

## Dialectic of Consumerism: How *A Series of Unfortunate Events* Defies Itself

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Contemporary American culture is steeped in consumerist ideology. It is a social climate where profit rules and control of cultural production is limited to a select few corporate interests. As such, popular culture is designed to reinforce consumerist values in order to keep wealth and power concentrated at the upper echelons of the social hierarchy, keeping the middle class oppressed. This paper seeks to explore ways in which a seemingly subversive text reifies hegemonic ideology within the dominant societal discourse. A rhetorical critical discourse analysis of the first three books of Daniel Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* reveals that despite the author's intent to subvert consumerist ideology rooted in the Victorian sensibility, as a product of popular culture, the text adheres to the dominant discourse. In covert ways, it enforces consumerist values by perpetuating the myth that the upper class lifestyle is normative and desirable, that happiness is found in materialism, and that poverty is necessarily villainous and disgusting.

Since its initial launch in 1997, *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events*, a series penned by Daniel Handler, has sold over 60 million copies and has been translated into over 41 languages (A series of Unfortunate Events author, 2010). It is part of the revival of children's series on a mass-market level that includes such blockbusters as the Harry Potter series. Notably, the author developed the story in cahoots with an editor looking for the "next big thing" in children's books, even though Handler's primary audience was adults at the time (Minzesheimer, 2006). In all actuality, the books, movie, and related merchandise are finding success with children and adults alike (Minzesheimer, 2006). Handler claims to be surprised at his success, as the series is intended to be dark, allowing terrible happenings to occur for the protagonists (Minzesheimer, 2006). *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is a relatively young text in the process of critical evolution. Due to its massive success, the text deserves further analysis. Specifically, as an artifact of modern American consumerist culture, it merits attention as a reflection of consumerist ideology.

### **Consumerist Messages in Mass Media**

Arguably, one cannot separate contemporary cultural production from the entrenched consumer-driven ideology that dominates the current societal landscape. Nevertheless, a clear discordance erupts between the corporate promises of great rewards and the reality of media consumers' diminishing satisfaction levels. Beginning at childhood, the messages contained in mass media

production encourage people that happiness, well-being, and identity are derived from consumer behavior, a trend that many academics find problematic (Hill, 2011; Cook, 2001; Schor J. B., 2008; Martins, Southerton, & Scott, 2004). Research has shown that children and adults are reacting similarly to the pervasive consumption-glorifying climate of Westernized society; however, as consumer involvement increases, levels of life satisfaction decrease (Schor J. B., 2008). In spite of these findings, nearly all iterations of modern culture glorify consumerism; by their very design they need to be marketable and profitable.

This skewed relationship goes beyond satiation and enters into a disturbing realm of corporate didacticism. In addition to the design of cultural products as consumerist, they also contain hegemonic ideologies embedded in overt and covert ways (Hinkins, 2007). In recent scholarship, concern has been expressed over the pedagogical nature of children's media (Hinkins, 2007). David Buckingham (2007) notes, "In most industrialized countries, children spend more time with media of various kinds than they spend in school, or with their family or friends" (p. 44). Considering this, clearly media play an important role in the socialization of children and do much to reproduce cultural ideology. Since media are designed to make a profit, it behooves those in control of cultural production to reify hegemonic ideologies around class and consumerism in order to maintain socio-cultural dominance.

### **Spending as Illusion of Power**

People subscribe to and accept these ideologies because they believe that they are benefiting from them, though clearly they are not. The distribution of wealth in contemporary American society is unprecedented in its inequality. It is important to distinguish wealth as marketable assets rather than income; wealth affords certain privilege that income does not. For instance, wealth does not usually come with a leisure time trade-off (Wolff, 2010). As of 2010, the top 20% of people owned over 89% of the wealth in America, leaving 11% for everybody else (Domhoff, 2013). Notably, along with this concentration of wealth in the upper echelons of the American class structure, the working and middle classes are spending more and more on incidental and luxury items, due to what Juliet Schor (2002) calls vertical aspiration. She asserts that vertical aspiration results from the switch from the desire of people to compete for socioeconomic status with the neighbors to a desire to parallel society's elite, prompted in large part by media exposure. As the concept of taste maintains class distinction boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984), it follows naturally that exposure to the tastes of the elite would lead to contemporary vertical aspiration. According to Lawler (2005), the desire to spend among the middle class is exasperated by the ideology that it is despicable to be considered working-class. Thus, the middle class attains power by distinguishing itself from the working class by public consumption. The effect of this vertical aspiration is that the wealth gap continues to grow at an alarming rate; keeping the elite in power and the middle and working classes oppressed.

### **Vertical Integration**

The state of media ownership further contributes to the wealth concentration at the upper echelons of American society. Currently, six conglomerates control over 80% of the media available (Bell, *Race in Media*, 2012). In the "free-market" economy of America, mergers and

acquisitions, along with lowered government regulation, has led to unprecedented common media ownership (Winseck, 2011). Consequently, not only do few have access to media profit, few have control over what is produced. This creates an environment where the political economy of media is limited to a small group of corporate interests (Bell, *Race in Media*, 2012). So while it seems as though audiences have more varied access to different types and channels of media, the quality and diversity of content is shrinking (Winseck, 2011). Accordingly, the cultural artifacts produced from popular American culture are designed to make a profit, and to reinforce ideology that keeps the masses sending money upward in the social hierarchy.

### **Purpose**

With the state of contemporary media as it is, it is nearly impossible to mass-produce media texts that are subversive to the dominant ideology. The purpose of this research is to investigate ways in which the author is subversive to ideologies surrounding politeness as a matter of taste, class mobility, and emulation of the wealthy by using the genre of Victorian literature to supplant values associated with the era that coincide with modern consumerist ideology and social hierarchy. Furthermore, I will attempt to investigate and explain ways in which the subversion of these ideologies is largely unsuccessful in that within the dominant discourse, it is necessary to prefer an upper-middle class lifestyle, to find happiness and well-being in material comforts, to vilify the poor, and to rely on the stereotypical assumption that to be poor is disgusting.

### **Methodology**

This criticism will be a rhetorical critical discourse analysis. Rhetorical criticism is appropriate in that I seek to explore the ways in which the author intends to present a work that subverts normative expectations in children's literature. I also intend to apply the lens of critical discourse analysis in order to explore ways in which hegemonic ideologies concerning class perpetuating consumerist values are manifested in the text.

Rhetoric has been defined as a type of communication concerned with persuasion. It follows that in the study of rhetoric, one is primarily concerned with how symbols are used to challenge or reinforce beliefs that may initiate or maintain action (Stansbery, 2012). Concerning society, rhetoric functions to distribute personal, psychological, and political power while shaping knowledge (Golden, Berquist, Coleman, & Sproule, 2011). Critical studies hold that all texts function as rhetoric as they are created to influence in some way or another (Brummett, 2006). They inherently support cultural meaning webs and help us to make sense of existence by providing schema to help categorize the world (Gorham, 2006; Hall, 2011). Since media texts function as rhetorical influence on perceptions of existence and reality, the messages therein beg close attention.

Contemporary critical discourse analysis focuses explicitly on societal power relations (van Dijk, "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis", 1993). It is done with consideration of linguistics, semiotics, and intertextual analysis, which considers the text itself along with the historical and societal contexts from whence it is produced (Fairclough, 1992). According to Norman Fairclough (1992), "Intertextual analysis crucially mediates the connection between language

and social context, and facilitates more satisfactory bridging of the gap texts and contexts” (p. 195). Discourse in critical discourse analysis is defined as the ways in which people know and think about the world. It is also concerned with ways in which expression is limited and the rules concerning how one may participate in and define reality (Bell, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 2013). There are two categories of discourse: primary and secondary. Acquired during childhood, primary discourse functions to provide the basic frameworks for interpreting the world, whereas secondary discourses are attained throughout life, and are specialized. The societal structure itself functions as a secondary discourse (Bell, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 2013).

Discourse is used in ways that empower some and oppress others. Raymie McKerrow (1989) asserts that “discourse is the tactical dimension of the operation of power in its manifold relations at all levels of society, within and between its institutions, groups and individuals” (p. 98). Critical discourse analysis is analysis of the discursive devices used by those in power to maintain privilege (van Dijk, “Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis,” 1993; McKerrow, 1989). It is concerned with the abuse of power by the elite and ways in which they dominate oppressed groups. Dominance, as van Dijk defines it, is “the exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial, and gender inequality” (van Dijk, “Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis,” 1993). It defines power as the ability to control the actions or minds of other groups (van Dijk, *Critical Discourse Analysis*).

The critical discourse analyst works from the idea of Gramsci’s hegemony. Hegemony is the method for gaining and maintaining power. Gramsci points out that power comes not only from coercive force, but by ideology (Bates, 1975). The masses become instrumental in their own oppression, adopting the ideology of the elite and self-regulating (Bell, *Privilege and Oppression in Popular Culture*, 2012). Thus, power is not only something imposed by one group onto another, it occurs in everyday activities, norms, and general consensus (van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis”). In order for oppressed groups to self-regulate to the benefit of society’s most powerful groups, the ideological assertions of the powerful must become self-evident cultural assumptions (Lull, 2011). Since society’s most powerful institutions, including media, share ideological beliefs and control the means of cultural production, the discourse replicated in popular culture inherently cements that ideology. Michel Foucault expands this idea in terms of discourse. He defines discourse:

[W]ays of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. (Weedon, 1987)

For Foucault, truth is produced by society (Mills, 1997); therefore, all knowledge, speech, action, and cultural production are a product of some power struggle. In regards to discourse which does not align with the dominant ideology, he states that “there exists a system of power which blocks, prohibits, and invalidates this discourse and this knowledge, a power not only found in

the manifest authority of censorship, but one that profoundly and subtly penetrates an entire societal network” (Kay, 2006). Following Foucault, discourse includes cultural artifacts that help to communicate ideology, existing within a complex web of socio-cultural power relations that dictate the rules of representation.

Critical discourse analysis attempts to describe and explain ways in which hegemonic ideology manifests in texts. Media, one of the most influential pedagogical institutions in contemporary culture, offers plenty of fodder for analysis. As van Dijk (1993) asserts:

Control of knowledge crucially shapes our interpretation of the world, as well as our discourse and other actions. Hence the relevance of a critical analysis of those forms of text and talk, e.g. in the media and education, that essentially aim to construct such knowledge. (p. 258)

The knowledge constructed by pedagogical institutions adds to socially shared attitudes, norms, and values, leading to effects on behavior on the personal level. For this reason, cultural critics seek to critique the pedagogy of popular texts.

Being that critical discourse analysis deals in the discourses of power and dominance, it necessarily takes upon a stance of advocacy for the oppressed. It is presented with clear bias and intention to create social change (Bell, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 2013). According to van Dijk (1993), “critical discourse scholars want to...get more insight into the crucial role of discourse in the reproduction of dominance and inequality” (p. 253). My bias as a member of the American middle class, along with approaching children’s literature from an adult perspective, may affect my reading and coding of the text. I have a personal interest in the ways in which vertical integration and consumerism play a role in maintaining the disparity of wealth distribution in contemporary American society and the ways in which consumerist pedagogy is reproduced in cultural artifacts.

Since the illusion of upward mobility and thus the dominant class ideology in relation to class and consumerism has its roots in the Victorian era, I intend to code the first three books of the series, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, first by examining the author’s use of the rhetorical tools available in literature such as setting, character, and language within the broader genre of children’s literature in order to subvert cultural values rooted in Victorian era sensibilities. Furthermore, I will code the artifact from a critical discourse perspective, looking at both the elements of the text and the way that they serve pedagogically to actually enforce cultural ideology around maintaining the power structure by valuing consumerist attitudes.

## **Discussion**

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the author attempts to be subversive to the dominant consumerist discourse in that he uses the Victorian model to deconstruct itself, leaving the reader questioning the Victorian sensibility. He employs a setting that is ambiguous, has a definite Victorian feel. The streets are cobblestoned, the city rich and sooty, contrasting with the mix of middle and lower classes of the suburbs. Drawing from Gothic literature, he features many grand

homes that are reduced to shabby shadows of what they once were. Situated in a neighborhood with elegant brick structures adorned with “shiny brass doorknob[s]” (Handler, *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning*, 1999, p. 18), is the now dilapidated home of Count Olaf. Montgomery Montgomery’s wondrous exhibit of reptiles is dismantled into an empty glass shell (Handler, *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Reptile Room*, 1999). In the third book, Aunt Josephine’s home was once an opulent lakefront property, but is now cold and empty feeling, with peeling paint and a long neglected radiator (Handler, *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Wide Window*, 2000). Then, in perhaps the most obvious use of the Gothic literature trope of “ramshackle-where-there-was-wealth,” is the protagonists’ own lavish home, reduced to rubble in a fire. Any doubt that the setting is intended to be Victorian is quelled by the illustrations accompanying the narrative.

Furthermore, Handler imparts a Victorian feel with his characterizations. Nods to the Victorians can be seen in virtually all of them. The reader is first introduced to Mr. Poe as he emerges from the distance through fog, head adorned with a top hat. He is characterized by his constant coughing, exhaustion, and refusal of coconut cream pie, all of which suggest the bane of many Victorians’ existence, tuberculosis. Count Olaf’s shabby jacket is tailed and patched. Little Sunny Baudelaire has razor sharp teeth, that when paired with the leeches in Lake Lachrymose and the fantastical reptiles from Uncle Monty’s house, add an element of supernatural to the books. With the Victorian era birthing such inventions as the bicycle, home sewing machine, public flushable toilets, and the electric light bulb, it is no wonder that the female protagonist, Violet, is an inventor at heart who “never wanted to be distracted by something as trivial as her hair” (*BB* p. 3).

Utilizing overtly polite and portentous language, the author positions the text within Victorian sensibilities further. The children pontificate upon how “pleasant” it would be to spend time with Justice Strauss in her garden (*BB* p. 21), a rather polite word for any fourteen-year-old to use. Throughout all three novels, referring to devastating events as merely “unfortunate,” the narrator illustrates the emotional reserve characteristic of the Victorian period. Uncle Monty becomes irate with the children when they interrupt, and the children often stifle self-expression out of fear of behaving impolitely (*RR*). Throughout the texts, the narrator takes the time to define elementary lexicon, while leaving more complex words to stand on their own. He spends a great deal of time defining common colloquialisms such as “finding a needle in a hay-stack” and “casing the joint,” while using words such as “feigned” in order to define the word “faked.” By juxtaposing the vocabulary in this way, the author positions the narrative and audience in the stilted Victorian tradition.

Simultaneously to crafting the text in such a way as to lend it a Victorian texture, the author seeks to subvert ideologies generally associated with the era. Whereas the Victorian era values a Puritan work ethic as a means to be successful, this very notion is supplanted in the text. Albeit begrudgingly, the children perform chores for Count Olaf such as chopping wood, cooking, and cleaning up after his theater troupe. They come to find out later that the chopped wood serves no purpose and their culinary efforts go largely unappreciated (*BB* p. 49). Moreover, in *The Reptile Room*, the children dedicate hours of work to planning an unrealized trip to Peru with Uncle Monty, scouring guidebooks, designing snake traps, and biting long sections of rope into useable

pieces. In *The Wide Window*, the children put forth a great deal of effort, risking life and limb, in order to rescue their aunt, and ultimately fail, as Aunt Josephine is devoured by leeches. Throughout the series their efforts are unrealized as the plans give way to a debacle. In all three novels, the children apply their unique skills to attempt to foil the plan of Count Olaf, and while they succeed in evading his deviousness, they are never able to capture him and bring him to justice. By using the young protagonists' failure as means to progress the plot, Handler successfully subverts not only expectations of children's literature, but also the Victorian myth of "the self-made man." In doing so, he creates a critique of the contemporary idea of vertical aspiration and the myth of upward mobility.

Handler also subverts elitist notions of civility by over emphasizing the incompetent adult characters reliance on them, which invariably places the children in perilous situations. In the first of the three novels, Mr. Poe's reliance on following rules places the children in Count Olaf's care in the first place (*BB* p. 23-24). Further in the story, Mr. Poe rejects the protagonists' plea for help, ignoring their claims of physical and emotional abuse, reasoning that the Count may raise them as he sees fit based upon the law (*BB* p. 63-66). In the same book, Violet is made into a child bride for the lecherous Count because the other adults are powerless against archaic marriage law (*BB* p.146-150). Ultimately, the children are denied a home with a willing and compassionate guardian, even though it is in their best interest to be adopted by Justice Strauss; the adults are powerless to make a decision which contradicts a technicality in the children's parents' will (*BB* p. 160). In *The Reptile Room*, Uncle Monty refuses to listen to the children, insisting that they should not rudely interrupt him (*RR* p. 59). *The Wide Window* takes this concept further, featuring an adult who is nearly paralyzed by exaggerated caution (*WW*). By employing tactics that paint notions of civility as sources of absurdity, Handler effectively subverts ideology around the desirability of emulating the bourgeois.

Although the author is highly subversive in his text, closer examination of the discourse within reveals replication of the dominant ideologies that serve to reify consumerist values that keep the mass population spending, which in turn maintains the power of the elite. One of the ways in which the text does this is by equating mundane issues of comfort and taste with truly frightening and tragic events. Throughout *The Bad Beginning* the author draws attention to the clothing that is gifted to the children in lieu of the clothing they lost in the fire. The show disdain for the clothing because it is in "grotesque colors, and itched" (*BB* p.13). At one point Violet reflects upon the terrible events of her recent life:

Their parents had died, suddenly and horribly. Mr. Poe had bought them ugly clothing. They had moved into Count Olaf's house and were treated terribly. Mr. Poe had refused to help them. They had discovered a fiendish plot involving marrying Violet and stealing the Baudelaire fortune...All in all the Baudelaire orphans had encountered catastrophe after catastrophe, and Violet found their situation lamentable (*BB* p. 127).

This trend replicates in the second and third book as well. In *The Reptile Room*, the children suffer a car accident, the murder of their uncle, and constant fear of their murderous relative, Count Olaf. Despite the terrible events that had—and will—befall the children, they are positioned in such a way that travelling down an unpleasant road that smells of horseradish is

just as miserable (*RR* p.2, p. 18). Human-eating leeches, the ever-threatening Count Olaf, and the recent death of their uncle notwithstanding, the children are dismayed when confronted with gifts that are not of their liking in *The Wide Window*. Paralleling tragedy and fear with issues of minor discomfort and taste, the text makes assumptions that the audience is upper middle class, or should want to be. This is troublesome in that it adds to the dominant discourse that the upper and upper-middle class lifestyle is desirable and the norm.

Another problematic message in the text is that creature comforts bring about happiness and that the loss of material possessions creates unbearable strife. Following the death of their parents and the fire, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny survey the charred remnants of their home. Emphasis is placed on the loss of the children's belongings and home furnishings rather than the grief of losing one's parents. They lament the grand piano, elegant brandy bottle, and their beds that had been reduced to rubble. Equating their material belongings with love, they observe the "traces of the enormous house they had loved" (*BB* p. 12). Decorating their lavish rooms in a pleasing manner is a major way that the children find happiness in the second book. The author emphasizes the happy times they have because of it:

During the week that followed, however, the Baudelaires had a wonderful time in their new home. Each morning they woke up and dressed within the privacy of their own rooms, which they had chosen and decorated to their liking. (*RR* p. 33)

The second book also sends this message by suggesting that Uncle Monty is competent and easy to get along with and as a characteristic of these traits, he is capable of purchasing whatever the children may need (*RR* p. 19). In the third book, this message is reinforced when the children think about the unfairness of their recent lives:

It wasn't fair that their parents had been taken away from them. It wasn't fair that the evil and revolting Count Olaf was pursuing them wherever they went, caring for nothing but their fortune. It wasn't fair that they moved from relative to relative, with terrible things happening at each of their new homes, as if the Baudelaires were riding on some horrible bus that stopped only at stations of unfairness and misery. And of course, it certainly wasn't fair that Sunny only had a rattle to play with in his new home. (*WW* p. 24)

The emphasis on the have-nots of the children as a source of misery implies that to acquire and have things brings about happiness. These types of messages iterated repeatedly in media serve to cement consumerism-driven values by naturalizing them in the cultural landscape.

Besides reifying materialistic values by equating material objects with happiness, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* also contributes to the media canon of messages concerning class by positioning the villain as poor. The primary villain of the series, Count Olaf, is clearly poverty stricken. He is shabbily dressed, in a stained suit with frayed cuffs (*BB* p. 22). He wears shoes with no socks (*BB* p.25). He is even remarkably thin (*RR* p.104). To the dismay of the children, he can only afford to feed them porridge. His house is dilapidated and dirty, with a sagging roof that is in disrepair. The furnishings therein are sparse and rickety (*BB* p. 20, 22). From these details the children know that he is not only poor, but despicable as well, an inference that the



narrator confirms as absolutely correct (*BB* p.28). Tying villainy to poverty, the author contributes to the hegemonic ideology that encourages the middle-class to consume as a means of asserting social status and power.

In addition to positioning poverty as villainy, the author relies heavily on harmful stereotypes regarding the poor to characterize his villains. They are necessarily some combination of dirty, odorous, uneducated, and alcoholic. Count Olaf's henchmen wear greasy jackets (*BB* p. 125) and pass out sitting up with empty beer bottles in their hands (*WW* p. 134). The sidekick with indeterminate gender is described as "lifting [Violet] up over its smelly shoulder" (*WW* p. 140). The author repeatedly makes references to Count Olaf's hygiene. He is described as "neither interesting nor kind; he was demanding, short tempered, and bad smelling" (*BB* p. 29). When Violet breaks into Count Olaf's room, she is not surprised to find it dirty, with mucus on the curtains, supposedly because Count Olaf was blowing his nose on them (*RR* p. 130, 131). Implying alcoholism, half-empty wine bottles are a consistent feature of Count Olaf's space (*BB*, *RR*, *WW*). He suggests drinking wine to celebrate at lunch (*RR* p. 92) and even his suitcase features a bottle of wine (*RR* p. 162). Made clear by the lack of books in Olaf's home (*BB*), and his poor grammar (*WW* p. 50), the impoverished villain is uneducated. Relying upon stereotypical depictions of poverty and the ways in which it characterizes people serves to further impart the idea of the disgusting lower class. This reifies and replicates hegemonic discourse that encourages consumerist behavior from the middle-class to distinguish itself from the poor and working class.

This discussion has examined the author's use of rhetorical tactics to present a literary media text that attempts to subvert ideologies surrounding class and consumerism. It is successful in that the author establishes a Victorian texture to the novels through the use of setting, characterization, and language. It simultaneously deconstructs itself by supplanting Victorian value systems such as the myth of upward social mobility through a Puritan work ethic and making traditional constructions of what civility means absurd. In this way, the author critiques modern ideology surrounding vertical aspiration and bourgeois civility as a class distinction and source of empowerment. Nevertheless, existing as a popular culture product, one cannot separate the text from the dominant discourse. It serves to pedagogically reinforce and replicate dominant ideologies. This is evident in that themes exist in the texts, which support the upper-middle class lifestyle as normative and desirable. Furthermore, it reinforces the dominant discourse in that it equates not having or losing materialistic possessions with misery, thereby implying that well-being and happiness result from materialistic and consumerist behavior. Positioning the villains as poor encourages consumerism as an assertion of power. The author further vilifies the impoverished by employing harmful stereotypes that incite disdain and disgust for the working and poor classes, thereby encouraging spending as a means to acquire social status.

### **Limitations**

While this study explores hegemonic ideology and the ways in which *A Series of Unfortunate Events* both supplants and reinforces them, specifically around class and consumerist attitudes, some limitations exist for it. First, this analysis deals with only the first three books in the series. Further research could be done in order to achieve a more thorough understanding of all thirteen

novels. Moreover, the analysis does not explore ideology regarding representations of gender, race, or ability, whereas the artifact features discourse that speaks clearly to pedagogy regarding these issues.

## Implications

Being that the foundations of meaning-making begin with the secondary discourses acquired in early childhood, artifacts marketed to children deserve close attention. Media are consistently and repetitively instilling values that promote consumerism. In creating consumers, the dominant discourse effectively keeps the masses oppressed. The consumer aspires to be a part of the dominant culture; as such, messages in media that keep the masses aspiring to emulate the wealthy are actually illusory assertions of power serving to further enforce the wealth and power of the elite. Without ardent critique of media pedagogy and critical understanding of the ways in which hegemony operates, the cycle of oppression will remain unchecked.

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