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# Spirits, Miracles and Clauses: Economy, Patriarchy and Childhood in Popular Christmas Texts

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The meanings and practices associated with the celebration of Christmas occupy a notable place in the study of cultural and social histories, where there is particular emphasis on the tensions between Christmas and capital (Clark 1995). As a festival with both religious and secular associations, Christmas is both mythologised and ‘sacralized’ in the combination of ‘mythical themes and...ritual consumption’ (Belk 2005, p. 101)—such that there is considerable elision between the traditional association of Christmas with notions of generosity, good will, and childhood innocence and wonder, and those of consumption and commercialism. Indeed, as Cindy Dell Clark’s interviews with American children and parents concerning the meanings attached to Christmas demonstrates, ‘consumers create transcendent meaning in their lives by sacralizing objects consumed’ (1995, p. 99). While a good deal has been written about the ways in which Christmas texts and practices are located in the context of consumer practices (Clark 1995; Schmidt 1995; Belk 2001) and are implicated in the formation of cultural traditions (Clark 1995; Armstrong 2004), sustained analyses of Christmas texts make only limited appearances in studies of childhood, children’s literature and popular culture. Yet stories, films and picture books that focus on the celebration of Christmas provide a surprisingly rich source of cultural information about the ways in which children and childhood are constructed in reference to the broader social world, and the enduring popularity and commercial success of Christmas texts speaks to their potency in the cultural imagination.

In this paper, therefore, I explore the notion of childhood as it is re/configured in Christmas texts through the discursive frames of industrialisation and global capitalism. Through a poststructuralist analysis of three Christmas texts from the 1840s, 1940s and 1990s, I map discursive shifts in the ways that children and childhood are constructed in relation to the discourses of capitalist societies. Three texts are examined in detail: *A Christmas Carol*, published by Charles Dickens in 1843; the 1947 version of the film, *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*; and the 1999 Walt Disney film, *The Santa Clause*. While these texts provide only a small sample from the thousands of texts available, their commercial success and sustained popular appeal makes them particularly significant sites of analysis. Dickens’ text is widely considered ‘the most

often repeated and imitated secular Christmas story of all’ (Belk 2005, p.18), which has itself ‘become sacred Christmas literature’ (Belk 2005, p. 19). The success of *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* led to several remakes for television audiences, with major motion picture remakes released in 1973 and again in 1994, while *The Santa Clause*—the role credited with launching actor Tim Allen from a successful television career into a string of Hollywood blockbuster films—won the 1995 People’s Choice Award (USA) for Favourite Comedy Motion Picture, and was followed by sequels in 2002 and 2006 (IMDb, 2007). When considered together, these three popular, enduring and commercially successful texts illustrate some of the ways in which cultural texts are implicated in constructing children, over time, as particular kinds of economic subjects.

Following recent work by Davies (2005)—whose comparative analysis of a 1940s children’s story and its 1970s revised version demonstrates how historically located social discourses surrounding the nature and regulation of childhood are re/produced in children’s texts—this paper maps discourses of children as economic subjects through the trope of Christmas stories over a considerable period of time. While the texts selected for analysis here provide interesting commentaries about the implicit social and moral values of the particular milieu within which they were produced, they simultaneously draw on broader notions of childhood in relation to social and political economies in ways that reflect significant shifts in thinking about how children are located within the frameworks of capitalist production and enterprise. Specifically, the argument is made that earlier Christmas texts predominantly construct workplaces, factories, and commercial enterprise as hostile, irrelevant and/or unresponsive to the needs and interests of children and childhood, whereas in contemporary Christmas texts such as *The Santa Clause* children are reconfigured as integral to and a driving force *within* the spaces of capitalist production. Additionally, in each of the texts considered—irrespective of historical context—patriarchy is the primary device by means of which ‘appropriate’ economic childhood is achieved.

A striking difference between the earlier texts examined in this paper and the 1990s text is the extent to which childhood has been recast in the contemporary text as

existing in alignment with the kinds of social conditions, personal dispositions and relational arrangements most conducive to the operations of globalised capitalist economies. The earlier texts considered here construct childhood as vulnerable to the vagaries of an adult world, where children's access to financial and symbolic capital (and the agentive capacity these imply) is limited, and can ultimately only be achieved through the direct intervention of (male) adults or through the mythic intervention of the magical/supernatural (which is, in turn, mediated by male adults). For the later texts, however, childhood is an empowered category, where children's innovations, insights, predilections and dispositions enable them to transcend the constraints and limitations of the adult world in order to take up their 'rightful' place as the new producers, managers and organisers (rather than merely the consumers) of capitalist culture.

This distinction is centrally located within debates around the impact of consumer culture and neoliberal discourses in the lives of children, and sits alongside similar distinctions made in other genres and discourses in which children and childhood are increasingly reconfigured in terms of their relation to/elision with consumer cultures (see, for example, Kenway & Bullen 2001; Giroux 2002; Steinberg & Kincheloe 2004). While a good deal has been written about the extent to which discourses of consumerism have permeated children's texts and youth culture, there is a need for more nuanced micro-analyses of the textual devices and narrative strategies through which such permeation is achieved within and through specific texts. At the heart of such concerns is the crucial role of text in constituting subjectivities, and this analysis is informed by poststructuralist notions of power/knowledge, and the processes of agency and subjection through which power operates to produce particular types of social subjects.

### **The making of economic subjects**

Central to this analysis is a poststructuralist understanding of the productive capacity of text, and of the significance of texts to the discourses in circulation at a given point in time. Stories, novels, films, and other forms of narrative texts that pervade the social world are understood here not only as a means of reflecting and conveying particular social

values, practices and meanings, but are also understood as a key means of *producing* them. The storylines available within a culture/society are thus an important means by which identities and social relations are written/spoken into existence, and provide a powerful resource through which individuals learn to 'read and interpret the landscape of the social world, and to embody, to live, to experience, to know, to desire *as one's own*, to take pleasure in the world, as it is made knowable through the available discourses, social structures and practices' (Davies 2003, p. 19, emphasis in original). Learning to recognise and take up—as well as to resist—the subject positions made available through the familiar storylines of families, friendship groups, communities and cultures is an important means by which individuals negotiate their own subjectivities and navigate their multiple locations in the social world.

These processes through which individuals come to recognise, take up, resist and reconfigure the subject positions available to them are understood, in poststructuralist terms, as processes of subjectification which entail not only the external operations of power acting on individual subjects, but which also involve 'the way the human being turns him- or herself into a subject' (Foucault 2002, p. 327). Thus the processes of subjectification are accomplished not merely through the imposition of power, but are also reliant on the agentive fashioning of the self, in a double process of agency and subjection through which individuals are both constituted, and accomplish themselves as social subjects. According to Foucault:

*One has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, one has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination.*

(Foucault, cited in Carrette 1999, p. 162)

This line of argument has particular relevance when considering how children's subjectivities are shaped through the cultural texts that permeate childhood experience. Importantly, as Davies (2005, p. 153) observes, 'children are not only shaped by external conditions

such as the stories told to them, but they are dependent on those conditions and they take them up as their own.' While, as John Stephens has pointed out 'there is little doubt that the socio-cultural values of the writer's period will determine which 'universals' are inscribed within the fiction's teleology' (1992, p. 207), those external conditions that inform and shape a text are in turn drawn on by readers in their negotiation of texts. Readers, as Stephens argues, 'may look for different values' (1992, p. 207), even while they draw on their knowledge of the social world and the text's relation to it in order to comprehend texts as intelligible. The role of readers in producing meanings from the text thus becomes crucial to the text's communicative effectiveness, such that the values, categories and possibilities constructed in any text are open to multiple, even contradictory, readings. The recognition of available subject positions, and the agentive capacity to act in relation to them are, as Judith Butler reminds us, dependent on the social conditions through which the subject is always already constituted:

*We come into the world on the condition that the social world is already there, laying the groundwork for us. This implies that I cannot persist without norms of recognition that support my persistence; the sense of possibility pertaining to me must first be imagined from somewhere else before I can begin to imagine myself. My reflexivity is not only socially mediated, but socially constituted. I cannot be who I am without drawing upon the sociality of norms that precede and exceed me.*

(Butler 2004, p. 32)

Butler's argument provides a useful frame for considering the extent to which the sphere of sociality both precedes the individual and provides the conditions from whence individuals are able to proceed in their negotiation of cultural texts. Through mapping these complex processes of agency and subjection onto the production and consumption of cultural texts, it is possible to see how the 'techniques of the self' to which Foucault refers are inextricably bound up with and dependent upon the knowledges and norms of social life. While the storylines and subject positions through which children come to recognise and fashion themselves in relation to the social world may be understood

as external forces acting on individual subjects, they can also be understood as an effect of the social conditions upon which children's recognisability and viability as social subjects is dependent.

The work that narrative texts do in mediating between the self and the social makes the texts of popular culture a powerful vehicle for the circulation of familiar storylines, commonsense understandings and dominant discourses. This is not to imply a conscious or deliberate attempt by authors, script-writers, publishers, producers and so on to inculcate readers/viewers with a particular set of values, views or behaviours (though texts may certainly be designed or appropriated to this end in some circumstances), but rather it is to suggest that the familiar storylines through which individuals come to recognise themselves in relation to others and the broader social world are an important means through which knowledge about the terms and conditions of social intelligibility (see Butler 2004) are made available. Stories told and retold—using familiar narrative structures and devices such as intertextual references, the construction of alignment through the development of characters with recognisable qualities and dilemmas, strategies for effecting resolution/closure, and so on—draw on the social knowledges and understandings that readers/viewers inevitably bring to their negotiation of texts (see Stephens 1992; Stephens & McCallum 1998). Conversely, readers'/viewers' knowledges and understandings of themselves in relation to the social world determine, in part, the ways in which they construct new meanings from texts, and negotiate the various subject positions made available to them through the recognisable storylines of their culture.

What is of particular interest here is the increasing pervasiveness of economic discourses in texts and storylines concerned with children and childhood, and the significance of these discourses to the shaping of particular types of social subject. Critiques of neoliberal discourse, in which the operation of the 'free market' is given primacy over all other mechanisms of governance and social organisation, inform a range of social analyses and policy debates (see, for example, Rose 1999; Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1996), and scholars concerned with the influence of market forces in texts produced for and

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about children point to both the commodification of children and childhood, as well as the slippages between home, education and commercial contexts, as primary areas of concern (see Kenway & Bullen 2001; Steinberg & Kincheloe 2004). What has been less well documented, however, are the ways in which neoliberal discourse, with its emphasis on individual responsibility, entrepreneurial endeavour, technological innovation and consumer choice permeates contemporary texts produced for children and families. Yet I would argue, it is precisely this permeation of neoliberal discourse in children's texts that enables the invisibilised (re)constitution of the contemporary social subject primarily as an economic subject.

In the texts considered here, there are numerous examples of the ways in which the repetition of neoliberal rationalities has gradually supplanted notions of generosity, morality, justice and compassion (albeit under the guise of mythic adventure, childhood desires and magical transformations), calling to mind Judith Butler's suggestion that, '[i]f conditions of power are to persist, they must be reiterated; the subject is precisely the site of such reiteration, a repetition that is never merely mechanical' (Butler 1997, p. 16). In the following sections of this paper, I explore the ways in which the construction of children and childhood are reiterated in economic terms across the three popular Christmas texts already been introduced, suggesting that it is possible to trace a shift from earlier texts, in which the economic world was largely seen as either hostile or irrelevant to children, through to contemporary texts, in which childhood is seen as central to and a driving force within the neoliberal spaces of capitalist enterprise.

### **The spirit of childhood past**

The earliest text considered here, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, provides an account of children and childhood that is constructed against the backdrop of horrific social conditions experienced by the poor of England and Europe, and the inhumane and brutal working conditions endured by child labourers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The concept of childhood had undergone considerable alteration during this period, as the Industrial Revolution saw huge numbers of children, from ages as young as three, forced to work in factories and mines as a cheap form of labour (see Cleverley & Phillips 1987). The exploitation of children

under these conditions was not, of course, without its protesters, and while a detailed discussion is beyond the parameters of this paper, it is worth noting that Charles Dickens—himself having been removed from school as a child and sent to work in a factory following his father's arrest and incarceration in debtor's prison—was a vocal critic of the dismal circumstances of London's schools for the poor, and the brutal working conditions suffered by children in mines and workhouses of mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century England (see Kelly 2003).

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Dickens' portrayal of children in *A Christmas Carol* can be read as social commentary, a point made by Dickens himself, having elected to embark on producing a literary narrative, rather than a political treatise, concerning the issues of child labour and education for the poor (Kelly 2003). As indicated in the earlier sections of this paper, however, I want to avoid implying that texts (even those explicitly intended by their authors to do so) merely reflect social realities or provide commentary on social 'truths'. I am suggesting instead that the social, political and economic circumstances with which Dickens was explicitly concerned have been drawn upon as discursive resources through which both the ideological position of the text and the subject positions made available to readers are constructed. What is particularly interesting about Dickens' text for the purposes of this paper, then, is not only that it draws upon and constructs commentary in relation to specific social and economic conditions of its day, but also its reliance on readers' apprehension of and alignment to a broader set of presuppositions, and its function in drawing on these resources to construct subject positions in relation to, for instance, patriarchal family structures, emotional ties, and identity categories (of gender, class, childhood, adulthood, and so on).

Dickens' story concerns the conversion of the miserly and cold-hearted Ebenezer Scrooge, a 'man of business' who is moved, through the visitation on Christmas Eve of three spirits and the visions they reveal to him, to reconsider his lack of compassion for the poor—including members of his own family—and to reform himself with a renewed generosity of spirit. While the text overtly maintains a thematic concern about the social conditions discussed above, what I want to take up in greater detail here is the

more implicit narrative work through which the category of childhood is constructed as dependent upon and vulnerable to the success/failure of patriarchy and its determining effect on social and economic change.

In each of the scenes Scrooge is shown on Christmas Eve by the three apparitions who visit him, childhood features as a prominent motif—first, in the figure of Scrooge as a lonely schoolboy and young apprentice; then in the horrific figures of the two children of ‘Man’ who lurk beneath the robes of the Ghost of Christmas Present; and later in the figure of Tiny Tim, the ailing child of Scrooge’s nephew, Bob Cratchit. In each case, childhood experience is constructed as largely determined by the conditions imposed by an adult world, rather than by any intervention or agency attributed to child characters. Scrooge’s schooldays, for example, take place in:

*a large house, but one of broken fortunes; for the spacious offices were little used, their walls were damp and mossy, their windows broken and their gates decayed...entering the dreary hall, and glancing through the open doors of many rooms, they found them poorly furnished, cold and vast. There was an earthy savour in the air, a chilly bareness in the place, which associated itself somehow with too much getting up by candle-light, and not too much to eat.*

(Dickens 2003, p. 65).

In this dismal environment, Scrooge’s isolated and lonely childhood is emphasised by the merriment of schoolmates returning home (to presumably happier family circumstances) for the holidays, while the only available option for the young Scrooge to negotiate his own circumstances exists in the realms of fantasy and books. The happier times he is able to recall—during which he has been allowed by his father to return home, and is subsequently apprenticed to the kindly Mr. Fezziwig—are also times that were brought about not by any endeavour of Scrooge himself, but rather by the circumstances with which he is presented.

Indeed, the point of transition from the powerless state of childhood to the agentive state of adulthood appears to have taken place when Scrooge allowed his fondness for money

to interfere with his romantic relationship, thus bringing about the end of his engagement to marry. The personal consequence of Scrooge’s choice to pursue financial gain over romantic and familial ties—signifying the failure of patriarchy in securing the moral order—is constructed as an individual tragedy which is, in turn, mapped onto the larger human tragedy brought about by the social and economic circumstances with which Dickens was particularly concerned. The effectiveness of the text as a mode of social commentary and moral instruction, I would suggest, lies in its appeal to *individual* sensibilities with respect to what is constructed as a *universal* dilemma—the threat to social cohesion posed by the moral predicaments associated with industrialisation. In this sense, the moral choice of the individual is afforded a broader and more enduring social significance, so that, through the individual choices the character of Ebenezer Scrooge is required to make, both personal fulfilment *and* broader social good are to be achieved.

Dickens’ text makes this link between individual choice (which is afforded only to men) and social consequences explicit through the horrific figures of the two destitute children who are shown to Scrooge as they huddle beneath the robes of the Ghost of Christmas Present:

*They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread.*

(Dickens 2003, pp. 100-101)

Invoking in Scrooge both pity and revulsion, the images of these two children (identified by the Ghost of Christmas Present as ‘Ignorance’ and ‘Want’) function here as the articulation between childhood and society. Vulnerable to, yet powerless to intervene in, the political and economic circumstances of which they are both victims and inheritors,

their grotesque appearance signifies the degradation of both childhood (indicated by the suggestion that where they might, in other circumstances, have been ‘angels’, they are lurking ‘devils’) and of humanity (in their reconfiguration as ‘monsters...horrible and dread’) through the excesses of industrial greed and exploitation. It is worth noting here that debates of the period during which *A Christmas Carol* was written were heavily invested with notions of a ‘natural order’ in relation to both the innocent but corruptible ‘nature’ of the individual child (notions informed by Rousseau’s *Emile*, and its influence since publication in 1762), as well as notions of a ‘natural’ social order associated with patriarchal familial structures and domestic arrangements. During this period, ‘the “fundamental categories” of analysis had become “childhood-adulthood”’ (Hendrick 1997, p. 42), and campaigners against the exploitation and brutalisation of child workers, as Hendrick points out, were concerned not only with the threat that industrialisation was seen as posing to children’s physical and moral development, but also by the threat it posed to the sphere of adulthood, specifically in relation to the ‘natural’ patriarchal order seen as necessary for the reproduction of civilized society.

Dickens’ engagement with the dual categories of childhood and adulthood takes place prior to the development, in the 1850s, of reformers’ growing insistence on the reconstructed category of childhood (with particular reference to the childhoods of the poor and destitute) in terms of delinquency (see Hendrick 1997). Instead, the moral (hence social) threat implied by Dickens’ ghostly figures of destitute children is associated not with any ‘innate’ moral deficiency associated with childhood, but rather, with the ‘stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age’ (Dickens 2003, p. 101) whose greedy excesses are seen as depriving childhood of its ‘natural’ innocence. The exploitation of working class children, and the threat to the moral order that it implies, can in turn be read as a threat to the social order, the ‘potent sense of unrealised threat’ (Ketabjian 2003, p. 668) that Dickens saw as a consequence of industrial oppression and exploitation of the working class in works such as *Hard Times* (Eagleton 1987). Thus both childhood and adulthood are constructed as jeopardised categories in Dickens’ account of the ghostly children. Scrooge’s response to the two children—and the Spirit’s response,

which echoes Scrooge’s uncompassionate reply when he had been asked, on the previous day, to make a charitable donation to the poor—underscores the division between the categories of childhood and adulthood in the text:

*Scrooge started back, appalled. Having them shown to him in this way, he tried to say they were fine children, but the words choked themselves, rather than be parties to a lie of such enormous magnitude...*

*‘Have they no refuge or resource?’ cried Scrooge.*

*‘Are there no prisons?’ said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. ‘Are there no workhouses?’*

(Dickens 2003, p. 101)

This passage illustrates the extent to which Dickens’ text constructs childhood entirely within the discursive terms of vulnerability and dependency. The only hope for these children and the conditions of the human of which they are symptomatic will lie, according to Dickens, in the moral choices made by (privileged, male) adults.

Moved by the conditions of childhood—and their inevitable implications for both individuals and the broader social order—Scrooge must confront and alter both his attitudes and conduct in order to accommodate the needs of others. His transition ‘from infantile solipsism to maturing social awareness’ (Stephens 1992, p. 3), a transition which, according to Stephens, is a pervasive thematic concern of texts in children’s fiction, effectively re/constructs the character not merely in the adult terms of conversion to a morally ascendant position, but also as metaphoric child whose future now depends wholly on his revision of *adult* choices. Indeed, this construction of adult-as-child is signalled by Scrooge’s exclamation, upon waking on Christmas morning to discover that he has survived the previous night’s ghostly encounters:

*‘I don’t know what day of the month it is!’ said Scrooge. ‘I don’t know how long I’ve been among the Spirits. I don’t know anything. I’m quite a baby. Never mind. I don’t care. I’d rather be a baby. Hallo! Whoop! Hallo here!’*

(Dickens 2003, 119).

Scrooge's adult choice of a selfish existence focused on pecuniary interest is replaced—with the aid of, and mapped onto, his fear of an uncertain future/eternity—by a childlike compulsion to generosity and joyful celebration. Interestingly, though, the significance of Scrooge's new-found generosity to the concerns of childhood is most apparent in relation to the character of Tiny Tim, whose life is to be spared as a consequence of Scrooge's new-found benevolence toward his family. This maintenance of what Anne Cranny-Francis refers to as a 'causal fallacy' (1992, p. 120), is an important means by which Dickens underscores the moral message of the text:

*The relationship between the characters and actions and [the] end is clearly established, not least by the causal fallacy which makes narrative such a powerful ideological mechanism: that is, the temporal unfolding of narrative is equated with cause and effect in order to naturalise (to make seem natural, obvious or inevitable) the causal relationships established.*

(Cranny-Francis 1992, p. 120).

In this instance, the causal relationship established between the morally ascendant choice of the story's male adult focaliser and the outcomes for the male child beneficiary of that choice, underscores the centrality of patriarchy as a primary organising structure of social relations, and as a primary prerequisite for the reproduction of desirable social values. Although readers are told of several acts of generosity that accompany Scrooge's elation at finding himself alive on Christmas morning, the continuity of the patriarchal social order is most emphatically redeemed through his re-establishment of familial ties and through the individual benefit accrued by Tiny Tim as the youngest male family member. In this way, I would argue, Dickens both retains the category of childhood as vulnerable to and dependent upon the economic context of the day, while simultaneously proposing a moral solution—predicated on patriarchal values—to the perceived social threats of industrialisation.

### **Miracles and rational childhood presents**

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox film *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* was released in 1947, a period during which behaviourist models of childhood were gaining prominence as a result of the work

of psychologists such as B. F. Skinner (see Cleverley & Phillips 1988), with the production of 'normality' being an important component of the operation of governmentality (see Rose 1998; Davies 2005). Against this backdrop, the film tells the story of a young girl, Susan, who is being raised by her divorced mother, Doris, an executive who works for the New York Department store, Macy's. Doris has little tolerance for 'filling [children] full of fairytales', and therefore insists on rational explanations that foreclose options for Susan to experiment with the sorts of imaginative play and fantasy associated with 'normal' childhood experience. While Susan and Doris have a loving relationship, their encounters with an elderly man who claims to be 'Kris Kringle', and their relationship with a neighbour, Fred Gailey, present challenges to the rational childhood promoted by Susan's mother. For example:

*FRED GAILEY: I see she doesn't believe in Santa Claus either. No Santa Claus, no fairytales, no fantasies of any kind, is that it?*

*DORIS: That's right. I think we should be completely realistic and truthful with our children, and not have them growing up believing in a lot of legends and myths like...Santa Claus, for example.*

In this film, the risks posed to childhood by the economic and social order operate not by depriving children of physical and material well-being, but rather by locating them in circumstances that deprive them of 'normal' childhood experiences, cultural knowledges, and family structures. Susan's lack of knowledge about, for instance, commonplace fairytales such as *Jack and the Beanstalk*, is juxtaposed with the detailed, rational explanations she is able to produce about other topics and aspects of her life. Her inability to join in a game of pretending with other children in her apartment building is a powerful ideological marker of the extent to which childhood is placed at risk by the imposition of adult rationalities onto developing young minds. In each case, however, it is the intervention of patriarchal figures that offers possible solutions to the dilemma—Fred Gailey actively intervenes by confronting Susan's mother, and contravening her wishes by introducing Susan to Kris Kringle, and Kris Kringle teaches Susan how to imitate monkeys so that she can play with the other children, while Fred Gailey distracts her

mother. In these examples, the absence of nursery rhymes, fairy tales and imaginative play from Susan's day-to-day experience functions as a metaphor for the absence of a patriarchal family structure through which her material and psychological well-being might be secured.

Susan's material wellbeing is a site of ambiguity in the film, with the impact of corporate capitalism on Susan's life being situated simultaneously as the source of her mother's capacity to provide for her *and* as the rationalised/rationalising career context that is starkly juxtaposed with Susan's secret dream of a different life. For example, Susan's mother earns an income sufficient to supply childcare and a comfortable home, and caters for both needs and wants, as Susan herself makes clear:

*KRIS KRINGLE: And now, what would you like me to bring you for Christmas?*

*SUSAN: Nothing, thank you.*

*KRIS KRINGLE: Oh come now, you must want something.*

*SUSAN: Whatever I want my mother will get for me, if it's sensible and doesn't cost too much, of course.*

Yet despite the apparent material comfort of Susan's life, she confesses to Kris Kringle that she secretly wishes for a house with a yard and a swing—a scene depicted in a magazine photo she has saved—and suggests that she will only be able to believe in him if he can grant her wish. Thus the child is once again constructed as economic subject for whom material (hence psychological) wellbeing is secured by the appropriate intervention of patriarchal masculinity. The film's resolution, in which Susan's mother and Mr. Gailey plan to marry, and acquire (with the magical 'assistance' of Kris Kringle) the house in Susan's magazine photo, underscores the film's insistence on patriarchy as the means by which an appropriate version of capitalist consumption can be reinstated (in which women desire fashionable homes in the suburbs that will ultimately be provided to them by men). Thus a 'normal' childhood will be secured for Susan (Belk 2001), effecting the restoration of the moral, social and economic order.

Another important narrative running through the film concerns the world of commercial enterprise. Kris Kringle,

who has been employed by Macy's as the department store Santa, encounters first hand the extent to which corporate greed has shifted the notion of Christmas as a mythical/spiritual event in the interest of company profits.

*MR. SHELLHAMMER: Well, here's a list of toys that we have to push, you know, things that we're overstocked on. Now you'll find that a great many children will be undecided as to what they want for Christmas. When that happens, you immediately suggest one of these items. You understand?*

*KRIS KRINGLE: I certainly do.*

*MR. SHELLHAMMER: Good. Now you memorise that list and I'll...I'll tell you. When you've finished, come up to the 7th floor. I'll be waiting for you.*

*KRIS KRINGLE: (to Alfred) Imagine! Making a child take something it doesn't want just because he bought too many of the wrong toys! That's what I've been fighting against for years! The way they commercialise Christmas! (tears up the list of toys)*

The interest of Macy's executives in producing profit through its toy sales is treated with contempt, as another kind of inappropriate imposition of adult rationalities onto innocent/unsuspecting children. In this way the commercial world is constructed as a threat not to children, but to the moral order, and this concern is echoed in a subsequent conversation between Doris and Kris Kringle:

*DORIS: You'll be here in the morning then?*

*KRIS KRINGLE: Certainly I will. You see Mrs. Walker, this is quite an opportunity for me. For the past 50 years or so I've been getting more and more worried about Christmas. Seems we're all so busy trying to beat the other fellow and making things go faster and look shinier and cost less than Christmas and I are sort of getting lost in the shuffle.*

*DORIS: Oh I don't think so. Christmas is still Christmas.*

*KRIS KRINGLE: Oh Christmas isn't just a day, it's a frame of mind. And that's what's been changing. That's why I'm glad I'm here, maybe I can do something about it. And I'm glad I met you and your daughter. You two are a test case for me.*

*DORIS: We are?*



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*KRISKRINGLE: Yes! You're sort of the whole thing in miniature! If I can win you over, there's still hope. If not, then I guess I'm through. But I'm warning you, I don't give up easily. Good night.*

Here concerns about the commercialisation of Christmas and the perceived threat to childhood that it represents conflates and is mapped onto concerns about family structures and values, thus underscoring the threat that Doris—as divorcee, as single mother, as working mother, and as successful career woman in a male-dominated industry—represents to the moral and social order. This film powerfully reproduces three separate but intersecting notions: first, that commercial forces pose a threat to children and childhood by depriving them of the kinds of mythical beliefs, imaginative play, and family structures associated with ‘normal’ childhoods; second, that restoration of the moral and social order in the face of commercial forces requires the persistent intervention of patriarchy; and third, that resolution of what Belk refers to as the ‘sacred and profane oppositions emphasized in the secular world’ (2001, p. 31) can be satisfactorily achieved by restoring the nuclear family as the primary form of economic and social organisation.

### **Christmas ‘clauses’ and childhood ‘futures’ in the global marketplace**

In the texts considered above, patriarchy is central to restoring childhood to its ‘rightful place’ in the broader social and economic order. In the 1999 Walt Disney film *The Santa Clause*, however, patriarchy is deployed not as a means of safeguarding childhood from the effects of the prevailing economic order, but rather as a means of ensuring that childhood takes a central role *within* it. What I want to consider in this section of the paper, then, is the centrality of childhood to the successful interpretation, operation and continuation of spaces of capitalist production as signified by the motif of ‘Santa’s workshop’. In particular, I want to consider how childhood is constructed as achieving centrality through the film’s reiteration of the patriarchal order.

*The Santa Clause* tells the story of Scott Calvin, an advertising executive for a successful toy manufacturing company, who inadvertently becomes the replacement for Santa one Christmas Eve, only to find himself contractually

obligated to *become* Santa. Scott is accompanied to Santa’s workshop at the North Pole by his young son, Charlie, whose enthusiasm and unquestioning belief in Scott’s identity as the new Santa is central to Scott’s negotiation of his magical transformation over the following year into a recognisable version of Santa Claus. As is the case with many popular Christmas films, versions of the Santa Claus myth (see Belk 2001; Curtis 1995; Restad 1995) provide the pre-texts for *The Santa Clause*—versions which are, particularly in the case of the two films, informed by their location as American cultural and commercial products. This is an important point, as Stephens and McCallum observe: ‘The relationships between a retelling and its pre-text(s) are, in the main, dominated by metanarratives which are androcentric, ethnocentric, and class-centric, so the purposes of inducting audiences into the social, ethical, and aesthetic values of the producing culture are colored by those particular alignments’ (Stephens & McCallum 1998). While a detailed analysis of the gendered, racialised and class-organised dimensions of the film is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting their significance in light of Henry Giroux’s observation that ‘Disney’s image of itself as an icon of American culture is consistently reinforced through the penetration of the Disney empire into every aspect of social life’ (2002, p. 103). The cultural and commercial influence of the Disney corporation thus becomes another pre-text upon which this discussion might be helpfully mapped, particularly given the extent to which Disney films ‘operate within a broader nexus of power and circulation linked less to matters of entertainment than to the dynamics of consumerism and profit making, on the one hand, and the legitimization of particular narratives, stories, values, and identities on the other’ (Giroux 2004, p. 169).

Importantly, Giroux (2004) speaks to the complexity of analysing childhood films that are broadly accepted as constructing ‘a dreamlike world of childhood innocence where kids increasingly find a place to situate themselves in their emotional lives’ (2004, p. 165). Amidst what Giroux locates as a ‘crisis of vision, meaning and motivation’ (2004, p. 165) that has beset schooling and other dimensions of social life, films that promote the idea of childhood innocence, adventure and imagination are popularly

embraced as offering alternative—and beneficial—sites of personal and collective reflection and celebration. Such films have considerable potency in the cultural imagination, and Clark's (1995) study offers numerous examples of the extent to which the meanings that American adults attach to holiday celebrations are underpinned by constructions of childhood wonderment. The potential benefits of such films notwithstanding, though, they nonetheless need to be queried as sites that offer seductive images and possible subject positions that are neither innocent nor ideologically neutral, but that instead 'provide a high-tech, visual space where adventure and pleasure meet in a fantasy world of possibilities and a commercial sphere of consumerism and commodification' (Giroux 2004, p. 165).

While a number of Christmas films attempt to engage with perceived problems associated with the elision between pleasure and consumption by constructing children as either innocent and deserving beneficiaries and/or mindless dupes of capitalist culture, in *The Santa Clause* childhood is centrally located as the means by which adults—rather than children—come to understand their identities and successfully navigate social relations. Despite the 'trademarking of innocence' to which Giroux (2002) refers in his discussion of Disney texts, the notion of childhood innocence can also be seen as an important device by means of which texts may interrogate aspects of the social world. Throughout this film, Charlie's innocent perspective allows him to not only question the circumstances and adult perspectives with which he is confronted, but also to interpret circumstances and events for the adults in his life. For example, on Christmas Eve, Charlie interrupts Scott's reading of Clement Moore's (1822) poem, *'Twas The Night Before Christmas*, by asking numerous questions in an attempt to establish the veracity of the Santa story. Charlie has misunderstood the line from the poem 'Out on the roof there arose such a clatter', but before Scott can provide an explanation, he goes outside to investigate sudden noises on the roof. When a ladder leading to the roof magically appears against the house a few minutes later, however, it is Charlie who supplies an explanation:

*CHARLIE: It's the ladder!*

*SCOTT: Where the hell did this come from?*

*CHARLIE: Look here, Dad! [pointing to engraved brass plate on one rung of the ladder] The Rose Suchak Ladder Company!*

*SCOTT: Huh?*

*CHARLIE: Out by the roof there's a rose suchak ladder, just like the poem!*

What is particularly interesting about Charlie's explanation, for the purposes of this discussion, is its seamless integration of the notion of a corporate entity into his understanding of both literary and familial contexts. 'The Rose Suchak Ladder Company' becomes both explanation/legitimation for Charlie's previous questioning while simultaneously positioning the adult world of rationalities as failing to 'keep up' with the pace of childhood's intellectual/rational requirements.

Interestingly though, once transported to Santa's workshop at the North Pole—where the workshop is run entirely by elves (portrayed by child actors of various ages)—there is a curious reversal of rationalities, in which Scott's naïveté concerning his role as the 'new' Santa is juxtaposed with the corporate knowledge and industrial enterprise of the child-elves. For example, the 'Head Elf', Bernard, responds to Scott's demand for an explanation of his predicament with a line of argument that draws heavily on managerialist and bureaucratic discourses reminiscent of neoliberal workplace governance:

*SCOTT: Look, I am not Santa Claus. Ahhh...*

*BERNARD: Did you, or did you not read the card?*

*SCOTT: Yeah, I read the card...*

*BERNARD: Then you're the new Santa. In putting on the hat and jacket you accepted the contract.*

*SCOTT: What contract?*

*BERNARD: The card in the Santa suit, you said you read it right? So when you put on the suit you fell subject to the Santa clause. Here...*

*SCOTT: The Santa Claus? Oh you mean the guy that fell off my roof?*

*BERNARD: No, no, no, no. Not Santa Claus the person, Santa clause, the clause.*

*SCOTT: What?*

*BERNARD: Look, you're a business man, right? OK. A clause, as in the last line of a contract. You got the card? OK, look [reads]—'The Santa Clause. In putting on the suit and entering the sleigh, the wearer waives any and all rights to any previous identity, real or implied, and fully accepts the duties and responsibilities of Santa Claus in perpetuity until such time that the wearer becomes unable to do so by either accident or design'.*

*SCOTT: What does that mean?*

*BERNARD: It means, you put on the suit, you're the big guy.*

*SCOTT: It's ridiculous, I didn't put on the suit just to...*

*BERNARD: [shouts] TRY TO UNDERSTAND THIS!*

*[Other Elves in workshop exclaim together in a low tone: oooOOOoohhhh...]*

*BERNARD: Let me explain something to you, ok? Toys have to be delivered, I'm not gonna do it, it's not my job. I'm just an elf. It's Santa's job, but Santa fell off the roof, your roof. You read the card, you put on the suit, that clearly falls under the Santa Clause, so now you're Santa, OK?*

Throughout this exchange, Bernard takes up the subject position of authoritative adult, while Scott—whose inability to comprehend his situation once again signifies the failure of adult rationalities to adequately address the needs and requirements of childhood—is himself re/positioned not as child, but as ineffective adult. Resolution, in personal terms, can only be brought about through the process of Scott's *becoming*, his transformation from naïve to knowing, and his acceptance of that transformation as legitimating him within the terms of childhood's validated (corporatised) knowledges and mythical (albeit now reconfigured as rational) beliefs. Again, this textual device is an important means by which the film constructs the authoritative position of legitimate 'knowing' as belonging not to adults but to children. It is worth noting, too, that Scott's 'real life' occupation as a toy company executive is dismissed as offering little of value, either to the interests of children and childhood, or to Scott himself as he attempts to make

sense of and negotiate the fantasy realm of which he is now a part.

Despite the film's engagement with issues such as family breakdown, custody disputes, and commercial insensitivities that are constructed as posing particular risks to children and childhood, what I want to suggest here is that the *primary* risk posed to children and childhood in this film is the potential for adults to actively prevent children from taking up their central place in the spaces of capitalist production. The strongly psychologised fears expressed by Charlie's mother, Laura and his stepfather, Neal, about Charlie's obsession with Scott's 'job' as the new Santa are deployed as a means of legally preventing Charlie from spending time with Scott. Through this act of legal intervention, Laura and Neal pose a simultaneous threat to both the patriarchal order (as signified by biological paternity) and the economic order (as signified by the successful operation/continuation of Santa's workshop). However, when Charlie secretly returns with Scott to the North Pole the following Christmas, he takes up a central role in contributing to the creative/industrial enterprise of the workshop. By helping the elves design new 'products' to be used by Santa on Christmas Eve, Charlie is afforded responsibility for both ensuring his father's safety, as well as enhancing his pleasure at 'work' in his new job.

*BERNARD: Charlie's got some great ideas on how to keep you safe. Santa, this is Quentin, Head of Research and Development.*

*SCOTT: Quentin, good to meet you!*

*QUENTIN: Hello, Santa! Charlie and I have put our heads together, and I think we've got a few surprises for you.*

*BERNARD: This is some of the best stuff that's come out of the workshop since...the ball!*

The centrality of childhood to the success of industrial production is seen here in the ease with which Charlie is incorporated into the managerialist structure of the workshop, and the validation of his contribution by the elves who occupy senior roles in the discursive hierarchy. Inventions such as a flame retardant suit to be worn under Scott/Santa's traditional suit indicate the extent to which the safeguarding of patriarchy is now reconfigured as

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the concern and responsibility of childhood. Charlie's significance to Scott's success in accomplishing himself as the new Santa is reiterated in his explanation of the newly installed features in the sleigh:

*CHARLIE: I gotta show you this! [flipping on switches of the new dashboard in the sleigh] This'll bring on jingle bells, new screen, DC-10 alert, and air freshener.*

*SCOTT: Wow!*

*CHARLIE: And most important of all, your hat.*

*SCOTT: My hat?*

*CHARLIE: It's designed with a two-way radio. The microphone's in here [pointing to tassel on end of Santa hat]. It connects you directly to Judy.*

*SCOTT: Wait a minute, what's this?*

*CHARLIE: Oh, that's a CD.*

*SCOTT: Compact disk!*

*CHARLIE: No, Cookie-Cocoa Dispenser. The cocoa comes out nice and hot, and out pops the cookie!*

*SCOTT: How could I have done this without ya, Charlie?*

*CHARLIE: You couldn't.*

Charlie's contribution to his father's transformation into a believable—hence viable—version of Santa is situated here in the context of his technological knowledge and innovation that will secure the continuation of the Santa myth. Here the deployment of patriarchy as a means for ensuring a mode of capitalist production in which children and childhood remain central is reinscribed as Scott not only regains access to his son, but also gains legitimacy as an appropriate social subject in relation to his male heir. The importance of patriarchal succession is underscored when Neal suggests to Charlie that he will make a great psychiatrist one day, to which Charlie replies, 'No, I think I'm going to go into the *family business*'. In this way, the film locates children as the central agents for securing the link between childhood, patriarchy and economy.

## Conclusion

Each of the texts considered here provide culturally and historically inflected examples of the ways in which Christmas texts construct children as economic subjects, and childhood as a category placed at risk by capitalist economies and secured primarily through the reiteration of the patriarchal order. In Dickens' text, threats to childhood in the face of overwhelming poverty and concomitant fears of moral *disorder* brought about by the excesses of industrialist/capitalist greed are ameliorated in material and symbolic terms by the intervention of the elder male character who restores familial ties by improving the financial circumstances (hence the longevity) of his nephew's family. Although the 1940s text is not concerned with threats to childhood at the level of 'life-or-death', it nonetheless requires the intervention of patriarchal figures in order to restore the social and moral order constructed as necessary and beneficial to the interests of children and childhood. Unlike the earlier texts, however, in which the risks to childhood are associated with material, familial and emotional deprivation, in the 1990s text the risks to childhood are associated with deprivation of a vastly different sort, where depriving children of their 'rightful place' in the capitalist and patriarchal order constitutes the primary risk to the category of childhood. In each text, however, there is an elision between patriarchy and economy by means of which a preferred version of childhood is protected from the exploitative rationalities of the industrial/commercial world. While this paper deals with only a small sample of texts to illustrate its argument, it aims to open up a dialogue about the ways in which cultural texts function in the reiteration and production of cultural norms and values associated not only with children and childhood, but also with the economic conditions and structures that shape the social landscapes of which children are necessarily a part.



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