an interesting ritual occurs. The large glistening pinwheel begins to spin and the Teletubbies are signaled to come closer as their antennae and stomachs light up. One lucky Tubby is chosen to receive the transmission on its television tummy — a live action segment involving real-life children engaged in various day to day activities, such as walking the dog or singing songs in day care.

The overall feel of the show is bright, cheery, and fantastical, to say the least. The pacing and editing of the show is slow and often methodical, just the right speed for young viewers to keep up, and most actions and segments are often repeated twice. Further connection to young viewers is reinforced by the fact that the Teletubbies speak in broken, baby talk English, saying things like "eh-oh," trying to imitate the "hello" the narrator has just said, much as a young child would mimic its adult parent. Each show ends pretty much the same way it begins— the narrator tells the Teletubbies that it is time to say "bye-bye," the reluctant childlike creatures jump back into the hole atop their grassy dome, and the baby sun sets in the sky, cooing gently as it disappears behind the horizon. And all of this in 28 minutes.

So, how did this seemingly innocent and innocuous children's television show, which premiered on U.S. television in April 1998 on PBS, end up at the center of

widespread controversy, garnering the show and its characters such epithets as the “psychedelic spawn of Satan” and “dangerously subversive European propaganda”? (Richmond 32) From educational gurus to media critics and from gay activists to religious pundits, the controversy and attention generated by this one program is staggering and noteworthy. For example, one reporter noted that in a one-year period following the premiere of the program there were over 2,000 press mentions in Britain alone, which says nothing of the attention it has received since coming to America (Rigby 58). What is it about the show that is causing a stir? Why all of the controversy? What sensitive societal vein has this show managed to dig into and why? From where does the controversy come, who promotes the controversy, and what all does it entail, both in regards to the show itself, the implications for television and media studies, and for the reflection of society and culture at large, especially as it relates to children? These are the questions that not only reveal something about this new and unique children’s television program, but also the society that has received it.

As mentioned above in the brief outline of the show, it would seem surprising that *Teletubbies*, given its simplistic nature, would generate so much of a media and cultural frenzy. However, once seen, it is clear that this show is unique compared to other children’s programs or any other television program. So how does the show, as a media text, play into this media phenomenon? By looking at the text analytically, it is clear that there are elements at work that could be construed and interpreted in various ways. The show, as a text, does indeed exert a force, and there are several methodologies and/or critical approaches that could be taken to examine it. Narrative theory,

semiotics/structuralism, and poststructuralism provide analysis to search for possible preferred meanings and, more importantly, to unravel the many possible ways the show makes meaning. Of course, there are many more ways of analyzing this television program textually, such as in terms of postmodernism, globalism, and psychoanalysis. Whole papers could be written focusing on these topics alone, but which time and space does not provide for here.

It is important to begin with the text because it is the text from which the controversy stems. The text itself is not necessarily the reason for the controversy, but merely the catalyst for it. What are the preferred meanings of the text and how can the methods and theories, such as semiotics, poststructuralism, and narrative theory help understand it? What roles do sign systems play in the interpretation of the text and what happens when different people use different sign systems to interpret the text? Finally, how does the text exert a force in the struggle for meaning over that text and how does the text begin to influence the concept of childhood within society?

Ultimately, however, a discussion of the text is never enough. As cultural studies theorist David Morley states, “[...] programmes communicate more than their explicit (manifest) content — they also contain latent messages through implication, assumption, or connotation” (82) and this process has everything to do with the culture that receives it. Therefore, no discussion of the *Teletubbies* phenomenon would be complete without looking at the history of its reception and the attendant controversies surrounding it. In other words, the text must be moved into context. It is clear that the text is an ambiguous one, especially in light of textual analysis. Having established this, it is evident why such

heated debates have arisen concerning the nature of the show and, moreover, how these debates are clearly related to much deeper issues.

Furthermore, the Teletubbies predicament relates how different levels of culture and communication combine and collide to create and secure meaning, though meaning and interpretation call fall into distinct, opposing camps and, thus, create conflict. As Roland Barthes states,

[...] all images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a 'floating chain' of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore the others...Hence in every society various techniques are developed intended to *fix* the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs... (19)

The "terror of uncertain signs" seems to describe nicely the predicament surrounding the *Teletubbies* series and its controversies and the need to "fix" meanings to this very ambiguous show.

But then the question arises as to what cultural group or party has the authority to fix these meanings and win the rhetorical struggles within the culture. Often society looks to "experts," whether they be political, religious, or scientific, for answers. All of these parties are present in the *Teletubbies* situation. What does the research say? Is there any credence to the criticisms leveled against the show? The social scientific and child psychological evidence does indeed inform much of the controversies at hand. Though often conflicting and argumentative itself, the findings show that much of the controversy seems to be centered on legitimate concerns about the relationship between

children and television and the physical and behavioral effects it can have. However, as to specific concerns about speech development, gender identification, and passive viewing habits, the research seems to suggest that many of these concerns are indeed rhetorical and not scientific. Therefore, once again, this becomes another illustration of the struggle for ideological control within society.

However, where is the child in all of these discussions? Though ever present, his or her voice is rarely heard. Since little actual research exists on *Teletubbies* because of the newness of the show, ethnography is an appropriate place to begin, though certainly more research in other areas is needed. What ethnography provides, however, is a venue for children's voices to be heard. As David Buckingham states in his book, *After the Death of Childhood*, often children and the concept of childhood is one that is defined only in adult terms. He states:

The process of defining childhood has become increasingly problematic —and increasingly urgent— in recent decades. As I have suggested, 'the child' only comes into existence in this way: it is defined primarily by distinguishing it from what it is not — that is, 'the adult.' (76-77)

Of course, even ethnographies that are intended to give children a voice to be a part of their own defining are still filtered through the adults who undertake them, but it is still a start. They give children a chance to speak, and in the case of *Teletubbies*, it becomes evident once again that the issues being battled out are of an adult nature and not really about the children who actually watch the show. As Henry Jenkins intimates, the "politics of the child" often has more to do with the adults around them than the child

itself (1998). Though the arguments surrounding Teletubbies usually always center on the concern for and about children, their development, and their future, the argument thus far has not really included what the child has had to say in the matter. In other words, children and childhood become an easy emotional/rhetorical tactic to heighten the discourse of very adult issues. One has only to think of the last political race or election to realize that everything from national security to abortion to tax cuts has to do with "the children."

One mother of two of the children interviewed for this research stated her concern over the controversies surrounding *Teletubbies* and over the issue of children and television in general. She asked why people would get so worked up over a children's show and why people can't just "leave the kids alone." Indeed, the subject of childhood seems to be a cultural fascination, upon which many scholars and pundits have elaborated. It may be that this is so because of what childhood may represent to some or because of the need to protect the future. Or it could just be that people love their kids and want the best for them. Whatever psychological or other motivational factors lay behind this, the fact is that children are important and society at large knows this. That is why children and childhood become an important tool, often against their will or even the will of their parents, in the issues that mark the culture today.

In the end, the research and opinions presented in this thesis may just be another drop in the confusing bucket of this area of media/cultural studies. However, hopefully by looking at this one show, with its respective controversies and media attention, one more layer of insight will be added to an issue that is obviously, given the attention paid

to it, a cultural concern/obsession. Moreover, by adding children's voices to an analysis of the text and context of the show, it may be possible, as others have done, to include children in the very discourse that concerns them. Finally, by addressing these areas as they relate to childhood, it may shed some light on why as a society we cannot manage to "leave the kids alone."

CHAPTER 2

“EH-OH” OR “HELLO”: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF TELETUBBIES

The Usefulness of Textual Analysis as a Starting Place

In 1999, as a response and an attempt to quell the very publicized controversy surrounding *Teletubbies* (mainly over issues like children's education and possible subversive sexual messages) a spokesman for its American distributor is quoted as saying that "*Teletubbies* contains no political or social messages" (Ben-David 16B). While theorists and scholars ranging from the Marxist to cultural studies persuasion would take great objections to this statement, to suggest that the media exists in some form of cultural vacuum, there is possibly one area of study that might appreciate this rather focused point of view — those concerned with certain areas of strict textual/formal analysis. While many, if not all, critical writers certainly would not exclude the importance of investigating, for example, authorial intent, audience reception, and the cultural/social implications informing media events, many acknowledge the importance of starting with the actual object or site where the author and audience coincide, namely the text. It is from this vantage point that the critical approaches of semiotics and structuralism begin, as well as other related organizational approaches, mainly narrative theory. As one author states, these areas of critical thinking and writing really are a "...kind of mental activity divorced from the material world" (Seiter, "Semiotics" 63).

So why begin with critical approaches which are seemingly independent from the culture, society, and even reality around us? First of all, it is precisely because those

other areas of academic inquiry are so subjective, argumentative, and uncertain. Whereas scholars focusing in the areas of cultural studies, postmodernism, and the like argue over subjects such as power relations and even the nature of reality itself, areas of textual analysis are often relatively "free of heated debate" (Kozloff 67). However, this is not to suggest that disagreement and differing theories do not exist in these disciplines, even, for example, as to the nature and definition of "text" itself (Morley 26-29).

These modes of textual analysis, at least in an attempt to understand organizational methods and systems, address the fundamental problems of how media texts enter the culture, which seems to produce so many differing interpretations and, therefore, struggles over *what* a text means. This is the second reason these methods are useful. They provide a starting place for further probing and interpretation. Even the very postmodern and deconstructive critical approaches of new historicism and cultural materialism acknowledge that the "text exerts a force too" (Duerden 251). This is not to say that a thorough investigation of a program like *Teletubbies* should stop with the text itself, as strict formalists would argue, but, contrary to certain phenomenological principles which say that the "text has no life apart from readers" (Cowles, "Reader" 230), one must still look at the text as the site where other social and political implications meet, are explored, and reveal characteristics of the larger present culture. Or as Muriel Robinson puts it, the text, or narrative, is an "intersection of culture, language, and thought" (48). Furthermore, as Mark Currie states, using textual analysis

such as narratology, as well as semiotics/structuralism, should not necessarily be considered passé, but rather the very means from which to move the "poetics to politics" (4).

Moreover, with the help of a framework of narrative theory, as well as the systems of semiotics and structuralism, it is possible to look at *how* a text means, which also informs the arguments over *what* a text means. In analyzing a show like *Teletubbies*, which in its presentation and organization is both simple and at the same time ambiguous, it is important to look at the differing elements of the show, even down to the individual shot, in order to, as the televisual semioticians Hodge and Tripp state, see "how they are related to *build into* meanings" (19). In other words, this is not to say that this analysis provides singular or final interpretations, but rather it builds bridges into other disciplines of analysis, which can account for the varying and multiple meanings that exist. This process, therefore, may illuminate how, first of all, people come to make or read different interpretations and, second, why these differing meanings are so often hotly defended and contested, especially over something as seemingly innocent as a children's television show.

Narrative Theory and the *Teletubbies* Text

Before looking at the individual signs and sign systems evident in *Teletubbies* that are and have been so passionately argued and publicized, it is useful to look at the organization of the show in general, in which these more delineated, and debated, signs exist. For this process, narratology/narrative theory, as it relates to television specifically and storytelling at large, proves to be applicable and enlightening. It is also particularly

useful in that, as mentioned above, it falls into a category of academic structure, which for the most part, is "free from heated debate" (Kozloff 67). This statement, however, should not be construed to mean that the theories of narratology, or that a narratological analysis of the show *Teletubbies*, are in any way simple or uncomplicated matter. In fact, in acknowledging a shift to postmodern narrative theory, Currie states that while some may proclaim, along with so many other disciplines, the death of narratology, the common, cultural language and structure of this theory provide a paradoxical means of elaborating and/or deconstructing even the simplest texts, or shows, like *Teletubbies*. He states,

...the particularity of texts or readers only becomes recognizable through a shared descriptive vocabulary which itself constantly threatens to homogenise the heterogeneity it advances. It is this paradoxical model of change, the simultaneity of standardization and diversification, which makes it still possible to write [a] book or to talk of narratology, if only provisionally, as if it were a unified entity. (14)

Recognizing this, narrative theory still exists as a widely accepted critical approach and one that illuminates well the different elements of a children's show like *Teletubbies*. In fact, following the overview and explanation of televisual narrative theory set forth by several authors, this particular television program illustrates, first of all, the depth to which narrative methods can be implemented, and second of all, the usefulness of narrative theory in explaining how levels of possible meaning, sometimes controversial, can be created by narrative technique. And if nothing else, on a much

broader narrative scheme, *Teletubbies* shows how the storytelling tradition, especially how it relates to children, has metamorphosed through the television medium.

To begin demonstrating these points, one must start with the most basic ideas of narrative theory, namely the ideas of story and discourse. These terms have different connotations depending on the author using them and even the field of study in which they are used. However, most narratologists agree that, at least in theoretical distinction, the story is the "what happens to whom" and the discourse is "how the story is told" (Kozloff 69), or as Muriel Robinson phrases it, the "telling" is the discourse and the "told" is the story. She goes on to state that when the story and discourse come together, that is when narrative happens (45 -46).

The story, content, or the "told," in the case of the *Teletubbies* varies from episode to episode, naturally, and may not reveal too much in the way of narrative theory, due to its consistently simplistic nature. There are certain characteristics and a certain structure, however, that dictate how the stories in the show are put together, and these can reveal some qualities of the narrative which are important. Although many narratologists would concentrate on discovering mythic, folkloric, and/or archetypal patterns within texts, such as Vladimir Propp (Kozloff 71-72), it is sufficient here rather to highlight only superficially the types of stories that appear on *Teletubbies*.

First of all, it should be noted that the each program is divided into a series of short stories or segments. Semiotically speaking, these distinctive segments can be said to be the paradigms within the larger syntagm organization of the show. All of the episodes of *Teletubbies* are based on the same syntagmatic order, with differing

paradigms being placed within the structure of each episode. The show begins with a short introduction, which is exactly the same every episode, that introduces the audience to the Teletubby world and the main characters, Tinky Winky, Dipsy, Laa-laa, and Po. Following the introduction, various paradigmatic short segments will be shown, but not necessarily in a given order. One of these segments is a live action sequence featuring children doing such things as walking a pony, mending a fence, or playing in the rain. These segments will always be repeated, with repetition being a notable children's television motif and one that is closely linked to educational properties. Other segments in this middle section of the show revolve around simple stories of some Teletubby activity, such as doing a dance, eating their signature foods, tubby custard and tubby toast, or playing games with their respective toys or their lively vacuum cleaner Noo-Noo. The show's ending, which is also the exact same every episode, consists of the Teletubbies saying goodbye.

These individual segments, even the opening and closing scenes which do not vary from episode to episode, can and do stand on their own as individual stories, being connected within the larger framework of each episode thematically. For example, one particular episode shows the Teletubby characters in one of the story segments playing with a water puddle and during the live action segment, the story consists of children simply playing in the rain. It should also be noted that varying episodes often mix and match these individual story segments, or paradigms, so that, for example, the water puddle sequence is interchanged with the live action segment where, instead of playing in the rain, children wash a car with their father. The overall connection and flow of the

entire episode, or the syntagm, remains the same and in both cases the shows are constructed around a theme of water. This is not unlike the methods used by such shows as *Sesame Street*, which interchanges differing segments or paradigms within a larger thematic framework. More will be discussed about the compilation of these segments when evaluating the discourse of the show.

Sufficiently, each of these narrative segments hold the stories of the show and each of these segments rely heavily upon simple actions of cause and effect to move the action along. While some theorists insist upon some sort of conflict to drive a story, others recognize that a story, in its simplest form, is a series of events, and events are nothing more than a change from one situation or state of affair to another (Kozloff 69). Conflict does not play heavily in the stories of the Teletubbies to create an arch of action, but rather the introduction or discovery of new objects or the simple presentation of an event comprises the whole of their make up. (It is a children's show after all.) For example, in one episode segment the story is a simple plot line beginning with Po discovering a water puddle. She questions its nature and, with the help of the voice-over narrator, learns what it is and observes it carefully. Then Laa-laa appears and Po waits to see if she will step in the water. She does not and the two of them then wait for the next Teletubby to come, who happens to be Dipsy. He also notices the water and does not step in it. Then they wait. Finally, Tinky Winky appears and, though he notices the water before accidentally stepping it, decides to jump in the puddle anyway and play, which causes the other Tubbies to burst into laughter, as well as the Baby Sun hanging in the sky, who ever monitors their events.

These elements will take on another dimension later in the discussion of discourse, but for now what is important to remember is that these stories are carefully created for a specific audience of young children. In fact, it is these simple stories and lack of perceived traditional educational content, such as presentation of the alphabet or counting skills, that have created much controversy for the show and earned it the stigma of being completely devoid of any educational merit and, therefore, detrimental to children (“Their Mission,” 24). However, Anne Wood, the creator of the series, has refuted the statements, saying that the show, aimed at viewers as young as one, teaches cause and effect, which is important to children’s development and understanding of how the world works ([PBS Online](#)). Therefore, simple causality becomes not just a narrative technique to move the action along, but rather the whole impetus and instructional objective of the show. In other words, the stories of the Teletubbies are important because they illustrate at the most basic of levels the idea of causality in storytelling. Kozloff states that the viewing audience has an “almost unquenchable habit of inferring causality from succession” within storytelling (70), and it would seem that in the case of *Teletubbies* this habit is explored, promoted, and developed even among the youngest of viewers.

Far more involved and engaging than the stories of the shows themselves, however, is the way in which they are presented, or in other words, the discourse of the show. This is where things, theoretically speaking, get more complicated and interesting, and where narrative theory does much for explanation. Once again, following the line of discussion in Kozloff’s article, the idea of discourse begins with a look at its participants.

She outlines six categories of “persons” or types of participants that are involved in the narrative process. First of all, there is the “real author,” or the actual person who creates the text. Obviously, when dealing with the complicated process of producing a television show, identifying a single “real author” is difficult. Though there are obviously specific writers for each episode and many other personnel who give input to production, Anne Wood, its original creator, usually stands out as the “real author” of the show. At least by the media that covers the Teletubby phenomenon, Wood is the person ultimately responsible for the show, the one who takes the credit and the controversy. What may be more important in light of this controversy, however, is identifying the next participant in the narrative, the “implied author,” a category that has been contested within narrative theory due to its inability to provide a systematic means of description (Kozloff 96). This element is described as the “imaginary conception” of the author made by a reader of a text, or in other words, a “construct” of what kind of person the author is thought to be (Kozloff 78). This, again, could be a topic for debate. For some, as mentioned before, the author of *Teletubbies* is a storyteller who is “dumbing down” young viewers (Mulrine 70), representing all that is bad about television’s relationship with children, but for others she is presenting a technological, child-friendly view of the world (Boehm, 29; PBS Online), thus helping them to adjust and cope with today’s postmodern, media-infiltrated society.

What may be more easily identifiable, but nonetheless complicated, is the next participant in the discourse, the actual “narrator,” or person who actually does the narrating within the text. It is complicated because narration is used heavily in

Teletubbies and there are actually several narrators within the structure of the show that narrative theory can elaborate upon. As the show opens, a male voice with a slight Jamaican accent introduces us to the world of the Teletubbies by saying, “Over the hills and far away, Teletubbies come to play,” as the Baby Sun rises over the landscape. Aside from its obvious connotations and connections to folkloric tone and children’s stories in general, this narration leads us into a rather interesting chiasmus, or reverse parallelism, of narrative structure. This disembodied narrator, much like Kozloff’s idea of the host, enters at the beginning of the show to give introduction to the characters and overall structure to the show. The only other time this narrator narrates is at the end of the show, creating a bracket for the whole production. He is heterodiegetic, or outside of the world being shown, and has no identifiable connection to the action within the episode, but serves to anchor the storytelling process from an objective viewpoint.

The next narrator to appear in this chiastic narrative is the female voice that emanates from the voice trumpets, those periscope-like instruments that rise out of the ground. After the introductory segment and song, including the Jamaican narrator’s words, this narrator further brackets the story with the question, “Where have all the Teletubbies gone?” At the end of the show, just before the Jamaican narrator offers the final words of the show, the voice trumpet narrator returns with the words, “Time for Tubby bye-bye,” which is repeated several times in a mechanical manner. This narrator, embedded within the larger narration of the beginning and ending, is also disembodied but in a different way. She is not disembodied, in that she resides outside of the characters and plot, for she (the actual voice instrument) interacts with the Tubbies on

several occasions, but it is her voice and identity that are separated from the actual scene of action. This raises some interesting questions about who this narrator is and the purpose she serves. She is the only female narrator to appear in the regular scheme of the show and she has power to act only as a mechanical chiming of the action occurring on screen, unlike the next narrator to be discussed who has the power to not only report action, but dictate it as well. The ambiguity of this narrator and her role could certainly lead those of the more psychoanalytic/feminist persuasion to read questionable codes concerning the possible nature of the role of the female/mother-figure in this show and the relative power structures of such.

The next narrator to appear in the course of the show, however, has great capacity and power within each episode and delivers the bulk of the narration. He is a male, disembodied voice who narrates the short story segments that appear within the show. What is fascinating about this narrator is that though never physically seen on screen, he is still a homodiegetic narrator who interacts with the Teletubby characters. We do not know conclusively who he is, but we know that the Tubbies obey him, much as a child would mind a parent. In fact, the Tubbies respond to him by looking directly at the camera and often repeating, in baby talk of course, the words that he speaks, such as “eh-oh” for “hello.” More importantly, his narration not only describes the action occurring on screen, but also in many instances actually dictates what will happen in the story. For example, in the simple plot previously mentioned concerning the water puddle, this narrator tells the Tubbies to “mind the puddle,” which all of them do except for the mischievous Tinky Winky who jumps knowingly into it. On other occasions, for

example, he has been known to announce, "The Teletubbies decided to do a dance," which they, upon hearing, hurry together to perform. This occurred, however, only after the narrator had spoken. As Kozloff points out, omniscience of the narrator is a key variable to understanding more fully the narrative itself (84). In this case, it seems that our narrator is not only omniscient, but omnipotent as well, which could certainly open up many interpretations leading to varying issues such as the power relations between adult and child, child identity, and the role of technology in childhood, especially as it relates to the technological medium of the television. This narrator is obviously a parent figure who exercises control over the behavior of the Tubby children, but seems to do it for the enjoyment of the Baby Sun/viewing audience at hand. This could also be a contributing factor to the controversy surrounding this program — the fact that this all-powerful narrator exercises ultimate control on his subjects and does so purely for the pleasure and entertainment of himself and/or others.

There is one more level of narration in operation within this show. This occurs during the live-action segment, which is placed usually toward the middle of the episode and highlights the activities of real children doing simple activities. A child, usually outside of the action of the sequence, narrates this segment. This narration actually arises from a very practical purpose in that the show, being a British production, more than not produces segments that involves British children who speak with British accents, which American children may have difficulty understanding, or which non-English speaking children would not understand at all. So, the child-narrator used always has an American accent and reinforces the action with his/her narration. Likewise, since *Teletubbies* is an

international export, children of different nationalities and languages can narrate the action for their respective audiences. Though this narration serves mainly a functional purpose and, given the export capacity of the show, a financial purpose as well, it still adds dimension to the larger narrative as a whole. This segment and narrator are the turning point in the narrative structure. From the child narrator, the story returns to the control of the male narrator, who in limited capacities returns authority to the female narrator (voice trumpet), who finally returns the narrative process over to the Jamaican narrator.

The question then arises within this complex system of narrators, as to the identity of the "narratee," or the "you" to whom the story is directed. As hinted at above, in an interesting twist on more common interpretations, the Baby Sun appears to be that "you." This character does not interact with the Tubbies, but rather views their antics and responds accordingly with coos and/or laughs. Along Robert Allen's discussion of studio audiences and laughtracks summarized by Kozloff (80), indeed the Baby Sun fulfills the role of an audience cue. *Teletubbies* is not filmed before the "narratee" of a live audience and there is no traditional laughtrack inserted, but the Baby Sun is no less operational in serving the same purpose. Once again, this apparent manipulation of response could fuel the controversy at hand, especially in relation to the argument of television's power over children. But at the same time, the technique is nothing less than what adults have come to expect when hearing the audience laughing during any given popular primetime sitcom. As one author satirically states,

...Teletubbies should unnerve [adults] because it's smart-blatantly, joyously manipulative, to no clear purpose beyond exciting one-year-olds with the news that someone cares enough to manipulate them. Franco was probably right to say that any child you gave him before the age of five was his for life. That's why '70's kids should be grateful Big Bird got them instead. (Carson 135)

To complete the narrative process, moving from the "narratee," the final participants consist of the "implied reader" and the "real reader." This jump puts us squarely outside of the realm of the text, but not outside the realm of controversy. The implied reader, or the audience the show is designed for, is the youngest viewing population ever targeted — one-year-olds. This obviously has many people concerned, fearing that the toddlers, becoming too dependant upon television at such a young age, will develop bad habits and become "crib potatoes" (Mulrine 70), as some put it.

Semiotics and Structuralism: The Text Gets More Complicated

However, before moving the text into the realm of the audience, where the actual reader resides, it is important to further explore how these concerns and controversies are related to the text, specifically in the structure and sign systems of the text itself.

Narrative theory explains how the overall show is presented and, as hinted at earlier, shows that the elements of the organization of the show itself are ambiguous and could lead to possible differing interpretations. So what are the differing signs that cause many people to say that the show is "weird," subversive, even "creepy" and "educationally suspect"? (Millman) Are there dominant meanings encoded into the text or are they too

ambiguous to determine? These are questions that must be explored before analyzing what effect culture and society, or in other words the context, may have on the text itself.

The areas of semiotics and structuralism are concomitant and often interchangeable with the ideas of narrative theory. Though these fields of study may, too, be considered separate from the real world, they will at least provide a site for discerning what signs create struggles over interpretation and are so intensely debated within the cultural context of the show. Roland Barthes, in his article "The Rhetoric of Image," states that in the context of deciphering the linguistic or literal message of text, "the text replies -- in a more or less direct, more or less partial manner -- to the question: *what is it?*" (19).

Certainly, one of the main goals of semioticians and structuralists is to uncover the answer to this question by a close examination of the structure and signs evident in a given text. Semiotics and structuralism seek to find out what an object or text is, what it means, and how it makes that meaning, given the larger system, whether lingual or cultural, etc., that the text can fall within. In the case of children's television, especially television for very young children, it would seem that defining a text within the larger system of shows that exist would be relatively clear cut (for example looking at such elements as educational components, just to name one). However, since *Teletubbies* hit the screen, answering the question "what is it?" has certainly become more difficult. Notwithstanding its ambiguities, by looking at the show through a semiotics/structuralist methodology and eventually a post-structuralist approach, the show emerges as a statement of a postmodern society where several sign systems, often conflicting, collide

to open up a production of multiple meanings across a wide spectrum of audiences. And the one audience the program intends to reach the most and, therefore, affect the most — ages 1 to 4 — may never be able to fully explain the system from which they place and extract meaning from the show.

As with narrative theory, structuralism deals with the structure and organization of texts, be it linguistic, literary, or in this case, televisual. However, unlike narrative theory, which tends to place all narratives into its own fairly fixed structure, structuralism seeks not to place a text within such a set pattern in order to glean meaning, but rather uncover the inherent, concealed structures that already exist which allow the process of meaning to take place. It is also heavily influenced by relational patterns, both what an object, or sign, is and what it is not. Moreover, a semiotics approach to a text stresses the codes and conventions by which these signs begin to be given meaning. To look at some of these structuralist patterns, it is once again useful to look at the overall organization of the show as mentioned previously in the discussion of narrative theory. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his work on structuralism and myth, divides myths into what he calls mythemes, or bundles of features defined by both relation and difference. "And it is only as bundles," he states, "that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning" (qtd. in Cowles, "Structuralism" 93). As outlined while discussing narrative theory, each *Teletubbies* episode divides almost naturally into individual bundles or distinct segments, which, as mentioned earlier, are often interchanged thematically from episode to episode. These include, for example, the introduction, the live action segment, the Teletubby playtime segments, and the computer generated

segments, where such things as computer animated animals or ships appear for the Teletubbies' playful pleasure.

Following structuralist methodology, relational patterns begin to emerge as each of these bundles, or segments, is analyzed, even before addressing the relational patterns between larger systems as a whole. This can be accomplished by looking simply at one of these bundles, specifically the introduction of the program. Because it is the first segment of the show, as well as the first glimpse into the environment and nature of the Teletubbies, and because it does not change from episode to episode, analyzing the introduction is a tidy way to expound on not only the structure of the episode and overall show, but also the semiotic ideas of codes that are present. Some scholars have spent extensive research time on analyzing whole children's shows, even down to the analysis of single shots (Hodge and Tripp). However, for the purposes of bridging the text into a larger discussion of context and consequently, poststructuralism, the introduction of this program suffices in highlighting many of the necessary elements that reveal the ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings that exist in the show as a whole. The introduction, in other words, seems to illustrate in a condensed form many of the main elements at play in the text, as well as some of the concomitant controversies attached to its various polysemous meanings.

As mentioned earlier, this segment is the same every episode and introduces the Teletubbies before every show. It begins with a shot of a sun, a computer-generated rendering of a sun to be exact, rising over real-life, green, grassy hills, dotted with fake flowers. The hills and the flowers reveal a structuralist binary opposition that will be

consistent throughout the context of this show — the contrasting of nature and the natural with the artificial and contrived. The grass is real. The flowers, being oversized and extravagantly colored and which sometimes sway as if dancing to the accompanying music, are obviously not. As the sun continues to rise, this real/contrived, nature/technology split continues to be apparent.

Superimposed on the computer-animated sun is the face of a real baby, which giggles and coos as it rises in the sky, looking over this magical landscape. Once again, there is a division between the real and contrived. As Ellen Seiter points out, however, “[...] the nature/culture division, or the blurring of the two, is a central characteristic of children’s media” (“Semiotics” 58). In fact, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss this nature/culture opposition is the central myth of all society (qtd. in Seiter, “Children’s” 314). Seiter goes on to state that not only is this combining of the two opposites more and more prevalent in children’s literature and media, but also that the characters that contain this duality “[...] are often treated by journalists and experts on childhood as new, bizarre, and grossly commercialized [...]” (“Semiotics” 58-59). This then begs the question of why some of these characters and programs generate concern and controversy within a society, such as *Teletubbies*, and some do not. Is it the inherent nature of these images or does it have to do with the newness of these images? And how does the culture at large affect this process? After all, Big Bird is an eight-foot tall talking bird, but there is not much controversial coverage of it in the media. This, of course, puts structuralism and semiotics squarely in the realm of social context and audience reception, which will be addressed later. However, these issues address larger ones

within the areas of the semiotic/structuralist methodology because they constantly remind one that “[...] any society involves many codes and subcodes” (Cowles, “Structuralism” 86) and this must be taken into consideration in any discussion using these methodologies.

The baby sun also raises another interesting aspect to the concept of binary oppositions within texts. Since just the face of the baby is shown within the animated sun, it is difficult to determine the sex of the child. This is the first of many ambiguities of the show that deal specifically with questions of gender. In terms of binary oppositions, this could be categorized into the male/female relationship. This theme will be continued with the Teletubby characters themselves. Determining the sex of the Teletubbies can be difficult, not to mention the nature of the creatures themselves. Maybe with the exception of slightly deeper voices, it is difficult to conclude that Tinky Winky and Dipsy are male and Laa-laa and Po are female. Additionally, there is no other indication given in the purple, green, yellow, and red coloring of the Teletubbies, their outward appearance, behavior, or toys that they play with which would give any indication as to the sex of the character. This, of course, excludes the controversial purple, male Teletubby, Tinky Winky, who carries a red handbag or “magic bag,” which is often read as a purse, a particular female accessory. Sex identification is, therefore, dependent mostly upon the narrator who calls each Teletubby by gender specific pronouns. In a discussion about societal trappings that distinguish the sex of children, Karin Calvert posits that often clothing, color, or other gender-related articles play an

important role in society, more for the identification purposes of adults than children.

She states:

Institutional sartorial differentiation informs everyone who comes in contact with a child of its gender, so that they will respond in socially accepted ways to this particular little person, thus reinforcing the gender role that will be expected of it in the future. Pink and blue baby clothes become evidence of the importance of early identification in a society where so little seems certain. (67-68)

Once again, things such as color and clothing may speak to the codes that Western culture uses for gender identification, and, therefore, may effect the semiotic interpretation of any given text. It may also explain some of the cultural discomfort surrounding the ambiguous nature of the Teletubbies, given the fact that the show does not contain these traditional, recognizable signs.

However, what this vagueness of gender does not address, within semiotic and structuralist methodology, is the inability, and inherent weakness, of the idea of binary oppositions to include more than two contraries. This deficiency in the theory of structuralism and semiotics is one that has been elaborated on by such poststructuralists as Jacques Derrida. In spite of this weakness, Derrida, has not thrown out the whole theory, but rather created a method “[...] to deconstruct, to confuse and confound a way of looking at the world that is solely dyadic, binary, by using the very principles it deconstructs — the dyadic sign and binary oppositions” (qtd. in Jensen 35). Therefore, the theories of semiotics and structuralism do not become defunct when addressing the

very postmodern text of *Teletubbies*, however, it must, by necessity become more complex and inclusive.

The gender issues inherent within *Teletubbies* must consequently open a forum that encompasses more than just the binary categories of male and female. The Teletubbies are, in many respects, genderless, though the narrator uses pronouns to define their sex. But, it must be remembered, they, like the baby sun hanging in the sky, are also posited as infants within the show. And an infant's sex, if not indicated by some social accoutrement like clothing, as mentioned above, is also often unidentifiable and genderless, unless someone is changing diapers. Baby girls and baby boys that have not yet grown to become socialized into a particular society pretty much look and behave the same way. This idea shows up elsewhere in popular culture with such things as seen in the commercial photography of Anne Geddes, who has made a whole career out of taking pictures of babies, gender not apparent, in costumes of nature such as mice or bees. Therefore, the male/female distinction must take in more ideas of gender, especially as it relates to children and infants, who themselves often do not make any distinction between the sexes until they are more psychologically developed. It must include the split of adult/infant, the socialized/non-socialized. In other words, in a poststructuralist assessment, the male/female split comes to represent the absence of what is not stated — that which is not completely considered socially male or female, but rather that which is somewhere in between, including infants or those who practice non-traditional gender roles. For some, this is where the terms of “queer” and “queer theory” come into play.

Though used in different ways, “queer” can be used to describe the gray areas that lie between binary oppositions. According to one author,

[...] the most exciting deployments of “queer/queerness” are related to the word’s ability to describe those complex circumstances in texts, spectators, and production that resist easy categorization, but that definitely escape or defy the heteronormative. (Doty 7)

Teletubbies certainly defies “easy categorization.”

Returning to the introduction of the show, more ambiguities begin to surface within the methodology of structuralism and semiotics. However, these critical approaches also continue to help define the text in more traditional codes. For example, the next shot after the rising of the baby sun changes to one of close tracking over the hills, exposing the large, colorful, faux flowers and also the real-life rabbits, which are specifically bred big for the show in order to match the large set (Gleick 61). Once again, the real/artificial split is manifest. Voice over narration begins at this point and solidifies or "anchors" the visual signs, as Barthes would put it (Seiter, “Semiotics” 56), by giving the audience a clue of its location. It is important to remember that aural systems contain codes, just as visual ones do. As Robert Hodge and David Tripp state: “Each of these is a different code, organized according to different principles, carrying potentially different messages” (17-18). However, the combination of words with images often helps to suggest a meaning without closing off differing interpretations (Seiter, “Semiotics” 56). The narration begins, "Over the hills and far away, Teletubbies come to play." This short introductory phrase elicits the conventions of the genre of the fairy tale book and hails the

viewer to read the show as such. Though strict semiotics and structuralism unapologetically do not account for authorial intent (Seiter, “Semiotics” 37), Stuart Hall’s landmark treatment of television discourse suggests that this first spoken phrase of the show would imply “a preferred meaning,” even though there can never be a “[...] single, univocal and determined meaning [...]” (30) for such complex, visual signs such as television. This preferred meaning is backed up by an interview with Christ Watts, the lighting designer for the show, who states that even in his job on the set, the aim was to create a real-life fantasy world, but one that was reminiscent of two-dimensional books that young children would read (Calhoun 91). However, as Hall suggests, the show may be “encoded” by the producers of the show with the preferred characteristics of fantasy, but there is no guarantee that the show will be “decoded,” or received, as such, especially depending on the audience that is viewing it.

Continuing within the make-believe world of Teletubbyland, nonetheless, the camera continues to track over the grassy hills, dotted with a mixture of real trees and fake foliage, and reveals a computer-animated windmill, which is spinning on a far away hill. Also revealed in the shot is a grass-covered dome with a hole in the top — a dwelling of some sort, which some have referred to as a “breast-shaped edifice” (Seaton, “Laa-Laa” 260). The windmill and dome add an additional element to the idea of artificiality, namely the connotation of technology, which is also very contrived and very much in opposition to the idea of naturalness. The camera zooms in close to the top of the dome and the next shot reveals the Teletubbies popping out of the hole one at a time, birth imagery upon which Freudian psychoanalysts would certainly comment. When

they have all come out of the opening, the title graphic appears spelling out “Teletubbies” in balloon-like letters as a voice-over announces the show. The balloon letters then pop, acting as a wipe of the screen, and a second part of the introduction begins.

This second section introduces us to the characters and continues to set the tone for the show. The Teletubbies come running down off the top of their dome and start up another hill, as the lively and upbeat Teletubbies theme song begins, a song which reached the top of the British pop charts after it was released as a single (Ebenkamp 24). Voice trumpets, as they are called, which resemble high-tech, metal periscopes, rise out of the ground and a female voice/narrator emanates from them saying over and over, "Time for Teletubbies." Once again, more technology and all of its connotations are introduced, this time literally rising out of the naturalness of the earth which it so contrasts, the human voice being noticeable as human, but machine-like in its repetitions.

Each of the Teletubbies are then introduced in the song and featured in camera shots as they do their signature dances. Introduced from tallest to shortest, the first to appear is the purple Tinky Winky, followed by green-colored Dipsy, then yellow Laa-laa, and finally red Po. The song cues the four characters when it says, "Teletubbies say hello," which the Teletubbies then respond by doing in chiming, high-pitched baby talk. They self-reflexively look into the camera, which they are obviously aware of and comfortable with, and repeat “hello,” which comes out in baby talk as "eh-oh."

The final part of the introduction consists of the song repeating and introducing the characters again, as they dance and run into each other and laugh and finally end the song with a "big hug," which they all chant in baby talk as they gather in a circle and

embrace. Then they run out of sight and a voice trumpet rises and asks with its signature female voice, "Where have all the Teletubbies gone?" The shot then switches to the baby sun, who, watching all of this action from the sky, is obviously enthralled and entertained by what it sees. This is obviously a visual cue as to what the babies in front of the television at home should be doing as well — watching and enjoying — which is controversial to some parents who feel that the show is manipulative and subversively promoting television viewing (Richmond 32). From this point, each episode begins anew.

This last part of the introduction to the show also reveals many things in terms of structuralism and semiotics. As with the first part of the introduction, the nature/technology opposition continues to be apparent as the Teletubby creatures are introduced. The naturalness of the grass, trees, blue sky, and rabbits is in counterpoint with the very mechanical, high-tech geodome, windmill, and voice trumpets. However, what becomes more apparent within this section of the introduction is that unlike many depictions of the nature/culture opposition, where conflict rises out of their juxtaposition, the world of the Teletubbies is one where nature and technology are posited in complete harmony with one another. The Teletubbies are always happy, always hugging, and the world in which they live is full of wonder, fun, and play. Technology, like the camera the Teletubbies look into and always address, is not something to be feared, but embraced with wonder and innocence. Once again, like the issues of gender mentioned before, the nature/technology split must account for more than just nature or just technology. It must

include a realm that lies somewhere in between, or something completely different all together.

Poststructuralism: The Problems of Ambiguity

This argument opens up the interpretation of Teletubbies into the realm of poststructuralism, which proves to be a more complex system for analysis. It also accounts for the multiple interpretations of what the text means and how that meaning is derived. This is probably best illustrated by looking at the Teletubby creatures themselves, which are introduced in this last part of the introduction. Deciphering the image of the creatures is more convoluted and it certainly produces more controversy. What binary oppositions can be used to describe them? What referents do the Teletubbies represent? Just exactly what are they? And what sign system does one begin to use to decide what they are? These are questions that are not easily answered, but ones that shed light on the complexity of a show that might otherwise be taken as inconsequential, it being a children's program.

As each of the Teletubbies is introduced, it becomes apparent that some properties are identifiable and others are more ambiguous. They are brightly colored, plush-textured, and big-bottomed characters that one critic noted resembled "the colorized offspring of the Pillsbury Doughboy and E.T." (Richmond 32). Others are quick to point out their similarity to the body of a baby, the fuzziness of a teddy bear, and the face of an alien (Seaton 260). One author goes as far to read the Teletubbies in this manner:

[They] *do* look an awful lot like fetuses, with their huge eyes, oversized upper lips and hairless, smooshy faces. They also sort of look like an

infantilized version of the gray space alien. From an American perspective, the Teletubbies are a disturbing collision of two of the most pervasive cultural obsessions of our time, abortion and UFO's. (Millman)

Are they babies, bears, or fetuses? And what about the symbols on top of the Teletubbies' heads? For example, Tinky Winky, the largest, male-voiced, purple Teletubby has an upside-down triangle on top of his head that many interpret as being representational of an upside-down coat hanger, connoting such things ranging from a makeshift antenna on a television to abortion (Millman). However, for others, it represents the gay pride symbol, also an upside-down triangle. This argument is bolstered by the fact that Tinky, referred to as "he" by the narrator, is purple (a color often associated with gay pride) and carries as a toy a red "magic bag," which looks a lot like a ladies' purse. As some authors assert, "Tinky Winky still comes across as a big, fabulous fag" (Walters 122), one who shows the "importance of being well-accessorized" (qtd. in Zorn). So, are the appendages coming out of their heads antennae, phallic symbols, or symbols of gay prides? A structuralist or semiotician would say that it depends on the shared cultural system used to decode meaning, or the interpretive community that shares these common systems. A poststructuralist would say that it is impossible to tell, mainly because these "interpretive communities" are usually constructed by researchers who have, as Kim Schröder states, collected participants who were "[...] isolated individuals brought together for the sake of research" and, therefore, not a true representation of a "social collective" (337). In other words, the text can mean whatever it will to whoever reads it and "[...] can never be reduced simply to one

ultimate or real meaning” (Morley 83), even within a community that seems to have shared systems of interpretation. Therefore, some diehard poststructuralists assert that all images lead to an “[...] abyss of endless signs behind signs, leaving no possibility of final referential meaning or truth” (Cowles, “Poststructuralism” 119).

In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard posits that all of postmodern culture has become a world of signs that no longer refers to any “reality.” It has no referents and no originals. And since it has no referents, society begins to collapse on itself, breaking down all boundaries of meaning, the media, and culture, leaving very few distinctions between the social, political, cultural, religious, and even the real. Therefore, there are very few, if any, stable structures in society and all culture and environments are reduced to a constant ebb and flow of undifferentiated images and signs, and not reality, per se. Anne Wood, the creator of the show, perfectly illustrates this point by buying into the merging of the real with the media and all other cultural signs. In an interview discussing why such high secrecy is maintained on and around the set of *Teletubbies*, she states: “We want to preserve the reality of the Teletubbies [...] we don’t want to destroy the magic” (qtd. in Gleick 60). In Wood’s view, the world of the Teletubbies is just as “real” as anything else in postmodern culture. Baudrillard might well agree with her.

This questioning of reality itself is part of the “play” of poststructuralists — part of the pleasure of attributing multiple meanings to a text. In fact, some scholars go as far as to describe pleasure as whatever goes beyond a single meaning. For some, like Barthes, this aesthetic pleasure is even considered “blissful” and almost “erotic.” Barthes

goes on to say that the blissful text “unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions” (qtd. in Cowles, “Poststructuralism” 117). Reflective of these attitudes, Damon Wardrobe states of the *Teletubbies* text:

Teletubbies explores the gaping a-textuality of the post-postmodern era. The smiling baby-sun represents, in one sense, the de-centering of the perception, the dizzying new relationship between metonym, synonym, and signifier. The language of the Tubbies reveals a post-Joycean delight in the semiotics of Saussurean synchronic morphology - the phonemes explode diachronically in a paradigmatic deep structure. The extraordinary music combines a diachronic leit-motif with a contrapuntal (but strictly diatonic) and almost aleatoric feel. The garden in which the Tubbies roam like free-floating particles is Candidian arena. The rabbits symbolize the presence of a deterministic God, the flowers represent 20th Century Godlessness. (University)

He goes on to defend the show’s “deconstructionalist metafictional structure” and praises its inability to remain singularly identifiable (University). As Vincent Leitch states, postmodern texts “forego meaning” (qtd. in Cowles, “Poststructuralism” 117). They are what they are and they produce the uneasy pleasure of deconstructing only to hint at meaning, but never reach a single, final conclusion.

So what does this analysis say about *Teletubbies* as a media and cultural text? First of all, the show exists and is a popular one. The text has entered the culture and has become recognized by it. Therefore, the text exerts a force within society, though its

extent may be varied. Second, however, as textual analysis demonstrates, the text alone cannot account for all of the varied receptions across the wide spectrum of culture and the struggles involved in that process. In fact, the text seems to encourage these varied readings. After all, as theorists like Jonathan Culler assert, structures and codes don't really exist in texts, but in the producers and receivers of those texts (Cowles, "Structuralism" 90). Though textual analysis can suggest some of the reasons a text can have power in a society, it alone cannot fully explain what that power is and what can be done with it in any given culture. Ultimately, therefore, the text must be analyzed through a cultural studies approach, which accounts for ideological, poststructuralist, historical, and other elements that intersect with the text itself. In other words, the text must be moved into the realm of context.

Textual analysis such as methodologies of narrative theory, semiotics, and structuralism can be useful in suggesting how a text can make meaning. Poststructuralism and postmodernism, on the other hand, suggests that no conclusive meanings are possible. As for the Teletubbies, they, therefore, become just what they are — an unlimited string of cultural signs that in the end may have no meaning beyond their own image. Though they may be a new symbol and an ideological force with the culture for which different groups have attributed meaning, at a basic level they have become simply their own signs and have no referent but themselves. One of the children interviewed for this discussion, a four-year-old boy, was asked what exactly the Teletubby creatures were. After thinking a moment, this budding poststructuralist simply replied, "They're just Teletubbies." In the end, this may be the best way to think of them.

CHAPTER 3

“UH-OH”: THE TEXT MEETS CONTEXT

Texts, Culture, and Historical Reception

One can talk about the *Teletubbies*, or any similar children’s program for that matter, as just a kids’ show or as something innocuously or insignificantly geared toward a small sector of society — a bit of entertainment, hopefully educational, for children and a way to free up some time for mom or dad to do the laundry. Or, as mentioned previously, it can be considered a show that “contains no political or social messages” (Ben-David 16B). However, as David Morley states:

[...] there is, in television, no such thing as an ‘innocent text’ — no programme which is not worthy of serious attention, no programme which can claim to provide only ‘entertainment’ rather than messages about society. (82)

All texts say something about the culture in which they reside. Conversely, the way a text is received, interpreted, and used by individuals in a society not only speaks volumes about the text, but, more importantly, about the culture itself, especially when the text is as popular and polysemous as *Teletubbies*, not to mention controversial. The text might produce the polysemy, but in the end the culture determines the popularity and the controversy, while trying to solidify a far-reaching interpretation of the show within the society.

First of all, a show's popularity reveals something about the nature of the text and the public that views it. *Teletubbies* has an estimated viewing audience of over a billion worldwide (Seaton, "Tubby") in over twenty countries ("New"). Obviously with an audience this large, the show must resonate with children and the other audiences that view it. Speaking of the popularity of a text, John Fiske states:

The television text can only be popular if it is open enough to admit a range of negotiated readings through which various social groups can find meaningful articulations of their own relationships to the dominant ideology. Any television text must, then, be polysemic to a certain extent, for the structured heterogeneity of the audience requires a correspondingly structured heterogeneity of meanings in the text. (298)

Teletubbies can certainly claim to be polysemic and, as mentioned in Chapter 1, some scholars feel that often the pleasure of a text like *Teletubbies* comes from the ambiguities it presents to its audience for multiple decipherment (Cowles, "Poststructuralism" 117).

However, along with being hugely popular among children and parents, *Teletubbies* has also been extremely controversial for several different reasons, most having to do with these very ambiguities present in the text. The show has been called "vaguely evil" (Giles 69), "a threat to children" (Chesworth 15), and a "subversive force for international evil" (MacGregor A19). Is Tinky Winky a gay icon? Do the televisions on the creatures' stomachs promote television viewing? Is *Teletubbies* a communist allegory? Is the show "dumbing down" a whole generation of toddlers (Lyall, 41)?

For those, especially parents, grappling with these questions and many more like them, the ambiguities of *Teletubbies* are not necessarily pleasurable. They are quite the opposite. As mentioned earlier, Barthes states that all images are polysemous and, therefore, produce uneasiness within the society in which they reside — “the terror of the uncertain signs” (19). This statement perfectly summarizes the Teletubby condition/controversy. And with this terror, the issue then switches to a question of how ambiguous signs become “fixed,” or given a solid meaning within a culture where differing social groups struggle over control of those meanings. Moreover, how do these struggles over interpretational authority shape the overall reception and decipherment of the text in the society at large?

Try to imagine, for a moment, the show *Teletubbies* without all of the uproar concerning subversive gay connotations, without the tirades of child psychologists, angry parents, and even religious pundits, or without any of the controversy and media furor that have surrounded it. If these contexts were removed, how differently would the meaning of the text be understood? In a real sense, these musings are a moot point, for they suggest, first of all, that a television program could exist without external forces such as press coverage and reviews, which is almost impossible in today's media-concentrated world. Second, and more importantly, they suggest that the meaning of the program could exist independently of those other social contexts. For many scholars and authors, this idea becomes a critical fallacy that must be reevaluated. Many writing in the area of historical reception and new historicism state, in fact, that the real meanings of texts can only be thoroughly understood by considering the contextual conditions in

which the work is received, as opposed to a strictly textual or subjective viewer analysis (Klinger xvi).

Truly, in the case of the much-hyped *Teletubbies*, their points are well illustrated. The media coverage, controversy, and even the marketing strategy of the show have, either to the delight or chagrin of its creators, all contributed to the critiques and criticisms of the show and its meaning, for better or worse. By discussing the contexts in which *Teletubbies* has been presented and received, it becomes clear that these external forces have shaped the interpretation and reception of the show and, furthermore, they illustrate how cultural groups handle and navigate ambiguous texts. Moreover, these processes reflect larger cultural issues concerning such topics as technology, our relationship with television, the consumer culture, and the power relations within them, topics that often have more to do with adults than with children.

The British Debut: Controversy From the Beginning

Long before the show debuted on American television in April of 1998, *Teletubbies* was creating a stir among British audiences, mostly in a controversial fashion. The many points of contention concerning the show were promulgated by the press and have carried over to the United States and abroad, which has fueled the controversy and affected the reception and interpretation of the show worldwide. So, what are these areas of controversy, how did they begin, and what role has the media/press played in all of it?

It seems that an early point of objection was a simple matter of programming. When *Teletubbies* premiered on the BBC in March of 1997, it was scheduled in the early

morning time slot of the popular children's show *Playdays*, which was moved to the afternoon. Some parents, whose children comprised a loyal following to the show, complained to the local stations and news organizations. The press picked up on the parents' plight and, as one reporter stated, because it was a slow news week, the story circulated. He states:

First up is the *Telegraph* on a newsless Monday. Trips over this new kids programme taking over one of the old ones. No big PR campaign, none of that; no one would have noticed it if it weren't for the *Telegraph*. They run a piece saying mothers are up in arms about the new show cause it doesn't give kids a proper story like [*Playdays*] did... The other quality papers then take it up as a cultural sign of the times and an already-accepted row in the educational community. (Diamond 49)

Though there is evidently an element of sarcasm in this statement, it does seem that this press frenzy was, to some extent, a result of jumping on the media bandwagon, given the impressive number of articles, television stories, and internet communications devoted to the show.

However, though the airtime may have been the initial impetus for the public row over *Teletubbies*, it was certainly not the only factor. As people began to pay attention to the show, it was evident that this was not only unusual children's programming, it was just unusual. Nothing like this had ever been seen on television before and the process of interpreting and "fixing" the ambiguity of the text would ensue. The scheduling may have made people pay attention to the show, but it was the surreal and abstract nature of

the show itself that fueled the controversy and kept the media interested. Rhymer Rigby, writing in a business journal, summed up the *Teletubbies* craze with an interview of Gerry Masters, the secretary of the British Association of Toy Retailers. He states:

‘While a craze only happens with the right recipe and the right products, it often happens without us actually doing anything.’ The biggest promoters of a craze, he maintains, are the media: ‘We thought Teletubbies would be a modest but nice product selling to kids. But then all that publicity [...] came along, putting the programme in the limelight.’ Pretty soon, he adds, this exposure and the programme’s early morning slot meant that tired clubbers and students had adopted the Tubbies, appreciating their surreal world for altogether different reasons. With this sudden adult awareness, the toys were snapped up, creating shortages which the media went on to publicise, whipping up further demand. (60)

Clubbers, Druggies, and Other Unexpected Audiences

Along with all of the media attention, came unplanned audiences and oppositional readings, not to mention unexpected buyers. As Richard Y. Duerden states,

Texts are tricky yet powerful. No single intention, it seems, can determine the meaning or the impact of a text, in part because context is uncontrollable: unexpected readers may pick up the text, or within the text hazily grasped intentions may override conscious purposes, or yet other forces, discourses, ideologies, or social pressures might shape it. (251)

Indeed this has been the case with the Teletubbies. As one journalist from *The Times* stated: “Teletubbies suddenly found itself with a wider audience: au pairs, childminders, people skiving off work, students, and of course, parents themselves” (Pryor). Most controversial among these groups was the audience comprised of a whole cadre of teenagers and young adults that were very much in to the drug scene. “Clubbers” as they are called, began tuning into the Tubbies after a long night of dancing and drugs, delighting in the surreal landscape and hyper-reality of *Teletubbies* as a kind of “druggy daydream.” Apparently this following was created after an episode aired in which the letter E (a British slang term for the drug Ecstasy) fell from the sky and hit Dipsy on the head (Giles 69). According to one journalist for a British youth magazine, however, the fascination of young adults with those brightly colored creatures goes much further than their psychedelic side effects. It goes deep into the thread of society, almost in a therapeutic and/or religious way. He states:

Of course, we watched for a laugh, a giggle, kitsch value, boredom — but it's far, far deeper than that. We watched because, whether just coming down from the 2 am E, or away from home and missing our mums, we needed something secure. For all of its initial strangeness, *Teletubbies* is now the security blanket of choice for Britain's Generation X, a daily shot of tranquility in a world of chaos, the spiritual valium we can't kick. [...] With their clarion call of “Eh-Oh!”, the Tubbies break free of language's constraints, returning to baby talk, a pre-Babel ocean of immediacy and tenderness we can never again reconstruct for ourselves, while Tinky

Winky's handbag blasts apart the binary oppositions of adult sexuality with a simplicity and intent that is devastating. Put simply, Telletubbie-land is the only place where we are all equal, all prone, all free, all kids again. And that's all of us people, admit it. (Kulkarni 11)

Ellen Seiter, in her "Children's Desires/Mother's Dilemmas," discusses the idea of utopianism in both children's media, as well as in the culture at large. She states that this utopianism is evident in children's television in its "[...] subversion of parental values of discipline, seriousness, intellectual achievement, respect for authority, and complexity by celebrating rebellion, disruption, simplicity, freedom and energy" (300). Richard Dyer also comments on the idea of a utopia by pointing out all of the various areas of media that promote "[...] something better to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide" (222). It seems that this cult following among young adults reflects a carry-over of this same idea of utopianism and the same desire to be free of adult restraints, even though that is the very world of which they are a part. Moreover, these adults can spend money, unlike the children the show is geared toward. Speaking of the large adult consumption of Teletubbies, Raymond Snoddy commented: "[...] classifying consumers doesn't work anymore" and that "[...] people are neither acting their age nor their class, and indeed want different things at different times" (16). Anne Wood, creator of the show, in response to this surprising audience states: "The cult [following] is sad. It's compensating for the fact that these people never had a place to play in their own childhoods — they connect to the joy in the program" (Boehm 29). Though this is obviously a public relations response to the controversy

created by this subculture, Wood's remarks obviously reflect not only some truth about the subculture that attached itself to the program, but her comments also show an attempt to account for such oppositional readings and downplay them. If the show appeals to their lost childhood rather than their drug-induced state, then it is not really all that controversial and it has a better chance of being received that way.

With this unexpected audience came not only a concern about possible subversive messages contained in the text, but also an unexpected arena of discourse among adults. Because coverage of the cult following and the continued popularity of the show continued to be evident in the news and media of Britain, it was among adults that the discourse surrounding the show was conducted. As one reporter put it: "You know you've really cracked it when people are repeating [the] catchphrases in the bar" (Pryor). This is ironic, given that *Teletubbies* is geared for an audience of one-year-olds who cannot even carry on discourse, let alone have power enough to shape the show's reception within society. But as Stephen Kline states in an article about children's culture, the ideas of what is "good" for children and what constitutes children's culture in the first place is and has been really "[...] a matter of culture produced for and urged upon children" by adults (95).

Along with the discussions at water coolers and bars, other adult discussion began in more typical and expected areas, namely among parents, child psychologists, and educators. These groups were and are among the most vocal about concerns over the show and they also brought an air of legitimacy, as well as public concern, to the media articles covering the *Teletubbies* phenomenon. The idea and role of monitoring

children's television for "proper children's entertainment" (Spigel 117) is not new among these groups. Lynn Spigel recounts that the history of television from its beginnings in the fifties includes such controversies and discussions from "concerned societal parties" and was nothing more than a carry-over from the same discussions voiced over the effects of radio and film. After all, "children were innocent; they did not know what their parents knew [...]" (111).

Once again, in a struggle to fix and establish what constitutes "good" children's television, these "experts" have publicly battled it out over *Teletubbies*. Their concerns have centered around topics such as the educational content (or the perceived lack thereof) within the show, the possible damaging effects of using baby talk, and the fear of the promotion of television viewing and consumerism among young viewers. And once again, all of these arguments have been played out in the media. In defending herself against many of these attacks, Anne Wood stated that the show was "[...] conceived according to what 2-year-olds respond to, not what parents think is good for them" (Boehm 29). She also stated that young children do watch television and they might as well have a show to which they could relate. "Very young children weren't able to keep up, and they were becoming confused and less satisfied" (qtd. in Mulrine 70). As one children's television licensor questioned: "Would you rather have them watch 'Days of Our Lives'?" (qtd. in Mifflin A17) As for the educational value of the show, the creators have said, "[...] if it's education you want, go to school. [...] We are not a school, we are an entertainment programme for young children. We have a responsibility to treat our audience with respect" (qtd. in Murray, 114).

Teletubbies Cross the Pond: The American Debut and New Controversies

As these debates were hashed out among the British public, the show prepared for its American debut in April of 1998. Well aware that the *Teletubbies* would more than likely come to America with all of its concomitant cultural baggage, Kenn Viselman, owner of the Itsy Bitsy Entertainment Company and the American distributor for the show, launched a massive damage control and prevention campaign, as well as one of pure advertising. PBS started up a web page of “Frequently Asked Questions,” modeled after the BBC, to handle any concerns about the show (PBS). Along with press releases and PBS sponsorship and advertising, Viselman took out a billboard in New York’s Time Square to promote the show, as well as ubiquitous New York City bus signs (Charles 11). However, the controversy, and interest, surrounding the show followed from Britain to America. As Viselman said of the ensuing media frenzy,

Forget preschool — there has never been an entertainment property doing what this is doing. It went on the air April 6th. David Letterman mentioned it on the 7th. On the 8th, one big newspaper had it as a political cartoon, with Laa Laa up in the Dallas Book Repository shooting at Barney as he drives by in his Lincoln. Newsweek did a political cartoon, too. We’ve been on ‘Today,’ and we’re going on ‘Nightline.’ All this for a preschool show? (Mifflin A17)

Indeed, the media coverage, not only in Britain, but also in the United States has been staggering. Few shows, especially a children’s show, have garnered a spot on the front page of *The New York Times* and received attention from the likes of Dan Rather and

other evening news organizations (Mifflin A1+). Talk about unexpected arenas of discourse! What must have been going through Dan and other “serious” reporters’ minds as they reported on characters named Tinky Winky, Laa-laa, Dipsy, and Po?

Of course, what all of this illustrates is an element within the culture that is anxious about children and childhood. Why is it Dan Rather can talk about such things in an evening news report? It is because society at large still maintains a cautious stance over something that might be harmful to children. Sharon Stephens covers the adult fears over the theme of what she, and others, call “lost childhood.” She states that the idea of childhood as a “protected space” within society emerged and began to grow from the early 1900’s. “Lost childhood” stems from fears concerning children as innocent victims of adult mistreatment and includes not only threats of physical assaults on children, but also threatened spaces of what should be an ideally and ideologically safe, untainted, innocent, and carefree domain called “childhood.” She goes on to state:

The inculcation of family values in the home and community values in the school [before television] gave way to an uncontrolled invasion of children’s minds by market-driven media images and globally circulating signs. With this invasion came a loss of childhood innocence, and especially of sexual innocence.” (9)

Thus, with the introduction of television into the home, the domain of childhood became more threatened, trespassed upon, and polluted. As Stephens states: “At stake here are notions not only of innocence, but of nature, individual freedom, social values, enduring love and care, [...] and the family as the basic unit of society” (9-10). Additionally, not

only is society concerned about “childhood,” but also, in a more self-centered light, it is concerned about “parenthood.” Just as childhood is threatened by the adult world, parenthood is threatened by children who grow up, as the culture would esteem, “badly.” In other words, no one wants to be thought of as a bad parent. Of course, not only does the media pose a threat to childhood and all of these other factors, it also, as illustrated by the attention paid to the *Teletubbies*, fuels its own fears about itself by reporting the dangers of the media, within the media, to parents at large.

Politics, PBS, and Parents

In the case of *Teletubbies* these fears only intensified when the show debuted in America, as did the controversy and the media coverage. New parties began to join the quarrel over the show, namely politicians. As suggested by Henry Jenkins, politics are never far away from children. Concerns began to be voiced in Washington, not only over the content of *Teletubbies*, but also its connection to the government-supported, non-profit Public Broadcasting System. A few years ago opponents of public broadcasting were quick to criticize PBS for failing to create profits from the already present merchandising of such popular shows as *Sesame Street* (Goodman E2) and *Barney* (Siegel 16). It seems, however, that PBS, which is this time around actively seeking and receiving profits off of the sales of *Teletubbies* merchandise, is again being criticized for this move as well. The whole idea of public broadcasting is, after all, non-commercial and non-profit, many argue. But the show, being a British export show and one they initially spent over 13 million dollars to produce "had to generate sales" (Britt 12).

Its targeting of young children and increasing commercialization have also brought condemnation of the show and PBS. Central to this controversy is the fact that in recent years government funding for PBS has decreased noticeably and that commercial sponsorship is becoming more and more common within the program presentation itself. Another critic stated:

Liberal or conservative, if you believe public broadcasting has any role, it can't be to give us programming which can be had on commercial stations. Even those of us who grew up with and love public broadcasting have to wonder if it still has a *raison d'être* in a world of 500-channel cable, the Internet and video-on-demand — especially when PBS utilizes criteria in selecting shows much the same as its unsubsidized competitors. (Siegel 16)

However, others have countered that the point of PBS is not to be the only venue of “quality” children’s program, but to be the only one that is not targeting young viewers with savvy and manipulative advertising. As more and more commercialization appears on PBS, however, it appears to some that the “death of PBS” is inevitable (Siegel 16). Others have called for a strict return to the non-commercial status of PBS. Concerning *Teletubbies*, one author stated that the show itself was

[...] not as *Brave New World*-ish as the naysayers imply. But it is creepy when the show opens with a computer animated image of a spouting plant, with a Kellogg’s logo in the bottom right-hand corner, and a soothing female voice-over says ‘Rice Krispies — celebrating the joy of kids

growing through interaction.’ Sugar cereal has nothing to do with

‘growing through interaction’; this is just a cheap plug. (Hendershot 24)

However, as another critic points out,

Our toddlers’ fascination with the Tubbies unsettles us not because we’re frightened, really, that merchandisers have a stranglehold on our smallest children, but because it exposes something scary about ourselves: the power that advertising has over grownups. (Ellicott 15)

After all, children as young as the *Teletubbies* audience don’t buy products and they are not like “[...] a 7-year-old who will whine for a gun because television has convinced him it’s cool. [...] A toddler likes a toy because he connects with it” (Ellicott 15). Once again, what these arguments illustrate is that the rhetorical struggles to define an ambiguous show like *Teletubbies* often have more to do with defining ideologies of adult issues, such as American governmental spending, as well as consumerism among the masses and the fear that complexities like this engender.

As if these ideological problems were not enough to complicate the release and reception of *Teletubbies*, other minor, but reported, disturbances resulted with the release of the Teletubby product line. Not only were parents fighting over buying Teletubby merchandise, but police actually had to be called out to a mall in Los Angeles to break up a near riot when life-size Teletubby characters failed to show up at a Store of Knowledge that had advertised their presence on a given day (Stanley 14). In addition, the merchandise itself was causing a stir when some of the talking, interactive Teletubby toys were mistakenly thought to be speaking derogatory terms. Parents were up in arms when

they thought that the talking Po doll was using the derogatory terms “fatty” and/or “faggot” (Musto 56). The PBS website actually addressed the problem by issuing a statement explaining that Po is actually using the word “fadit,” which in Cantonese means “fast” ([PBS Online](#)). Within this show, she chants this mantra, along with the Cantonese word “mahn,” which means “slow,” as she rides her signature scooter. Of course, this explanation says nothing of why Po is speaking Cantonese in the first place, but it does explain how one more ambiguous element of the show has left people with “[...] the terror of uncertain signs” (Barthes 19) which has spawned controversy and left the public to try to settle on some kind of interpretation.

The issue then becomes a question of how an interpretation becomes fixed within a society and who has the power to solidify the dominant reading, if it is possible to reach a single, dominant reading in the first place. As some cultural theorists posit,

The text can no longer be seen as a self-sufficient entity that bears either the dominant ideology or its own meaning and exerts a similar influence on all its readers. Rather, it is seen as a potential of meanings that can be activated in a number of ways. (Fiske 303).

While the *Teletubbies* phenomenon illustrates well the multiplicity of possible meanings that can be derived from a text, it also, however, illustrates how a more dominant reading can become fixed within a society.

Jerry Falwell vs. Tinky Winky: Questions and Fears over Gender Identity

Just when some of the *Teletubbies* controversy and hype was beginning to die down in the American media and public, probably the biggest media frenzy around the

show hit the scene, with all of its accompanying cultural ramifications. In February of 1999, religious pundit and moral watchdog Jerry Falwell released a statement in his *National Liberty Journal* warning parents about possible homosexual undertones in the show. After citing different publications, including *The Washington Post* and some British sources, that hinted at Tinky Winky's homosexual nature, Falwell stated that "these subtle depictions are no doubt intentional and parents are warned to be alert to these elements [...]. However, many families are allowing the series to entertain their children" ("Parents"). To defend his stance, he cited that Tinky Winky was purple, the gay pride color, he had an upside-down triangle for an antennae, the symbol for gay pride, and that he was established as male in the show, but he carried a red purse for a toy ("Children's"). Indeed, Falwell made no mistake in saying that many had already touted Tinky Winky as a gay icon and that this particular Teletubby certainly had "[...] enough queer signifiers to justify [Falwell's] gay panic" (Musto 56). As one journalist put it:

By many lights, Tinky Winky has never been in the closet. He's been as out as a White Sox No. 9 hitter since *Teletubbies* went on the air several years ago in England, when the British gay community quickly recognized and celebrated him as one of their own. (Zorn)

Indeed, this was a reading that had gone all the way back to England (Gleick 60). What Falwell was saying was not new. As Heather Hendershot states, "Falwell was simply the first one to say that this was a problem" (21). And once again, because there is enough ambiguity in the text, different readings can be made and the struggle begins over whose interpretation and ideology wins out.

In defense of the show, one of the spokesmen for its U.S. distributors stated:

There isn't a boy on the planet who hasn't picked up his grandma's purse and carried it around. It's okay to carry this bag. You're not going to grow up to be an interior decorator. (Hendershot 22)

Others began attacking Falwell and his moral politics directly, generating media hype that led to a poll stating that 83% out of 7,800 Americans believed Falwell was "crazy" (Chesworth 15). Even openly gay politician Barney Frank defended *Teletubbies*, by saying that "in all fairness to Jerry Falwell, it's probably too sophisticated for him" (qtd. in "Perspectives" 19).

The counter attacks against Falwell made for good press and it certainly kept the media and entertainment industries busy for a while, but how did this effect interpretation and reception of the show? What is interesting about this situation is that these oppositional readings had been present for two years before Falwell ever mentioned them and no one, at least on a large public scale, seemed to be concerned about them. They were interpretations of the show, much like the drug-induced, psychedelic viewings done back in England, that were acknowledged, but ones that remained on the fringe of society, mostly ignored by the dominant ideology. However, what Falwell did, of course with the huge help of a media frenzy, was legitimize the argument. He brought a reading that was for the most part underground and made it mainstream, and in so doing inadvertently helped fix a meaning that had otherwise been held only among certain viewing sectors of society. Headlines began popping up like "Tinky Winky Gets Outed" (Zorn) and "Gay Tinky Winky Bad for Children" ("Gay") and even parents began to say

things like “I didn’t know he was gay until Falwell said something” (Hendershot 22). Falwell should have consulted a media analyst. In his desire to warn parents about a perceived problem, he actually created the problem and helped fix a public image about the show. After all, he did not come out against Bert and Ernie, and their perceived homosexuality remains largely unknown, even though certain publications “outed” them in 1994 (Hendershot 22). With the case of *Teletubbies* the gay and lesbian community should be thankful to Falwell for opening up a very publicized and media-focused discourse and creating a meaning that was hitherto relegated mostly to just those communities. They couldn’t have planned it any better. Fueled by the press, what was an oppositional and suppressed reading became a dominant reading, aware among even those who refute it.

This incident, once again, illustrates the culture’s fear and concern over the innocence of children. It also depicts the relationship between politics and childhood. One child developmental psychologist stated: “Falwell was injecting an adult issue where it doesn’t belong, and that the consensus of mental health professionals is that such imagery would have no influence on sexual identity” (qtd. in Zorn). Another author, calling Falwell’s statements a “silly crusade,” stated:

The Teletubbies are supposed to be toddlers. Toddlers are physically, mentally, and in every other way lacking in sexuality — gay, straight, or otherwise. Sometimes a purse is just a purse. (Lane 4)

However, this author is quick to point out that he

[...] reserves a bit of blame for those members of the gay community in

Britain [...] who turned Tinky Winky into a camp icon in the first place.

They were just having fun, I know. But was it really necessary to sexualize this little corner of the culture, too? Shouldn't the fight for tolerance be staged on some more plausible battleground? (Lane 4)

Plausible or not, childhood is a very common battleground to fight out these very adult issues.

The fallout after Falwell's statements lasted for months in the media. But like all media panics, they soon were pushed into the background by juicier and weightier media topics. When the *Teletubbies* production company, Ragdoll, stopped making new episodes of the show in October of 2001, just after four years of production, it was hardly mentioned in the press. The media that had paid so much attention to the show over its history was now pretty much silent. Certainly just a month after the events of September 11, 2001, making a big deal in the press over something like the cessation of a children's show would have seemed inappropriate and absurd. Anne Wood stated in an interview about the end of production that "Teletubbies will go on forever" (Seaton, "Tubby"). And with the continual airing of the show on PBS, the video and other merchandising still evident in consumer markets, and with the global expansion into other foreign countries, most recently China ("Teletubbies"), *Teletubbies* will no doubt be around a while, if not "forever."

Teletubbies, Television, and the Concept of Childhood

So where does this mix of controversy, media coverage, and consumerism leave society now and in the future, in relation to *Teletubbies*? Possibly no closer to a

universal, conclusive understanding of what *Teletubbies* definitively means or represents to everyone, but the show does illustrate how texts are influenced greatly by the environment in which they are created, interpreted, and discussed. It also illustrates how cultural issues have a way of surfacing in the texts and interpretation of texts in a society. *Teletubbies* reminds us that television is a ubiquitous presence in our society, and, like it or not, our children watch it. It also marks the pervasive presence of merchandising and the power of advertising and our uneasiness about that process. The variable readings and popularity of the text among different sectors of the population also illustrate how, in our postmodern age, even the most innocent of media offerings can and do fall subject to pastiche, parody, and appropriation. Moreover, the sheer fascination with the surreal world and its inhabitants illustrates our fascination, yet apprehension of the technological world in which we live. The shifting nature of the interpretations of that world shows that our culture is fixated on the 'unfixed.' No one is quite sure what the Teletubbies are. They are ambiguous and the text makes no attempt to define them, with which an *X-Files* generation is not only comfortable, but fascinated as well.

Additionally, the show, like others of this current era, marks a shift in the way texts are created and analyzed. As Stephen Greenblatt states,

As the text bears the imprint of many cultural discourses and practices, so also the author of the text voices not his or her expressive soliloquy, but polyphony... [Texts] function within culture in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself

the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes. (qtd. in Duerden 254)

In other words, to understand the meaning of a given text, we must not look solely at the text itself, but must place it in a historical context. Moreover, as behavior and society change, so often will meanings of a given text. And these factors must be considered as well. Whether *Teletubbies* will take on different meanings in the future is yet to be seen. For now, as Klinger states, we must look at our current, cultural factors as "not just 'out there,' external to the text and viewer; they actively intersect the text/viewer relation, producing interpretive frames that influence the public consumption of cultural artifacts" (xvi).

CHAPTER 4

“NO NO”: EXPERTS’ PERCEPTIONS AND THE AUTHORITATIVE VOICE

A Summary of the Arguments and Controversies

In August of 1999, *Teletubbies* came under attack from the American Academy of Pediatrics which advised parents to prevent children under the age of two from watching television completely. Concerned parents and other child experts entered into the discussion and once again *Teletubbies* was the sounding board for wider cultural issues, namely that of the relation between television and children. As one author states:

Although many adults paid lip service to their agreement with the pediatricians, *Teletubbies* remains popular, and product sales are high [...]. If there is one lesson to be learned from the pediatricians’ response to *Teletubbies*, it is that the voices of trained professionals will always win in the popular press, but exhausted moms and dads who need to get dinner on the table will nonetheless do whatever it takes to get an energetic baby to sit still. (Hendershot 23).

Along with a discussion of the historical and cultural reception of a text, it is important to look at who holds positions of authority concerning childhood in a society. Certainly in the case of children, their development and their relationship to television, trained professionals who have conducted research in these areas are given prominence. But as Heather Hendershot states above, where does this leave parents, who struggle to bring their children up “correctly?” Is there any credence to the claims that *Teletubbies* is

dangerous to children's development in areas such as language, education, and gender identity? And what does this speak about children's relationship to television in general? It is important to look at the research that fuels the controversies.

The subject of children and television evokes strong emotional, as well as intellectual, responses from a variety of groups ranging from concerned parents to educators to politicians. Any trip to the library or search on the Internet on this subject will illustrate the plethora of varying ideas, research, and feelings on the matter. These issues, often citing contradictory information, are not absent from the *Teletubbies* controversy, but there are more specific topics that can be examined within the context of this particular show. Most notably, the show is the first of its kind to aim at an audience as young as 12 months old. Questions naturally arise concerning whether children that young should be watching television in the first place and what the effects of such young viewing might be. Jane Healy, author of *Your Child's Growing Mind*, focuses on this concern, like many others, stating that "PBS is once again decreasing the distance between television and the womb" (Mulrine 70). Dr. Susan Linn, in an article for the Family Education Network, also sites the possible problems of early childhood viewing. While acknowledging the lack of research in this area, she does, however, point out that studies do show a correlation between television viewing and obesity, the overall addictive nature of television viewing, and the possibility of children developing short attention spans. In addition to the fact that the show is created for one-year-olds, critics also fear that because the Teletubbies have televisions incorporated into their own bodies, this will promote and reinforce television consumption and viewing. For this and other

reasons, for example, the editor for children's programming in Norway states that the show will not run in that country (Brandweek).

Moreover, the marketing of *Teletubbies* merchandise ranging from computerized, interactive dolls to coloring books compounds these issues because, once again, it concerns such young viewers. This concerns many critics for fear that this is creating the youngest market segment ever targeted, a segment that is very young and vulnerable (Linn and Poussaint). In the show's defense, *Teletubbies'* creator and producer, Anne Wood, herself a former school teacher and speech pathologist, counters by pointing out that children this young were and are watching television already, and that they had no specific programming geared for their specific needs before *Teletubbies* (Mifflin A1). She also states that the merchandizing campaign was not integrated in to the show's launch, at least in America. Due to the popularity and demand for such items, however, toys and other products featuring the show are now available throughout the global market and are heavily advertised (Boehm 21).

Another developmental criticism leveled against the show is that it has no particular educational value, such as teaching the alphabet or counting skills. Of course, the question needing to be addressed must then be how one defines "educational television" for one-year-olds, a demographic group that can barely speak, let alone recite the alphabet or count to ten. Once again, camps have formed on either side of the issue, some citing that there remain too many other valuable childhood developmental activities with which television interferes. Others, like Ronald Slaby, a developmental psychologist at Harvard University, believe that well-researched children's television,

even for toddlers, can be educational by introducing them to basic concepts like cause and effect (Mulrine 70).

Along with the educational controversy comes the debate over the role of baby talk used in the show. Though the narrator uses perfect English, the Teletubbies themselves speak in broken words, much like most toddlers, which has many parents and educators concerned that this will negatively effect their children's speech development (Lyll 41). However, other experts, such as Mabel Rice of the Child Language Program at the University of Kansas, state that Teletubbies may actually help children in learning language by giving them characters whose speech they can identify (Mulrine 70). It should also be pointed out that the amount of the baby talk used in the show is far less than the amount of perfect English used by the narrator to anchor the action on screen.

Finally, among the other controversies unique to this program comes the widely publicized concern voiced by Jerry Falwell that the show could be damaging to children's emotional and moral development by promoting a homosexual lifestyle (Linn and Poussaint). Falwell based his statements on the fact that certain gay organizations and publications, such as *The Advocate* (Walters), proclaimed the Teletubby Tinky Winky to be a gay role model because, though the character is positioned within the story to be a boy, he carries a red ladies handbag and his antenna is an upside-down triangle, the symbol for gay pride.

Looking to the Research: Literature That Informs the Controversies

So what social scientific research exists that deal with all of these controversies surrounding *Teletubbies*? Problems exist on a number of levels concerning many of

these issues, namely as it relates to the developmental information available. First of all, given the fact that the program has only been on the air for about four years (three years in America), time has not permitted the production of research specifically constructed to investigate this particular program, especially any kind of longitudinal study like those researching shows like *Sesame Street*, for example (Anderson). Another problem exists in this area concerning the general paucity of research specifically designed to delve into the area of infants and toddlers' relation to television, especially the effects viewing might have upon them. Even researchers, such as Dafna Lemish who investigates imitative behaviors of infants who watch certain television programs, acknowledge the need for more research in this area, as well as the difficulties of pinpointing conclusive results in a group in subjects whose cognitive and communication skills are not as advanced as older children. Finally, as exemplified by the opposing views taken up by various scholars, educators, and parents, coming to any definite conclusion on the widespread effects, beneficial or detrimental, of television on children can be difficult precisely because of the varying information and research results that exist.

Having said this, however, it becomes necessary to evaluate some of the literature in the areas of child development, child psychology, and education that does exist in order to examine the problems and questions presented by *Teletubbies* in an attempt to try to reach some conclusions concerning all of the controversy, even though this material may not specifically deal with infants and television. For example, literature exists suggesting that children can learn gender roles and expectations, especially as it relates to toys and play, from television and advertising (Seiter, "Sold"). Research also suggests that

television does indeed transmit information and ideas about sex and sexuality, though this specific research deals with adolescents and primetime/more adult programming (Truglio). However, another research project states that children's full understanding of gender, theirs and others, does not fully develop until after preschool, at which time viewing habits are noted to change (Luecke-Aleska, et al.). Therefore, it would seem unlikely that the normal viewers of *Teletubbies*, under the age of five, would learn anything from the program concerning gender or sexuality, unlike Falwell claims. It appears to be even more unlikely, especially since the references in question within the show, like the purse and the upside-down triangle, are so marginal, symbolic, and ambiguous. If anything, research seems to suggest that younger children cannot make sense of the symbolic representations in television (Troseth and DeLoache), let alone one that is so culturally specific, such as the symbol of the upside-down triangle or the color purple.

Another controversy battled over the show is whether or not the baby talk of the show hinders language development and whether television viewing in general, thought of as a primarily visual medium, is detrimental to overall verbal abilities. As mentioned before, however, it must be remembered that the narrator speaks the majority of the dialogue, which is in perfect English, and most of the action visually presented on the screen is described verbally by this narrator. Research on children who watch television suggests that language acquisition is actually aided by viewing television and that vocabulary increases, though obviously these results do not come from watching television alone (Davies). However, according to one study, children presented with

audiovisual information, tend to have more success restructuring the information presented than do those who received video only or audio only information (Hoffner, Cantor, and Thorson). Moreover, by using "educational television," like *Sesame Street*, other studies show that verbal abilities, including vocabulary and the ability to verbally explain action that has transpired on the screen, seem to be aided by the visual aspects of television. These positive benefits also appear to be long lasting, by beginning a cycle of early success in school, which most often continues even into the high school years (Huston and Wright). Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the role of baby talk, according to many professionals is beneficial to language acquisition. As Rice states, "Children vocalize more when watching characters they identify with, like Cookie Monster [from *Sesame Street*]. It doesn't mean it locks them into 'Me want cookie'" (Mulrine 70). Others have stated similarly that *Teletubbies* may aid in the learning of rudiments of language (Grose). Furthermore, research conducted around another British children's program, *The Sooty Show*, in which puppet characters speak in made-up, nonsense language, suggests that what is important for decipherment and interpretation, especially for young children, is often not so much the actual language itself, but the pattern and model of language presented. The researchers state that "fabricated talk implicitly invokes a model of spontaneous conversation that is clearly shared by both the interlocutors and audience alike" (Emmison and Goldman 33). If this is true, then the baby talk in *Teletubbies*, which is so heavily anchored by the perfect spoken language of the narrator, should actually help in decipherment by employing both a pattern and type of speech that is then mimicked or narrated by an adult voice. However, as Judith Van

Evra aptly points out, many problems with language and literacy arise when television is too often substituted for other language-fostering activities, such as interaction with adults and other children and time spent reading.

Of course, the question must then follow whether *Teletubbies* is educational and whether it is necessary for all children's programs to be educational in the first place, especially when it is geared at such a young audience. How does one define what educational needs such young viewers have and what educational TV is in general? Kunkel outlines the political aspects operational in defining educational, especially as it relates to the Children's Television Act of 1990. Others outline the varying ideas of quality television as it relates to educators and heads of the media industry (Alexander, Hoerrner, and Duke). Once again, with the introduction of *Teletubbies*, these definitions, in some aspects of necessity, need to be reexamined in light of the specific educational and developmental needs of infants and toddlers, not just children general, a category which can range in age from preschool to high school, depending on the research stipulations.

Additionally, must all television for children be educational? As Huston and Wright point out, the main purpose of watching television, for both children and adults alike, is for entertainment, even if it does happen to educate concurrently. However, they also point out that there is strong evidence that children, even small children, do not take the television as seriously as one may assume, educational or not. This point is also reinforced by recent research (Troseth and DeLoache) conducted around 2 and 2 1/2-year-olds and television. Both age groups were shown a video of a room next to them

where someone enters and hides a toy. When the children were shown taken in to the actual room, the 2 1/2-year-olds recognized the environment from watching the video and were able to retrieve the hidden object, but the 2-year-olds had drastically lower retrieval rates. The results suggest that younger children, most likely because of prior exposure to television, become aware that what they see on television has no immediate effect on the environment around them and, therefore, they do not heed it as carefully as other older children who have learned more concerning television's symbolic representation and its connection to reality.

To test and support this hypothesis, the researchers also conducted the same experiment with primates that had never been exposed to video. Unlike the children who were used to television exposure, the primates had high retrieval rates and seemed to be unable to distinguish between watching videos of their caretakers and the caretakers in person. Studies such as these may have interesting implications on the debate over younger viewers because they suggest that children do not engage with what they are watching as seriously as previously considered. Of course, these findings also show, however, that the older children get, the more they do make connections between television and their world and environment, which can affect development.

These findings do not, however, address the possibilities of viewing habits that can arise from early and sustained exposure to television. Critics of *Teletubbies*, and children's television in general, fear the show promotes overall television viewing, which may have potentially harmful effects. It is interesting to note that *Teletubbies* premiered around the same time that the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*

released research conclusively relating television watching to higher levels of fatness in children (Andersen, et al.; Armstrong, et al.). These results are not surprising since increased levels of television viewing have been found to directly contribute to fatness in adult men (Ching, et al.). A *JAMA* article, released just over a year after the initial report, reveals, in a similar vein, studies reducing the use of television, video, and video game usage among children show promising results in preventing and reducing childhood obesity (Robinson). However, more research will be needed to explore connections, if any, between earlier exposure to television and overall increased levels of television viewing, which can lead to childhood obesity.

Another developmental issue of childhood linked to overexposure to television has to do with decreased attention spans. Connections are made between this growing problem among children and the amount of television that they consume, most especially those programs that contain fast-paced editing and more jumps between shorter-segmented presentations. Research seems to confirm these ideas. However, it should be noted that the research also shows that public television programs with slower pacing and more repetition, of which *Teletubbies* would certainly qualify, do not have the same effects on attention deficit as does private children's programming (Hooper and Chang).

As for the overall effects of television on children, many studies and research reports exist on the matter proclaiming both television's negative and positive aspects, as well as those findings unable to positively and singularly connect television to developmental problems and aberrations (Huston and Wright; Van Evra; Davies). However, research seems to suggest these positive and negative effects definitively relate to the type of

television being viewed. According to research, educational television programs in most cases produce positive developmental results in a range of areas including language acquisition, cognition, and school achievement (Anderson; Van Evra). However, commercial, fast-paced, and/or violent programming is linked to opposite, more-detrimental effects (Hooper and Chang; Van Evra; Gaddy). Given this information, the question must be addressed as whether or not *Teletubbies* can be considered educational and, therefore, produce the possible benefits that educational television is shown to have. Linn and Poussaint are quick to point out that the fact is that the show has not proven to have any educational benefits thus far. There is simply no research as of yet to support the creator's claim that it is indeed educational, only that the show is popular with children and parents. They go on to state: "The fact that children like something, or parents think they do, does not mean that it is educational, or even good for them. Children like candy, too" (19). They call for more research into the program and also express concern that an organization such as PBS, which is supposedly dedicated to children's educational television, would air something that did not have the research to back up its controversial claims.

The Need For Further Research

As for reaching some kind of definitive answer to these issues, based on the often contradictory and inconclusive evidence just reviewed, it is obviously a difficult and perhaps impossible process. What the review of the literature does exemplify, however, is the express need for more research into not only the *Teletubbies* program itself, but also the interaction and understanding of infants, toddlers, and young children to

television in general. There is simply not enough that is known or understood about this subject. In fact, the *Teletubbies* controversy illustrates the need for more research in the area of television and young children, and it provides an excellent opportunity and means by which to carry out this experimentation, especially in response to public concern surrounding the show.

More research projects, building on the few that exist, are needed to investigate specific issues of infant and toddler development and television, first of all, by looking at these children's interaction with the show itself. Research should be structured around the known developmental stages and advancements of young children/viewers to see if the show accelerates, enhances, and/or alters these otherwise normal developments in anyway. Longitudinal studies must also be undertaken to chart any of the suspected long-term effects of the show on language or other cognitive development and how children understand the show generally. Studies, longitudinal and cross-sectional, exist surrounding other children's shows, such as *Sesame Street* and *Barney* (Anderson; Huston and Wright; Rosen, Schwebel, & Singer) that can serve as formats for investigation, ranging from children's comprehension to imitation to understanding of pretense and reality. Of course, the recognized problem with doing research on television and trying to provide any definitive analysis, as reviewed by Neuman, is recognizing television as a pervasive part of people's lives, not only the subject being studied, but also the researchers conducting those studies. It is impossible to achieve a complete study where no person involved is free of the effects of television. Recognizing this aspect, however, need not be a complete hindrance. In fact, according to Watkins, acknowledging this fact

and incorporating it into theoretical frameworks, mainly the Soviet cognitive theories of Vygotsky and the like, can be beneficial because it can place television watching as a dominant activity in children's lives, one of many that combine to reveal a culturally based understanding of cognition and learning.

Regardless of what side of the *Teletubbies*, or the larger television debate a person stands on, it is evident that television does have the power to exert influence, positive or negative, upon its viewers, especially children. If opposing forces can at least come to this consensus, as many have, it is logical that the next plan of action would be to push for the education and dissemination of the information available on the possible effects of television. Therefore, in addition to more research on the subject of children and television, especially young children, it is important that the knowledge gained in these areas is disseminated at various medical, social, and educational levels to inform the public and promote different means of evaluative viewing, as well as intervention and aid in helping young viewers navigate and interpret what they watch.

As mentioned above, television viewing has been linked to higher incidence of obesity in children. Parents should be knowledgeable concerning these issues, even at a prenatal level if necessary. Parents and physicians begin planning for a child's health early on, and this should include all aspects of a child's future development. Requesting that physicians take the scientific information available concerning television and obesity and incorporate it into their practice of childcare is a first step. The facts cannot be ignored anymore. High levels of television viewing can negatively affect health. Additionally, information and suggested means of television viewing intervention and

mediation should be made more readily available. Research shows that restrictive mediation, such as limiting viewing hours, and instructive mediation, such as explaining to children and analyzing actions shown on screen, along with interactive parent/child co-viewing of television can be effective in aiding a child's understanding and formation of more critical viewing skills, though more definitive evidence is still needed (Valeknburg, et al.).

In addition to more adult-oriented education, child-centered education is needed. Much discussion exists on the topic of development of curriculum in media literacy and viewing skills (Buckingham, "Re-viewing;" Neuman). Though different ways of implementing these skills into educational systems have repeatedly been addressed, discussed, and suggested, little has been done to officially incorporate them into instructional institutions (Buckingham, "Reviewing"). Just as children are taught reading and literature comprehension, including literary interpretive measures and thinking skills, they should be taught different ways to critically think about what they watch on television, as well as ways to express and support the thoughts they extract from the programs. Television is so much a part of society and culture that it is imperative that children are taught ways to decipher and analyze these materials, just as they are taught in school to do so with novels or other literature. Interestingly enough, some schools are beginning this process, and one in particular, in fact, is using *Teletubbies* to help children as young as ten analyze audiovisual style, audience perception, and the background logistics that are involved with the production of the show. Commenting on this, Buckingham states, " In the increasingly complex media environment of the late 20th

century, this kind of investigation should represent an essential component of a broader, more contemporary form of literacy education for all" (294).

Of course, time and further research will be the only ways to evaluate if these suggestions will prove to be effective, but the alternative of doing nothing would appear to be no solution either. In many ways, the ambiguous nature of *Teletubbies*, its proliferation in the market place, and the media attention surrounding the show and its controversies perfectly illustrate the complexity of the media world that now exists. It also illustrates the growing concern the population has about the effects of television, but at the same time the general reluctance to give up television viewing. It also says much about who has authority within our society to dictate standards of proper childrearing and how these standards are often in conflict with the reality of what actually happens in the home.

CHAPTER 5

“AGAIN! AGAIN!” A CHILD’S PERSPECTIVE

Child Audiences: People Who Actually Watch the Show

Though most people have heard of *Teletubbies*, or the "Flab Four" as some are want to call them (Richmond 32), and even seen the strange, hyper-colored creatures in various aisles of consumer institutions, often this media and cultural exposure has not included actually watching the program itself or watching children watch the show. Even Jerry Falwell who spoke out against the show admitted that he had never actually seen the program, but was merely reporting what others had said about it (Hendershot 23). But what can be said about the people that actually do watch the show, namely children, and often young children at that? What meanings and interpretations are they making of *Teletubbies* and in what ways, if any, do their responses speak to the controversies at hand? And to what extent can these influences even be determined and charted, given the age and developmental stages of these children?

Qualitative Research, Ethnography, and *Teletubbies*

This whole area of media studies — the interaction of children, television, and other forms of media — is a difficult and tumultuous territory, one that encompasses dizzying amounts of literature containing plenty of varying speculations, opinions and often heated, intense debate. It is also, as Henry Jenkins correctly points out, an area where “a surprising number of essays written about children's media, children's literature, or education manage not to talk about children or childhood at all” (3). It is surprising on one level, but not on another, as Jenkins also alludes to, because it is becoming more

and more evident in today's society that children and the idea of "childhood" are sites where larger social and cultural issues and agendas, both political and ideological, are being fought out. Thus, he calls for a reconsideration of how we define "childhood" in the first place. In other cynical but applicable words, an easy way to heighten a debate, force and issue, or solicit strong emotional reactions from people is to move those discussions into the arena of children and the concept of childhood. These and other considerations must be addressed when looking at children's culture as a whole. In a real sense, the whole thing is often not about the child, or just the child, anymore.

Nowhere is this better evidenced than in the *Teletubbies* phenomenon. The half-hour long children's program and its concomitant controversies epitomize the cultural struggles that exist on many levels in society, which include, but are not limited to, the concerns of the effects of television, gender issues, and the implications of global media. Each of these issues alone, as they relate to *Teletubbies*, should be examined in great detail. However, it is important not to lose the child in all of these discussions. Therefore, any study of this phenomenon should include an ethnography of the very children it proposes to attend.

At this point, the question inevitably rises as to how to interact and deal with the child and the child's perspective. Admittedly, it is often very difficult to collect and deduce more concrete information from an audience whose communication skills are not considered fully developed, not to mention the other challenges that can arise when dealing with the behavioral patterns and interpretations of an audience that, in the case of *Teletubbies*, most commonly ranges from the ages of 1 to 4. A normal and prolific

approach for this audience segment has been a quantitative one that often counts, charts, and compiles data on the behavior and responses of children in relationship to television and the media. Not to completely malign the information that can be extracted from these studies, it must however be stated that they can often be redundant and indeterminate. As Ellen Seiter points out,

The emphasis on quantifiable phenomenon locked mass communications researchers into a cycle of number-crunching... [and] avoided studying the media in context, preferring instead sanitized, controllable situations (laboratory, telephone interviews), producing data that was irrelevant to everyday life. ("Television" 13)

And, if according to Raymond Williams' famous dictum, "culture is ordinary" and has everything to do with the experience of the everyday (5), then what better place to begin to understand the larger cultural issues at stake within the *Teletubbies* phenomenon than to begin with the everyday experience of the audience most intended for the show, namely children who watch the program in their homes.

Method of Ethnography: Adding the Voice of the Child

As suggested by Seiter and others doing research in the field, a more ethnographic and/or qualitative approach was in order. Though certainly large groups and quantitative research is valuable and needed in the future, for the purposes of this paper and in order to fully explore the experiences of children as they watch the show, only a small group of children, 18, was used to inform the many arguments and controversies at hand. The group consisted of three five-year-olds; five four-year-olds; three three-year olds; four

two-year olds; and three toddlers, ages 19 months and 21, which were only observed and not interviewed, for obvious reasons. The group was composed of various family, friends, and other people wishing to have their children participate in the study. (Interestingly enough, parents of three of the interviewees sought out this project without any solicitation because they wanted to get some closure on all of the very public arguments, which tells something of the parents' plight, as well as the children's.) The research was conducted in the homes of the children, or in homes at least with which they were familiar, and attention was given to how these children usually viewed television. The goal of the interviews was, once again, not to count responses, but rather qualitatively analyze how children are making meaning out of the show.

There were and are obviously drawbacks and implications to this kind of approach. Since it is an analysis, the responses of the children must be, of necessity, filtered through the researchers' own interpretive writing. Likewise, the questioning and observation in this study was intentionally geared at looking at the children's experience in relation to the culture and controversies at hand, which, therefore, structured the responses of the children. However, this did not negate the research approach, but rather it placed the child in relation the program/text itself, as well as the culture in which the show had been received.

Positioning the child this way must be done in order to inform the larger cultural implications entangled with the show and its controversies as already discussed. At the heart of the matter lies the problem of interpretation. Roland Barthes states that "all images are polysemous," and open to varied interpretations (19). This is more than the

case with the ambiguous and almost unidentifiable nature of the Tubby creatures themselves. The conflict, then, is not only a matter of deciphering and deciding upon the images presented within the show, but also struggling over who or what will fix those meanings for the individual or even society at large. So, to begin by looking at how a child responds to the text itself and makes meaning from it can hopefully re-center the argument more around children and shed light on the larger process of how children make meaning in the first place.

The groundbreaking work of Robert Hodge and David Tripp stresses the importance of placing the child within the interpretive process, as it relates to the meaning of the text at large. Their often cited work, a semiotic approach to the children's cartoon *Fangface*, offers exacting detail into the processes and structures of meaning as it relates to children and the text. What their semiotic, structuralist, and often post-structuralist approach to a children's show, in this case a cartoon, demonstrates is the "enormous complexity of what is often taken to be a very simple and straightforward message structure" (39). Another finding elucidated in their work is the idea that children respond to and negotiate this textual "complexity" in multiple, sophisticated ways, acknowledging space for different modes and instances of interpretation. They discuss the varied societal institutions, such as the family and school, that can affect a child's understanding, as well as the codes, whether they be social or narrative, that children can employ to make meanings of a text (71-2). In other words, it shouldn't be taken for granted that just because a show is "for kids" that either the program itself or the methods that children use to decipher and understand it is any simple matter.

Though *Teletubbies* is stylistically and narratively geared toward a much younger audience than *Fangface*, and the children observed and interviewed are younger than the Hodge and Tripp's subjects (they were around age 9), the conclusions drawn by these authors appear as applicable in many respects to this audience as it did the older one. In the research for *Teletubbies*, a similar strategy to that of Hodge and Tripp was applied, in that a single episode was used, stopped and reviewed in small segments, and children were asked detailed questions concerning what they were seeing and interpreting on screen. However, often time was taken to just watch and observe the participants without any interruption or interrogation from the interviewer. By reviewing some of the general observations and by examining specific examples of the children's particular textual interpretations, it is evident that there is a necessity and validity, even at this micro-level, of examining, qualitatively, children's responses and incorporating these findings into the larger body of "children's issues," or in other words, reintroducing the child into the discourse of childhood.

Children's Responses to *Teletubbies*

So what did children have to say about *Teletubbies*? Before moving to the specific textual questions, it should first be pointed out that it was obvious in the observations alone that all of the children were actively, not passively, engaging with the narrative. In general terms, the older children, ages four and five, were very active and forthcoming, not to mention descriptive, with their responses. Obviously, the younger children, with their limited verbal abilities, were less descriptive, but still, overall, showed visible responses to the show. One of the criticisms launched against shows like

Teletubbies, and indeed all children's television in general, is that it promotes zombie-like passive viewing. However, as Heather Hendershot points out,

While cartoons designed for older kids tend to be straight forward adventure stories, historically the shows for younger audiences — *Sesame Street*, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, [etc.] — all strove to get children talking back to the TV screen. (23)

She goes on to state that current shows, such as *Blue's Clues* and *Teletubbies*, are no different.

This interactive element was evident in a number of instances within the research among all of the children, even the youngest viewers who giggled, mimicked the portrayed action and actually touched the television screen. For example, a four-year-old named Travis demonstrated active viewing and commentary by making the connection that just as the children on the television were washing a car, he also "once washed a car with his dad." The children would often verbally point out an element they connected to or enjoyed, by saying, "Look!" The youngest viewers — the toddlers — all interacted with the television by walking up to and touching the screen and all of them vocalized as they watched.

The older children all talked a great deal during the viewing. Many of the children sang along with the theme music and two of them, siblings Megan and Travis, age four and five, even at one point began to mimic the action of a computer-animated animal parade, Travis even going so far as to imitate the specific movements of each animal, such as crawling on his belly just as the snakes on the television were doing.

When Megan joined in the mimicry, it was also interesting to note the precision that Travis demanded of her in relation to the text. The animals on screen marched two by two next to each other. When Megan tried to follow behind Travis, he immediately tried to physically place her next to him, side by side, just as the animals on screen. When Megan resisted, his frustration manifested itself when he stopped his parade and exclaimed, "Work with me, Megan."

Dafna Lemish has commented on the presence on the role of imitation in the viewing experiences of young children. In a qualitative research project involving children as young as 12 months, as young an age as the target audience of *Teletubbies*, Lemish notes that not only was imitation a common form of activity during television viewing, but it also began appearing consistently in children as young as 16 months (51). She correctly asserts that the role of mimicry needs to be further investigated with toddlers and young children in order to gain a greater understanding of the potential of learning from television and the effects it can have upon children, especially in positive terms (53).

To add the child-centered evidence presented by Lemish and the behavior noticed in this research to the overall *Teletubbies* argument, it seems that the larger controversy about children's television viewing habits, even young children's viewing, may not necessarily be viewed as negative. Lemish notes that children as young as 18 months began recognizing letters and numbers and began rudimentary alphabetical and counting skills (53). Travis and Megan often counted along with the narrator, as he counted off the Teletubbies one by one. Two of the other children, Samuel and Rachel, ages four and

three, did this as well. Of course there is another side to the argument, and more research will be needed to gain a better understanding of all of the implications of the show and of children's relationship to television in general, but the initial observations to the show present no negative behaviors of passive viewing among the older children or toddlers.

It should also be noted at this point that contrary to images of the child so fixated on the television screen that he or she takes on the 'glazed over' effect or a 'zombie-like' mode of viewing, that none of these children exhibited this behavior with *Teletubbies*. In fact, it was quite common to see the children taking their attention elsewhere, by means of playing with toys, looking at a book, or playing with the family dog. One participant, a four-year-old named Austin, insisted at his mother's urging that he did indeed like *Teletubbies*, but that it was more important for him at the time to look for a snail outside instead of sitting to watch the show inside. His interview and observation had to be postponed until later.

Acknowledging this, however, it was interesting to note that there were certain stylistic and narrative elements that "hailed" the children's attention back onto the television screen. John Fiske describes the Althusserian idea of hailing along the lines of "hailing a cab" (288-9). It is a means of attracting one's attention, and when viewed in the light of how media hails us as viewers, it encompasses and involves sign systems that we as "those hailed" are caught up in. In today's media saturated world, hailing is not unusual, in fact, as one author states, "Living means being addressed" (qtd. in Warner 129).

With *Teletubbies*, it seems that the repeated viewing of the show has created a sign system by which the children have learned to respond. Different segments of the show are signaled with the spinning of the pinwheel, accompanying by the swishing sound of its turning. For example, one segment of an episode consisted of several minutes of the Teletubbies doing a dance to special music. Travis, though at first interested in the segment, soon lost interest and began to play with a plastic wildebeest and lizard, his "new favorite toys," so he stated. However, when the dancing segment was over, as signaled by the stopping of the music and then the sound of the spinning wheel, Travis looked up from his play and asked, "What's happening?" He had learned from repeated viewing of the show that certain sounds and images mean certain things, in this case that the scene will change and a new one will appear. Later when questioned about what the pinwheel was doing when it started to spin and make that specific noise, he responded, "It's spinning magic wishes for the Teletubbies." He recognized that every time it spun something new happened to the foursome and, given their usual merriment surrounding the event, Travis deduced that the Teletubbies wanted the action, or "wished" for it. Another child, age five and named Meg, said of the pinwheel, also hailed by its action, that when it spins "it means it's time to play." Other children, Sydney and Rachel, both three, recognized and responded to the sound of the spinning wheel, but did not make any connection that its spinning would indicate action on the show. One said that the wheel was a "clock" and the other said it was a "roller." Samuel said it was a "fan to cool the Teletubbies off" and Benjamin, age three, said it was a "star." None of the children identified the object as a pinwheel/windmill.

The idea of hailing creates a variable to the idea of the child as active viewer. Though these children showed obvious freedom and discrimination in not only mimicking and interacting with the text, but also in choosing to leave the narrative, the text itself must still be viewed as exerting some force, since it, at least in the case of these children, was able to draw their attention back into the narrative, even when they had chosen to look away. The complexities and contradictions of viewing and interpreting media text, as Hodge and Trip suggest, are always evident (71).

Reading the Signs: Children Inform the Controversies

Aside from observations on interaction with and response to the show, what were the children's interpretations of individual elements of the text? And what do their responses reveal about their place in society and also their role, if any, in the larger controversies over a show made for them? Answers to these questions could also merit a great deal of space, and reveal a myriad of complexities. Though difficult and not necessarily conclusive, these must be at least briefly addressed in order to begin to put the child and the child's perspective into these larger and often 'adult' concerns and controversies over the program.

One area adults often express concern over is the nature of the characters themselves and the effects this might have on children. In relating these ambiguous images into our known sign systems, the Teletubbies are often hinted at being like or a combination of alien, teddy bear, and even a fetus (Millman). However, what sign systems do children use to make meaning of these images? Concerning the nature of the Teletubbies themselves, Travis' answers proved most interesting. A few months earlier

than the official research was conducted, Travis was questioned as to what exactly the Teletubbies were. His response, rather matter-of-factly, was that they were "just Teletubbies." He seemed quite comfortably resigned to relegating the Teletubbies to terms explainable by their own names and their own sign system. The term "Teletubbies" itself was the best way for him to describe to creatures. However, a few months later when doing official research, to the same question Travis shifted his answer by stating that they were "babies." Somewhere between the two interviews, he adopted and incorporated another sign system, either learned from somewhere else or inferred on his own, to explain the terms of what they are. He followed statement that they were "babies" by saying, "Not like me." This statement is also interesting because it seems to suggest that whereas he could only describe them on their (the Teletubbies') terms before, as he develops, he begins to describe them in terms that are related to himself, his identity, and the "other" — concepts and systems with which he is beginning to become familiar. They are "not me." So, it would seem that, much like adults who also seek to define the creatures in terms that they are familiar with, so too Travis has begun that process. Megan, however, when asked what the Teletubbies were or were like responded much like Travis had earlier, by either saying, "They're Teletubbies," or noting the characters' specific names or colors. This shift possibly says much about developmental processes as well as socialization processes, especially how the need to communicate in familiar terms fits into these processes.

Also concerning the nature of the Teletubby characters is the issue of the television apparatuses in their bodies. Some adults view this design as a symbol for the

ultimate consumption of television, and, fearing that it promotes television viewing among small children, it is seen as negative (Mulrine 70). How do children see it?

Travis was asked what those were on the Teletubbies' stomachs. He correctly identified them as "TV's," but when questioned why they had them in their tummies, he could only respond, "Because." He didn't know why they were there.

Most of the children read this element in various ways. Meg stated that "movies come on their tummies; it's really silly," but she could not tell me where the movies came from either. Amber correctly identified the object as a "TV," but when questioned why they had televisions on their stomachs, she responded that they were "on their clothes, not their stomachs." None of the children seemed to understand the idea of television transmission or make the connection that the pinwheel was signaling that transmission. Moreover, the majority of the children did not even read the rectangles on the Teletubbies' stomachs as televisions. They were often identified simply as "rectangles," "squares," or they gave no answer.

Likewise, when questioned as to what was atop the Teletubbies' heads, the children's responses were also vague and varied. Travis correctly identified them as "antennas," but when asking for a definition what that was, he responded, "You know—all bugs have them, like the dung beetle." He was then asked if the Teletubbies were bugs, to which he quickly responded that they were not, but had antennas "kinda like bugs." Another girl, two-year-old Clara, said that they were "hair," and Austin said that they were "shapes." When asked why the antennas lit up, some children responded that they didn't know. Rachel stated that it was because they were "happy." Benjamin stated

it was because they were “thinking.” Given these responses, it would be difficult to conclusively assume that children relate the television set stomachs with the idea of television consumption, or even transmission for that matter. More research is needed.

Another adult conceptualization of *Teletubbies* that often surfaces in the controversies is over the environment in which the Teletubbies live. It is futuristic and naturalistic at the same time and the actions of the characters is dictated by machines, such as the pinwheel, the voice trumpets that rise out of the ground, or the faceless, unidentified narrator. Some adults read these elements as "Orwellian" or "big-brother-like" (Millman). All of the children, however, seemed more interested in the bunnies, flowers, and the baby sun hanging overhead. When questioned as to where the Teletubbies lived, Samuel responded, "Teletubbyland." When asked to describe it, he made references only to the grass, rabbits, and the baby sun. This reflects the information gathered by Lemish in her study that shows that children most often respond to things with which they are most familiar, such as pictures of other babies or animals (41). Megan also typically showed this connection by exclaiming, nearly every time the baby sun was shown, "It's the baby sun!" or "It's a baby!" and usually laughed every time the baby did. In fact, all of the children responded most to the baby-sun, especially the younger viewers. Hayden, a two year old, broke out in a full on giggle whenever the sun would appear on the screen. The children did not seem to be bothered or particularly aware of the technological elements of the landscape. Rather, they focused their responses to the natural elements. When questioned about the metal “voice trumpets,” one child described them as “telescopes” and another said that they were “speakers,” but

then quickly changed his answer to a “telephone.” Once again, this illustrates that children most relate to objects which they can understand, but at the same time, the ones that they cannot categorize do not trouble them.

The children of this ethnography also did not seem to be troubled by the gender issues surrounding the Teletubbies. Gender is an issue very much on the mind of a wide variety of people, ranging from cultural theorists to politicians to the common, everyday person. Once again, children's responses can offer insight into this arena, even as their own gendering processes are often occurring, and should not be ignored or diminished. The recurring element concerning the responses of the children concerning gender was one of inconsistency. It should be noted that the text, again, helps provides this ambiguity by assigning gender or sex really only through the pronouns "his" and "her" used by the narrator to talk about the Tubbies. Notice that the colors of the Teletubbies are bright and not necessarily feminine or masculine and there are really no other physical characteristics that can determine the sex of the creatures (with the possible exception of Tinky Winky's and Dipsy's voices, which are deeper and more male sounding).

Travis showed a lack of gender constancy when questioned about the Teletubbies. He said correctly who was a boy and who was a girl, except for Dipsy. (He considered him a female.) When asked what Tinky Winky was carrying, he replied that it was a “purse.” When asked why he was carrying a purse, he replied, "Because he is a baby (pause) and a girl." It is obvious in this case that the purse is causing some gender confusion for Travis, maybe not for other children. But the presence of the purse caused

no more confusion than the androgynous nature of the beings themselves, as with Dipsy. All of the vocalized children stated that Tinky Winky was indeed carrying a purse, except for Benjamin, who said it was a “red thingy” and Meg who said it was a “magic bag.” When queried as to why Tinky Winky was carrying the purse some of the answers included: “because it’s his,” “he’s playing,” “he’s silly,” and “because it does magic.” Travis seemed to be the only child that conclusively linked the purse to being female, though he showed some confusion over it.

The other children also showed confusion in properly assigning gender to the Teletubbies. Megan showed confusion along these lines when she, though correctly identifying the males and females, referred to Laa-laa as a “he.” Amber, at one point, said that Dipsy was a boy, but kept referring to her as a “she” and finally stated that she was a girl. When asked: “So, Dipsy is a girl?” Amber then responded that “he was a girl right now.” Meg was the only child that properly identified the gender of all of the Teletubbies. When asked how she knew Po was a girl, she said, “Because she is sweet.” She was asked, “So, boys aren’t sweet?” Her answer: “No, they are mean.” She was then asked if all girls were sweet. She responded, “Yes, except my sister Rachel can be mean sometimes.”

These answers elucidate some interesting points. It could be concluded from them that either that the text is producing these gender identification inconsistencies, or rather, children exist in a confusing state where the process of gender is being learned in the first place, as well as their accompanying pronouns. Several studies show that children do not begin to fully understand gender until around preschool age and that often

gender is something unfixed in their comprehension — a lack of gender constancy. For example, a 2 ½ year old may know that she is a girl, but think she can grow up to be a daddy (Maccoby; Maracek; Ruble and Martin). Obviously much more research needs to be done in this area with regards to *Teletubbies*. However, these limited examples seem to suggest that children are not necessarily confused by the Teletubbies, but that the Teletubbies reflect an ambiguity that is already present at this stage of their development.

What is interesting is that children do not seem to be troubled by these ambiguities, as this small ethnography illustrates. With adults, it is a different story. Charting the effects of the *Teletubbies* controversies, parents' interaction and mediation, and other peer influences on the children's reception would also be worthy pursuits for further research. One study surrounding Teletubbies already exists, which charts parents' and experts' responses to *Teletubbies* in Israel, but not children's responses are included, and certainly there is no indications as to how parents and others affect children's reception of the show (Lemish and Tidhar).

However, what this project exemplifies, once again, is the complexity of how adult issues seem to enter childhood and how the child often does not have a say in the arguments. Another cite of further research could well be how these struggles often affect parents who want to do right by their children. Many of the parents of children interviewed stated their frustration over what they should believe concerning all of the controversy. As one parent lamented, "Why can't they just leave the kids alone?" As Jenkins and others are quick to point out, adult issues become children's issues if for no other reason than society perceives children as the future and, thus, the inheritors of the

culture, with all of its attendant baggage. If this is the case, then it should not be forgotten to look at the child and the contributions that even the smallest can make to broaden understanding in the society in which he or she lives.

When queried as to why she liked the show, Meg answered: “I like the show because it is fun and I like the Teletubbies because they are funny.” Austin said he liked it because “they laugh a lot.” Sydney stated that she liked “the people and the sucker-upper” (a reference to Noo-Noo the vacuum cleaner, as explained by her mother). Amber expressed her affection for Po and the dancing that all of the Teletubbies do. Megan said that “the Teletubbies hug each other and they’re nice to each other and they love each other.” What child psychologist, religious/moral spokesman, or cultural critic would have a problem with these statements? But then, often, no one has asked a child what he or she thinks.

CHAPTER 6

“TIME FOR TUBBY BYE-BYE”: A CONCLUSION

Though now considered the epitome of quality, educational children’s television, when *Sesame Street* premiered in 1969 the show was attacked on several fronts, educational and otherwise. Some objected to its portrayals of racial integration, some disliked its pro-feminist housewife-turned-nurse character, and some thought the show’s loud colors, fast-paced editing and numerous zooms would promote LSD and the drug culture lifestyle of the 1960’s to children. Others objected to the fact that it was intentionally designed to look like commercial television, making use of advertising techniques as well as the pervading styles of film and popular television of the times.

In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, children’s shows that caught cultural flak included everything from *Barney*, which was also accused of dumbing down children, to *The Simpsons* and *Beavis and Butthead*, which were said to promote all kinds of mischief by encouraging kids to start fires and back-talk with statements like “Eat my shorts!” Heather Hendershot relates the chronicles of these episodes and asks if the *Teletubbies* cultural panic was really all that different from these previous examples and the many others that have surfaced over the history of television and even film and radio. She goes on to question what these panics, and their reoccurring presence in society, say about culture and childhood. She summarizes:

There seems to be a pattern: the kids who grew up when radio was under attack in the thirties become the censors of fifties TV, which they charged caused juvenile delinquency, and the kids who grew up watching fifties TV would later panic about video games [...]. In sum, our culture's amnesia about media history means that kids keep growing up and turning into the censors that they resisted as children. (20)

In addition to the idea of cyclical censorship, Kirsten Drotner also explores the role of the media in such cultural panics. As exemplified by the *Teletubbies*, the media plays a powerful role in persuading, informing, and creating concern among the masses, especially as it relates to the interpretation of specific shows like *Teletubbies*. She states:

Most stage managers of media panics offer very simplified notions of what is involved in cultural interpretation. On this basis, media experience and social action are directly linked: if we see violence on the screen, we become criminals. Or, according to others, if we are exposed to media violence, our senses are dulled, so that we accept a higher degree of "real" violence. While nineteenth-century panics emphasised the social evils resulting from mass-circulating fiction, today media opposition centers on psychological ill-effects. Arguments are being internalized as the media penetrate deeper into our social lives. (53)

Of course these internalized arguments catch many people in their crossfire. Educators, politicians, and especially parents all struggle not only to mediate all of the conflicting voices of dissent, but also try to decide what is best for the children. As

Drotner points out: “Children and young people are continually defined as victims in the panics” (54). She goes on to discuss this social assumption, defining the relation between culture and social psychology. She states:

According to this assumption, cultural development and human development are aspects of one and the same process. Children’s cultural edification is part of, indeed, proof of, their social elevation. Therefore, their cultural fare must be guarded, watched over, and protected, because its composition is vital for their mental growth. Following this logic, if we adults watch soap operas every afternoon, then our humanness is gradually undermined. But if children watch soap operas every afternoon, then they never even get a chance to develop this humanness. (54)

Indeed, children and childhood has become an arena that is carefully watched over in society and one that maintains a high level of concern. In fact, a recent poll in 1999 states that concern over children and the family tops the list of the most important problems facing society today (Dew 57-58).

So how does the *Teletubbies* phenomenon enter in and play a role in this child-centered culture? Its ambiguous text, heavy advertising and merchandising, and its targeting of young children no doubt have made it a target of concern and attention within society. Additionally, its very publicized controversies, promulgated by and struggled over in the media, have brought these cultural issues into the realm of childhood. Though Drotner is quick to point out that the reasoning that produces such arguments over what is best for children is a social construction particularly ingrained in

Western societies, she does not necessarily refute, to some extent, the importance of it (53-54). Children, who are either are not able to add a voice to society or are not given one, do need parents and others who do have power in society to keep a venue open to discuss issues concerning them. However, as others are quick to point out, this should not give leeway to use children in discussing issues that really have nothing to do with childhood, though it invariably seems to happen (Jenkins). In talking of the controversy over *Teletubbies*, especially as it relates to the safety, well-being and development of children, Charles Lane states:

The lesson of “Teletubbies” for adults, then, is clear: Let’s all quit trying to dress up our own political squabbles as ostensible battles to save the brains and souls of our children. Those brains and souls are a good deal more resilient than parents generally realize [...] (45)

As other authors points out, it is not necessarily what children watch on television that can be detrimental, but rather what television is too often substituted for — parental teaching, reading, and supervision and media mediation within the home (MacGregor; Van Evra). In a recent conference where discussions of violence, media entertainment, and children were discussed, Mrs. Jehan Sadat, wife of Egypt’s former president Anwar Sadat, stated:

The problem is in our homes. Too many parents don’t know what’s happening to their children. Too many have abdicated responsibility for teaching their children what is important. (qtd. in Dew 58)

Therefore, the *Teletubbies* arguments may have to do less with what the show actually does to children and more to do with what is not being done for them by parents and society. If nothing else, this statement is evidenced in the fact that such public uproar could be had over something like *Teletubbies* in the first place and that these kinds of public panics have and will continue to arise. As Heather Hendershot states:

While adults like to say that television shortens children's attention spans, it is grown-ups who often seem distracted as they re-direct their ire from show to show. As each new program comes under attack, the previous program is discarded, the scandal rarely revisited. (20)

Teletubbies is certainly old news by now. Its round, brightly colored creatures grace the aisles of toy and video stores and their faces may no longer seem strange or threatening to the public at large. Just as society adapted itself to the concepts of a big, yellow talking bird, ninja fighting turtles, or a red, fuzzy creature named Elmo, so to the nature of the *Teletubbies* seem hardly questioned or talked about in the media anymore. Though this terror is over now, until society feels its children are safe, more panics and controversies like the *Teletubbies* phenomenon will come again, only in different forms and with different shows.

APPENDIX A
LETTER AND PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS
RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Children's Understanding of *Teletubbies*

Principle Investigator: Agatha Anne Cowart, graduate student, Department of R/TV/F
Faculty Sponsor: Olaf Hoerschelmann Phone: 565-7327

Dear Parents:

I will be conducting a research project designed to gain insight into how children make meaning out of the television they watch, namely the children's show *Teletubbies*. This show, aired on PBS every weekday morning, is a non-violent, slow-paced, whimsical program designed for young children. This research will serve to inform my larger research on this program for my Master's thesis.

Over the next couple of months, I will be visiting children in their homes or preschool/daycare facilities and observing and interviewing children for a couple of hours each to see not only the ways in which they view the program, but what they take they show to mean. After observing the child as she or he watches the show, I will show him or her some selected parts of the program and ask questions concerning what they think is happening at that time and what the screen images mean that they see. I will also ask them some general questions about the show and what they think about it. All answers will be taped by an audio recorder and transcribed later.

I realize that this will take up time and possibly disrupt children's schedules. I also realize that children are often uncomfortable around new people. Where possible, I would like to make at least two visits, one for observation and one for interviewing, in an effort to put the children more at ease around me. I realize the inconvenience, but I hope that my research benefits will outweigh this by first of all giving children a voice in a subject where they are often do not have one and, second, by promoting critical thinking skills as they watch television.

I should also note that any child that does not wish to participate will in no way be made to do so. If this research is conducted at his or her preschool or daycare and they choose not to participate, it will in no way affect you child's standing at the school. The broad results of this study, as a whole, will be made available to any interested parent or teacher. To preserve confidentiality, only first names will be used to identify children in my later reports and thesis. Should you have any questions or desire further information, please call me at 940-566-6525. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,
Agatha Cowart

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS
RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Subject Name: _____ Date: _____
Title of Study: Children's Understanding of Teletubbies
Principle Investigator: Agatha Anne Cowart, graduate student, Department of R/TV/F
Faculty Sponsor: Olaf Hoerschelmann Phone: 565-7327

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you have read and understood the previous explanation of the proposed procedures. It describes the procedures, benefits, risks, and discomforts of the study. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study at any time. It is important for you to understand that no guarantees or assurances can be made as to the results of the study.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (940) 565-3940.

RESEARCH SUBJECTS' RIGHTS: I have read or have had read to me all of the above.

_____ has explained the study to me and answered all of my questions. I have been told the risks or discomforts and possible benefits of the study.

I understand that my child does not have to take part in this study, and that either my refusal or my child's refusal will involve no penalty or loss of rights to which I, or my child, is entitled. I, or my child, may withdraw at any time without penalty. The principle investigator can stop the child's participation at any time if he or she appears to be uncomfortable, if he or she is not responsive, or if the study is canceled.

In case there are problems or questions, I have been told I can call Agatha Cowart at (940) 565-6525.

I understand my child's rights as a research subject, and I consent to his or her participation in this study. I understand what the study is about and how and why it is being done. I will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

I do grant permission for my child, _____ to participate in this project.

(Parent/Guardian Signature) Date

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE AND OBSERVATION FORM

Name: _____ **Age:** _____

State of subject – demeanor, attitude, attentiveness, willingness to participate, etc:

General questions for children:

Do you like to watch Teletubbies?

What do you like about the show?

What are Teletubbies?

What is on their stomachs?

What is on their heads?

Are they boys or girls?

Where do the Teletubbies live?

Who takes care of the Teletubbies?

Specific Recorded Episode Response

Introduction sequence:

What is that? (about baby sun)

Who's talking? (narrator)

What is happening? What happens when the windmill spins?

First Action Segment comments, if any:

Live Action Segment comments, if any:

What is happening (pinwheel spinning)?

Why is their stomach lighting up?

Second Action Segment comments, if any:

Closing Section:
Where are the Teletubbies going?

Additional Segment Questions:
What toys are they playing with?

What is Tinky Winky holding?

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