**“Freaking Out:” An Examination
of *Freakazoid!* and Children’s Culture**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the animated television program *Freakazoid!* in the contexts of animation history, television history, and children's culture. As the symbolic figures of Adult and Child are given as fixed and oppositional polarities, it is necessary to question whether these oppositions are, in fact, as fixed as they are perceived to be. This thesis accomplishes this by analysing *Freakazoid!* in terms of its position as a Warner Bros. cultural product; how the 'new' medium of the Internet is crucial to understanding *Freakazoid* as a character, as well as how technology changes the face of household power and politics; and how the figure of the (adult) fan of (children's) animation subverts concepts of taste and social hierarchies. This thesis contends that the address of these symbolic spaces between the alleged polarities of Adult and Child are what make *Freakazoid!* an important text in understanding the functions of power and taste, especially in a conservative media climate.

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“Members of any society carry within themselves a working definition of childhood, its nature, limitations and duration. They may not explicitly discuss this definition, write about it or even consciously conceive of it as an issue, but they act upon their assumptions in all their dealing with, fears for, and expectations of their children.”

Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood 1600-1900*

“The television generation only essentially understood animation as ‘the cartoon’ as it had been produced for television, and the children’s demographic.”

Paul Wells, *Animation and America*

This thesis stems from my love of all things Warner Bros. In the mid-1990s, though I was already in high school, I would rush home every afternoon for a daily dose of *Animaniacs* (1993-1998) and *Freakazoid!* (1995-1997). Flash forward ten years, and I still look forward to that daily dose of comic anarchy, now on DVD. My objective is to address a wrong I feel has been committed – even in analyses of other Warner Bros. cultural products. Endless Internet searches of “Warner Bros. animation” revealed a spectrum of materials about the *Looney Tunes* cartoons and characters from the 1940s and 50s focusing on Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Sylvester and Tweety, Yosemite Sam, Coyote and Roadrunner, etc. Very little is available beyond fan sites and fan fiction for the Warner Bros. programs and characters created in the 1990s. The literature I was able to find included a range of how-to-draw guides, and Steve Schneider’s *That’s All Folks!: The Art of Warner Bros. Animation*, published before these new cartoons were broadcast. Even Kevin Sandler’s anthology, *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, focuses primarily on the history of *Looney Tunes*, or the “Termite Terrace” animation studio on the Warners lot, save for Bill Mikulak’s article on fan culture, as pertaining to *Tiny Toon Adventures* (1990-1992), which is framed in terms of intellectual property rights. The only other mention of any Warner Bros. animation from the 1990s is

The Art of 'Space Jam,' the abysmal feature-length advertisement for Michael Jordan and Nike footwear.¹ Scourings of journal article indexes and databases, including the Library of Congress, Lexus/Nexus, and the Mass Media Articles Index revealed nothing, when searching for Freakazoid. The only *scholarly*² reference to *Freakazoid!* comes from Bill Mikulak, who notes, in the context of *Tiny Toon Adventures*, that “[t]hree subsequent shows – *Taz-Mania*, *Animaniacs*, and *Freakazoid!* – further fueled adult fan interest.”³ One sentence was gleaned from months of research. As a film scholar, I am in a privileged position to redress what I feel are grievous wrongs done to television shows so unfairly dismissed.

“And now you know the rest of the back story – good day!”

The history of animation in its latter years, is also the history of children’s entertainment. It can be argued that, in fact, the two are nearly synonymous. Initial forays into the cinematic, such as the Zoetrope, the Praxinoscope, etc. were animated, as they were segments of action rendered by hand, frame-by-frame. Optical illusion and persistence of vision allowed for these discrete images to have the appearance of continuous action. In 1896, the Lumiere Brothers began to shoot live-action footage. Animation complimented live-action nicely in the ‘trick’ film genre, whose foremost filmmakers included James Stuart Blackton and Emile Cohl. Blackton’s *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906) featured Blackton drawing faces on a blackboard, changing their expressions as they flirt with each other, and Cohl mixed cartoons and live action footage for a series of comedies.⁴ Such films were a small part of an evening of live vaudeville entertainment. Gradually, animation lost its novelty and began to take a back seat, as the live-action film became the viewing standard. Though Winsor McCay

contributed a great deal to changing the face of animation from camera tricks to an actual method of filming (though his films were still exhibited as part of a vaudeville evening), it was Walt Disney who championed the cause of animation in the name of both art and children's entertainment. It is not my intention to trivialize the artistic contributions from the Fleischer Brothers ("Out of the Inkwell" series), or Pat Sullivan and Otto Messmer ("Felix the Cat"), and other extraordinarily gifted animators working in the 1920s and 30s to advance the art of animation. I am condensing history in order to focus on how animation, an already marginalized form, became entangled and synonymous with children's entertainment.

Whatever other things may be said of Disney, the man or the company, the fact remains that he revolutionized the (cel) animation process by introducing 'model sheets' to ensure the standardization of character representations, and was among the first to document principles of animation like 'stretch and squash.'⁵ Perhaps, more important than his technological innovations was Disney's focus on "believable characters who behaved in believable ways in believable environments,"⁶ and the privileging story and character over the "inherent plasticity"⁷ of the form. I use the term 'plasticity' in this instance to refer to the inherent artifice of the medium – physics and bodies are not constrained by any of the natural laws, such as gravity. It is entirely possible, in the medium of animation, for Wile E. Coyote to paint a tunnel on a wall and have the Roadrunner pass through it as though it were real; or for Yosemite Sam to walk off a diving platform into thin air and not fall, at least, until he notices he has done so. Even Mickey Mouse walks upright on two legs, and is capable of captaining a steamboat, though Disney's focus was to push the issue of artifice as far onto the back burner as

possible, striving for the paradox of ‘realism’ in animation. According to Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, who, as Disney animators, are hardly unbiased, “the illusion of life is a rare accomplishment in animation, and it was never mastered anywhere except at the Disney studio.”⁸ However, even impartial sources bear this out. As Steve Schneider observes, “such healthy primitives as the Fleischer brothers and the ‘Felix the Cat’ cartoonists filled their frames with impossible movements and fantastic visions – twisting staircases, talking apartment houses, detachable tails, metamorphoses... But when Walt Disney began building his Magic Kingdom in the 1930s, such outré magic was progressively excluded from the premises.”⁹

Working with and competing against Disney for audiences, other studios seemed to have no choice but to privilege this plasticity, and make it their hallmark. The next chapter covers the Warner Bros. aesthetic in greater detail, but I will say here that the animators of the Termite Terrace studio differentiated themselves by positioning *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* as a more urbane response to Disney’s saccharine *Silly Symphonies*. As Paul Wells notes, “the cartoon operates as a potentially non-regulatory or subversive space by virtue of its very artifice.... Animation always has the excuse that ‘it’s just ink and paint.’”¹⁰ The Warner Bros. style (or ‘brand,’ as I will later assert) exploits the medium for its animatedness in order to “enunciate its difference from other visual forms,”¹¹ whereas Disney’s objective was to minimize this difference. Disney himself noted, “we are in the motion picture business, only we are drawing them instead of photographing them.”¹²

Where the late 1920s to late 1940s can be considered the ‘Golden Age’ of cartoons, by the late 50s and early 60s, the animated cartoon underwent a drastic

transformation.¹³ Animated shorts were an integral part of the studio system, in that their exhibition were virtually guaranteed as part of a block-booking in a studio-owned movie theatre. Animated shorts were not profitable on their own, but were part of a larger package that film studios offered to theatres to fend off independent competitors.¹⁴

Block-booking, already on its way out, beginning with the Consent Decrees in 1940, was effectively killed in 1948. The U.S. Supreme Court made a landmark decision in *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, virtually destroying the vertical integration stranglehold that large film studios had on the distribution and exhibition of films.

Following this, the studios' animation units found themselves in decline. Only profitable when linked to a feature film (or, as Disney found, *as* a feature film), cartoons followed the scaling-back of newsreels, live-action shorts, and B-movies, and ultimately production ceased altogether. Theatrical release of the animated short film was no more.

This cinematic decline coincided with (and was contributed to) by the rise in popularity of the wondrous new television. Iconographic advertising images from the early 1950s depicted Mom, Pop and 2.4 kids gathered 'round the television set to watch heartwarming, quality 'family programming,' but this isn't so much what actually happened. Parents, most notably mothers, found that they could park the kids in front of the TV and complete their multitude of time-consuming daily tasks without interruption.¹⁵ Television was always a willing companion, always entertaining, never tired or cross. What, then, were children watching?

One of the few remaining avenues to profit for animation studios, such as MGM, UPA, Harveytoons, and Warner Bros. was selling back-catalogue cartoons to broadcasters, simultaneously generating revenue and solving broadcasters' dilemmas of

how to get more programming quickly and cheaply on the air. Creating original animation for television using traditional production techniques was simply not feasible. For example, an average seven-minute animated MGM short in the 1950s cost between \$40 000 and \$60 000.¹⁶ By the mid-1950s, back-catalogue cartoons were scattered throughout the viewing schedule, comprised of recycled cinematic shorts bookended by some kind of live-action host. But, simultaneously, something very interesting was happening. Studios began experimenting with a new technique, called ‘limited animation,’ which minimized and/or repeated motions, thereby reducing the number of drawings required and reducing production costs. One of the earliest limited-animation ‘pioneers’ was Jay Ward, who, in 1949, created *Crusader Rabbit* for syndication. It reduced movements to an average of one per four seconds of animation, and had a budget of only \$2500 per episode.¹⁷ *Crusader Rabbit* was extreme in its paring-down of animated action, but UPA’s 1950 short, *Gerald McBoing Boing* elaborated on the technique, and a revolution (of sorts) was started. Its graphic style was likened to modern art, and won an Academy Award in 1951. CBS jumped on the “limited-animation bandwagon” in 1956, contracting UPA to produce a prime-time program, *The Boing Boing Show* (1956). Hanna-Barbera also produced *Ruff and Reddy* (1957-1964) for NBC, exemplifying “a shift in the animated form that would become typical for television productions: minimal visual variety, emphasis on dialogue and verbal humour, and repetitive situations and narratives.”¹⁸ Instead of animation disappearing altogether, there were now two forms of cartoons – continuously recycled Hollywood shorts, and original low-budget programs.

The children's audience had grown throughout the late 1950s and early 60s as sponsors began aggressively targeting children as consumers. In the 1950s, the toy market had grown considerably, and was tied to television. Disney's *The Mickey Mouse Club* (1955-1959) jump-started the initiative to market to children in their own language, so to speak; that is, for their association with a recognizable brand, and its corresponding narrative properties.¹⁹ As Naomi Klein notes, advertising and 'branding' are not synonymous. Advertising is merely one part of the brand process, which puts a 'face,' of sorts on a generic product. First, the product's name supplants its function – Band-Aid and Kleenex are good examples, as no one asks for an 'adhesive bandage' or a 'facial tissue' by their generic names. Then, an image is built around the brand name, which is carried out through successive advertising campaigns, bestowing the "brand essence." General Motors, for example, concocted narratives about the pharmacist or country doctor rushing, in his trusty GM vehicle, of course, to the bedside of a dying child just in time to save his life.²⁰

Thus, following in Disney's footsteps, other companies such as Topper Toys, Amsco, and the newly-formed Mattel began to sponsor children's programs in the hopes of becoming household names.²¹ The toy-based or sponsored program's production budget and place in the viewing lineup were of paramount importance in gaining the child audience. The child was to then pester her or his parents ad nauseum until the advertised toy was purchased. As part of the sponsored programs, back-catalogue animation never escaped its 'filler' stigma, and began to be considered only as only appealing to children. Advertisers, looking for wider broadcast opportunities, began to cast around for original programming. They found it with Hanna-Barbera.

Bill Hanna and Joseph Barbera, after their success with the *Tom and Jerry* series of cartoons in the 1940s and early 50s, found themselves unemployed when MGM closed its animation unit in 1957. Adopting UPA's limited style, they pared it down further, emphasizing dialogue and sound effects, and pitched their cheap services to broadcasters, and they were astoundingly successful. Hanna-Barbera created such 'classic' characters as Huckleberry Hound, Yogi Bear, Scooby-doo, and of course, Fred Flintstone. *The Flintstones* (1960-1966) was a run-away hit. Satirizing the situation comedy format borrowed from *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956), it temporarily slipped the 'kids-only' noose.²² A boom in animation followed, but, as with all good things, came to an end. After *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*, though, the family sitcom format was abandoned, leaving only gimmicky child-related offerings, such *The Secret Squirrel Show* (1965-1968) and *The Space Kidettes* (1966-1967), also produced by Hanna-Barbera. Sadly, the only conclusion critics could reach was that animation could not sustain a long-term adult interest. Other factors, such as a decline in writing quality, or generic saturation were dismissed.

In a case of history repeating itself, these animated programs now found themselves in the position that the cinematic shorts had – they were now 'back catalogue,' and as such were relegated to early Saturday morning hours – an old zombie shuffling around television's graveyard. Ironically, this segregation of mass audience into children and adults is based on ambivalence towards the television itself. From its inception, it was seen simultaneously as a way to bring families together, and to drive them apart. It kept children amused (hence 'electronic babysitter') and became further

entrenched in households, but was soon blamed for inducing laziness and stupidity in young viewers.

Given the extraordinary amount of unpaid work required of women maintaining households with children, it is unsurprising that television sets – with their potential use as a baby-sitting machine – were purchased so fast by so many families in the 1950s and that families with children were the first to want them. Television offered mothers a break...Television was first hailed as a medium for family togetherness...[but] worries over television's effects on children – ranging from facial tics to passivity – soon came to the fore...²³

Children are positioned as the most frequent and vulnerable television viewers, and criticism of television most often is framed in terms of the Child. Cartoons are often on the front lines in this attack, which is a direct result of the purchase, rebroadcast, and ghettoizing of old back-catalogue cartoons. Shortly after the shift to off-hours, savvy marketers saw the unattended child viewer as ripe pickings and began to advertise even *more* aggressively. They created animated programs that were merely publicity platforms for toy tie-ins.²⁴ Mass media (especially parenting magazines geared towards nervous mothers), got, and still get, incredible mileage out of producing alarmist stories revamped for each successive decade blaming television (and now also the Internet) for everything that is 'wrong' with children. In other words, TV and the Internet are blamed for how living and breathing children differ from the nostalgic rhetorical ideal of the Child, which Henry Jenkins categorizes as, most commonly, a white, fair-haired, blue-eyed, middle-class boy. In the Introduction to *The Children's Culture Reader*, Jenkins notes further that in the image of the so-called Universalized Child, "the markers of middle-classness, whiteness and masculinity are read as standing for all children," and that this icon "...is a myth, in Roland Barthes' sense of the word, a figure that transforms

culture into nature.”²⁵ This, of course, excludes both girls and all children of less-than-lily-white colour. This white, middle-class ‘pre-man’ is a hegemonic talisman of the (symbolic) Future, in that he stands as the inheritor to worldly power, and it is of paramount importance that this *tabula rasa* remain as heterosexual and pro-America as humanly possible. When the fragile state of childhood has passed, the fair-haired boy is to take up the mantle of maintaining the division between the Adult and the Child, as pertaining to mass media culture, as my fourth chapter, which deals with fans and fan culture, demonstrates.

In the name of protecting this blessed state, the plethora of alarmist tales of television and mass media at large are at best contradictory, and at worst, heavily restrictive. There is little or no consensus on how much TV is ‘too much,’ and exhortations to “establish ground rules, prevent TV from becoming an addiction”²⁶ are seated directly in the enforced (but illusory) concept that The Adult has the right to control The Child. Michel Foucault observes that the deployment of power (in Western cultures, anyway) polarizes the world in order to provide the *illusion* of free thought and free choice. Or, in other words, power exists in binary oppositions: active/passive, full/empty, knowledge/ignorance, high/low, powerful/weak, adult/child. Without powerlessness, power cannot exist. Without the Child, the Adult is meaningless.²⁷ The alleged distinction between these two categories is based in these created oppositions, as childhood “is a condition defined by powerlessness and dependence on the adult community’s directives and guidance.”²⁸

Literature on and studies of both actual and symbolic childhood can be divided into two areas: those, like Postman, Newton Minow, Stephen Kline and Jyotsna Kapur,

who view this limited and precious time with heavy nostalgia towards both the Past (that never existed) and the Future, which, for all intents and purposes, is a chance to create the Past. Put simply, this restrictive rhetoric contrives, with each successive generation of children, to get closer to their ideal world in which everyone knows their place within the social hierarchy and stays there. During his tenure as Chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Minow's television reform plans centred around calling for more reality-based (i.e., not cartoons), educational programs, instead of game shows, talk shows, detective shows, and westerns.²⁹ Others, like Phillipe Ariés, James Kincaid, Ellen Seiter, Henry Jenkins, Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine, provide legitimate historical and empirical evidence and analysis pertaining to the state of childhood-that-was, childhood-that-is, and how current portrayals of adults and children in various forms of media inform and contribute to what childhood will mean to the actual future. More importantly, they acknowledge gender, ethnic, and age differences in children, on an international scale, and what this means to both practical and symbolic visions of childhood. Their more rewarding and productive methodology is to examine actual children in actual spaces; their bedrooms, their classrooms, as well as cyberspace, to get a feel for how children *themselves* interpret and integrate the media forms around them into their own lived experiences. Somehow, these adults are not challenged or threatened by children's autonomy – there is no hand-wringing, no outcry that the metaphorical sky is falling in on life as we know it.

"We now join *Freakazoid!*, already in progress."

Inspired by the literature listed above, this thesis seeks to find and explore, and possibly wedge further open the gaps between the purported polarities of Adult and

Child, to demonstrate how such distinctions are meaningless and ultimately damaging to animated texts, as well as to the discourse surrounding adult and children's cultures. I have outlined already both conservative and, to my mind, the more realistic examinations of children, childhood, and children's culture. My further objective is to integrate these arguments into a case study of one animated television program from the mid-1990s. The case in question is *Steven Spielberg Presents Freakazoid!*³⁰ a Warner Bros, animated television series running from 1995 until 1997, originally broadcast on the Kids! WB Network. *Freakazoid!* revolves around the world's only Internet-created superhero. Computer nerd Dexter Douglas is accidentally sucked into cyberspace to emerge as Freakazoid, a teenage superhero protecting Washington D.C., and by extension, the world. However, the show is not merely a superhero cartoon series – it is also a show about *making* a superhero TV series. Not only is Freakazoid a superhero, he is also an actor playing himself as superhero, making a show about being a superhero. Though this does figure more strongly in Chapter Four, in terms of television, foregrounding the program in both political and showbiz spheres provides opportunities for biting social commentary, especially in an American context, silly 'celebrity' cameos (Spielberg included), and obscure cultural references. *Freakazoid!* shoehorns itself between adult culture and children's culture, using this position to strike at the pointlessness of maintaining the cherished illusion that there is and can be a rigidly enforced segregation of audiences. There is, of course, a certain amount of irony in the show having been broadcast on a children's network, with advertising time sold to marketers dependent on the stringent division in audiences. Indeed, this mismatch proved to be *Freakazoid!*'s undoing, as later chapters will demonstrate.

My next chapter details the history of the Warner Bros. studio, and how *Freakazoid!* is positioned as an inheritor of the *Looney Tunes* aesthetic. I also detail the politics inherent in what is commonly referred to as either 'dual reference'³¹ or 'double-coding;' the assumption that the mass audience is easily divisible into adult and child, and that the animated text has two 'levels' of humour, one dialogue-based and perceived as catering to adults; the other revolves around sight gags and incongruous noises that children allegedly prefer. I borrow heavily from Rebecca Farley's arguments³² as she deconstructs the cultural assumptions that the double-coding model is based on, which is deeply problematic in that the goal of such 'analysis' is not to benefit the text itself, but to uphold the alleged social hierarchy. My arguments are framed within the context of both television and animation history, as they are, for my purposes at least, indivisible. Further, I will position *Freakazoid!* as a cultural product of the Warner Bros. studio, and the historicity inherent in such a distinction. *Freakazoid!* is not only dependent on current events for humour; it contains within itself the history of animation, Termite Terrace, and television. This chapter lays the groundwork for acknowledging the subversive, i.e. "plastic," elements contained within the animated form, especially in the Adult/Child hierarchical framework.

The third chapter details *Freakazoid!*'s origins. As he is created by interface with the Internet, this 'new' mode of communication is integral to understanding how the show functions. I am, of course, using the term 'Internet' to refer to the vast communications network of millions of world-wide interconnected computers. I use Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'heteroglossia,'³³ which is the assertion that each 'text' contains its past and present history, and is always open to multiple levels of

interpretation, to enrich my study of both *Freakazoid!* and the medium of the Internet. This relates to the previous chapter, where I contend that *Freakazoid!* is simultaneously a contemporary cultural artifact, as well as an agent of nostalgia, calling, as it does, on its own history as a Warner Bros. cultural product. By positioning cyberspace as a mediator between real and symbolic, and the teenage body between Child and Adult, I assert that the liminality of these two phases, as exemplified in the figure of the 'freak body,' echoes the subversive elements explored in the previous chapter. A liminal figure, in Victor Turner's terms, is one between stops on society's "structure of positions"³⁴ which correlates neatly with Postman's concepts of social hierarchy. Thus, between the points of child and adult, the teenager subverts expectations that Child/Adult are meaningful and fixed states of being, and the 'freakazoid' body demonstrates the pointlessness of 'normal' as a distinction, all as facilitated by the Internet. Furthermore, as a new technology, the Internet is examined as a destabilizing agent of both household politics and power, as children readily adopt and adapt to its multitude of communications possibilities. This, of course, underlines and exacerbates adult anxieties regarding shifting power dynamics, and the threat of obsolescence in the job market, as Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine assert in their study of British school children, the household use of computers, and how computers have affected household politics.

Chapter Four flips the examination of *Freakazoid!* from studio product to the consumers of said product – the fans. For this chapter, I am deeply indebted to Henry Jenkins.³⁵ However, where he focuses on adult fans of adult television programs, I use his arguments in the context of children's programming. Where Jenkins seeks to correct stereotypes, I argue that *Freakazoid!* reinforces them to point out, once again, the grey

area between polarities of Adult/Child, and high culture/low culture. Because fans are marginalized due to their fixation on 'devalued' cultural materials, they are commonly infantilized in depictions from the mainstream media. This dovetails nicely with Foucault's assertions that power only exists in opposition, which is the foundation of the hierarchy of taste. This 'outsider' status positions the figure of the fan as subversive, in that it also exposes the failings of adherence to the oppositional Adult and Child. As an allegedly 'abnormal' individual, the fan stereotype reinforces Grosz's assertions that the normal only exists in opposition to abnormal. Further, *Freakazoid!* will be examined as part of the continuum of the superhero genre, either televised or in comic book form.

This is a crucial area of to understand the phenomenon of fandom, as well as *Freakazoid!*'s creating humour by either subverting or upholding genre conventions. The superhero, it can be argued, is also a liminal figure, and there is a certain amount of irony inherent in a marginalized (most often) man defending the status quo that simultaneously reveres and resents him for what he accomplishes in the name of public safety and how this reminds 'ordinary citizens' of their ordinariness. Analyzing *Freakazoid!* in terms of its placement within the conventions of the superhero genre allows for these stylistic devices to be subverted or upheld for comedic purposes, as well as illustrating how the superhero is in the paradoxical position of liminal outsider, defending the status quo, as the superhero narrative "clearly gives substance to certain ideological myths about the society they address: the USA."³⁶ Given that Jenkins has already pinpointed the problematic political symbolism of The Future inherent in the white male child, it is such a Future that the superhero ultimately defends. To this, I stitch Ellen Seiter, Jyotsna Kapur, and Cy Schneider's writings on consumer culture, especially as targeted to

children, to find the point at which the fan transgresses the boundary of 'acceptable' consumption of mass-produced culture and goods to become a perceived 'threat' to those who take it upon themselves to reinforce distinctions between good and bad taste, and high and low culture, especially in the context of comic books, animated television, and their corresponding marketed goods and toys.

The last chapter will provide an overview and summary of my arguments, reconciling them into a more cohesive whole. As I am exploring the areas where children, children's culture, animation, and subcultures overlap, and places where the discourse on these same topics allows for an analysis of where and how these areas *don't* meet, I will, by the end of this thesis, have provided a bridge between them.

My use of capital letters may seem somewhat unorthodox, but this thesis deals with two areas of distinction: the real and the symbolic. In this context, I choose to capitalize Adult to distinguish between living, breathing citizens of the world, and the abstract concept of Adulthood, whose sacred responsibility is to uphold social and taste hierarchies. I do the same with Childhood and the Child, which is not a reflection of the behaviour of actual children, but refers instead to the romanticized concept of childhood innocence, which "empties the child of its own political agency, so that it may more perfectly fulfill the symbolic demands we make upon it."³⁷ It is integral to my arguments to be able to quickly differentiate between these two states. Similarly, Real stands in for concepts of reality, as opposed to the lived experience, and the Future refers to the symbolic time ahead which can be drastically affected depending on how the Children of today are raised.

Ultimately, the goal of this thesis can be seen as polemic – both television and animation history have ignored this text for over ten years, and its popularity and relevance at the time brought only criticism from those who regard the original cinematic *Looney Tunes* cartoons with great nostalgia and as the only ‘legitimate’ output from the Warner Bros. studio. Because *Freakazoid!* was geared specifically for children and the televised medium, it loses out twice-over. It is my contention that this ‘falling through the cracks,’ as it were, enables *Freakazoid!* to address other issues and ‘persons’ “betwixt and between,”³⁸ and these dealings are what make *Freakazoid!* such an important text, especially in the contemporary conservative media climate.

NOTES

¹ Interestingly enough, the publisher of *The Art of Space Jam*, Rutledge Hill Press, is a Christian publishing house most notable for its “create your own Bibles.”

² I note in Chapter Four that Googling “Freakazoid” pulls up a multitude of fan sites devoted to quoting dialogue and providing plot synopses. However valuable they may be in preserving the minutiae of the show, I would hardly consider any of them to be peer-reviewed academic sources.

³ Mikulak, Bill. “Fans versus Time Warner: Who Owns Looney Tunes?” *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*. Kevin Sandler, ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 194.

⁴ Kanfer, Stefan. *Serious Business: The Art and Commerce of Animation in America from Betty Boop to Toy Story*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 17-19.

⁵ Thomas, Frank and Ollie Johnston, *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation*. (New York: Hyperion, 1981), 47-70.

⁶ Stabile, Carol A. and Mark Harrison. “Introduction: Prime Time Animation – An Overview.” Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, eds. *Prime Time Animation: Television and American Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Thomas and Johnston, *The Illusion of Life*, 25.

⁹ Schneider, Steve. *That’s All Folks!: The Art of Warner Bros. Animation*. (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 20.

¹⁰ Wells, Paul. “Smarter Than the Average Art Form: Animation in the Television Era.” Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, eds. *Prime Time Animation: Television and American Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 16.

¹¹ Ibid., 16.

¹² Thoman and Johnston, *The Illusion of Life*, 119.

¹³ Mittell, Jason. “The Great Saturday Morning Exile: Scheduling Cartoons on Television’s Periphery in the 1960s.” Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, eds. *Prime Time Animation: Television and American Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 33.

¹⁴ Ibid, 38.

¹⁵ Seiter, Ellen. *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 15.

¹⁶ Mittell, Jason. “The Great Saturday Morning Exile,” 38.

¹⁷ Kanfer, Stefan. *Serious Business*, 180-181.

¹⁸ Mittell, Jason. “The Great Saturday Morning Exile,” 38.

¹⁹ Kapur, Jyotsna, “Television and the Transformation of Childhood.” Marsha Kinder, ed. *Kids’ Media Culture*. (Durham, Duke University Press, 1999), 126.

²⁰ Klein, Naomi. *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Toronto: Vintage Books Canada, 2000, 5-7.

²¹ Seiter, Ellen. *Sold Separately*, 78, 80.

²² Mittell, Jason. “The Great Saturday Morning Exile,” 45-46.

²³ Seiter, Ellen. *Sold Separately*, 26.

²⁴ The examples of programs of this nature are legion, but this thinly-disguised marketing reached its peak in the 1980s with such programs as *G.I. Joe*, *He-Man* and *the Masters of*

the Universe, its companion *She-Ra: Princess of Power*, *Pound Puppies*, *My Little Pony*, *Strawberry Shortcake*, *The Care Bears*, and *Rainbow Brite*.

²⁵ Jenkins, Henry. "Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Myths." Henry Jenkins, ed. *The Children's Culture Reader*. (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 13-15.

²⁶ Seiter, Ellen. *Sold Separately*, 33.

²⁷ Foucault, Michel. "Two Lectures." Colin Gordon, ed. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 93-103.

²⁸ Kline, Stephen. *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing*. (London: Verso, 1993), 44.

²⁹ Spigel and Jenkins, "Same Bat Channel, Different Bat Times: Mass Culture and Popular Memory." William Urricho and Roberta Pearson, eds. *The Many Faces of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 122.

³⁰ Henceforth to be referred to as *Freakazoid!*.

³¹ Spigel and Jenkins, "Same Bat Channel," 125-126.

³² Farley, Rebecca. "From Fred and Wilma to Ren and Stimpy: What Makes a Cartoon Prime Time?" Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, eds. *Prime Time Animation: Television and American Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 151-153.

³³ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263-265.

³⁴ Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. (New York: Sage House, 1970), 93-94.

³⁵ Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 9-85, 224-225.

³⁶ Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*. (London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1992), 74.

³⁷ Jenkins, Henry. "Introduction," 1.

³⁸ Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols*, 93.

“Unless something better’s on TV” – *Freakazoid!* and Television

“‘Fun’ is not neutral ideological turf.”

Donald Crafton, “The View from Termite Terrace:
Caricature and Parody in Warner Bros. Cartoons”

This chapter is concerned with exploring Adult and Child as alleged polarities, illustrated by an examination of what is commonly referred to as ‘double-coding,’ mediated by the televised animated text. Double-coding operates under the assumption that each animated text has two layers of meaning – slapstick humour and unsophisticated visuals are seen as appealing to children, while the second layer of witty verbal jokes and intertextual cultural references allegedly appeal to adults. This limited (and limiting) mode of analysis depends on upholding what Neil Postman calls “social hierarchy,”¹ which is the conventional logic that there is a sustainable barrier between Adult and Child that must be maintained by subordinating the will and tastes of the child to that of the adult. Postman contends that television is a coarse medium, contributing to the erosion of these maintained differences between the states of Child and Adult by bringing adult foibles and weaknesses into the home and providing children with easy access to them. For him, the underpinnings of civilized society as we now know it are under threat. Children must ‘learn’ adulthood through literacy and manners, but television, a visual medium, discourages reading. Further, it brings obscene language and flippant attitudes towards authority into the heart of the family home. Postman acknowledges and excuses the hypocrisy inherent in ‘enculturing’ a state of innocence, as embodied by the Child, but insists it is a necessary “evil” to preserve social order – “behavior, language, attitudes, and desires – even the physical appearance – of adults and children are becoming increasingly indistinguishable.”² What he unfortunately glosses over is that the state of childhood, as we have come to understand it, has only existed in its current form

for 200 or so years, and, for the working poor, has never existed at all. In his comprehensive historical study, Phillipe Ariès notes that it only became unseemly to speak “indecently” in front of children, in terms of bodily functions or off-colour jokes, towards the end of the sixteenth century. Indeed, educators went so far as to begin to offer expurgated, or bowlerdized, versions of ‘classic’ texts, or remove questionable materials from their curriculums altogether. This crucial time is regarded as the beginning of a “respect” for the division of cultures into adult and children’s spheres.³ These spheres, culturally entrenched, persist to this day. Interestingly, for someone so concerned with children’s culture, Postman, with the exception of a brief nod to Walt Disney⁴ ignores the medium of animation altogether. As I have stated, it is difficult to separate children’s television and animation, but Postman only examines adult television and media culture and its negative effects on the Child, and avoids gathering evidence from observing and speaking to actual children about what they view on television and how they assimilate it into their own lived experience. Thus, the histories of television and animation are often depicted as a battle for control of children’s minds, with advertisers, parents, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) fighting to rule “the vast wasteland.”⁵

Double-coding serves only to underscore the subordinate position of children – it entrenches assumptions about children’s cognitive abilities, their symbolic place in society as emblems of Innocence, which must be cultivated at all costs, yet paradoxically simultaneously portrays them as savages, lacking the refinement to comprehend and enjoy clever dialogue. This of course is rooted in the sixteenth century estrangement of children from the wider world of language discourse. Rebecca Farley in “From Fred and

Wilma to Ren and Stimpy: What Makes a Cartoon Prime Time?” points out several glaring flaws in this type of reasoning – that, a) audiences can be segregated into two distinct groups; b) each group is homogenous – that is, that all adults are exactly the same, and all children are also the same, which fails to account for the vast developmental differences between a toddler and a pre-teen, or, someone in their early 40s and a senior citizen; c) adults are utterly incapable of appreciating slapstick humour and the “cartoon aesthetic” once they have crossed the magic boundary of age; d) children are utterly indiscriminate viewers with no appreciation or ability to comprehend irony or subtle word-play; and e) that form and content can be divided and analyzed separately.⁶ The enforced hierarchy of viewership being positioned in terms of binary opposition only serves to disempower the child. However, as James Kincaid points out, “by insisting so loudly on the innocence [and] purity...of the child, we have created a subversive echo.”⁷ This of course is not to imply that audiences are a homogenous mass, interpreting cultural materials in exactly the same way, all the time. Audiences can also be stratified along gender, class, race, and national lines as well, but focusing on these audience divisions limits the analysis of animated texts. Indeed, the purpose of this thesis is a reminder that nothing can be boxed neatly into categories, as there will always be overlap and grey areas. Examining what happens in these spaces of overlap is a more rewarding exercise than labelling audiences in tidy categories. Segregating an audience on the basis of age alone, may have some bearing on the timeliness of jokes and gags, but is used primarily to marginalize children as viewers, even within their own medium.

By examining the history of the debate surrounding television and children, and positioning *Freakazoid!* in the Warner Bros. pantheon, I will demonstrate that the

program undermines the double-coding model and explores the significance and ramifications of Kincaid's "subversive echo."

"And now you know the rest of the back story – good day!"

Seen as both valued family member and a mass-media soporific, attitudes towards television are deeply ambivalent. Arguments for *and* against television are framed in terms of the Child. Marketing schemes position TV as a way to bring the nuclear family ever-closer in the privacy and safety of the home.⁸ Writings against television see the TV as a means by which the evils of the (adult) world are brought into this sacred sanctuary. The danger of television, according to Postman, Minow, Kline, Kapur, and others, is that it does not bring the family unit closer together so much as it becomes a substitute for it. And, as television is not renowned for its judgement and subtlety, the unattended child viewer is, supposedly, being led astray.

Left to their own devices (especially in low-income homes with single or both parents working multiple jobs to make ends meet), the frightening probability is that the unattended Child will be drawn into the seedy world of adult television. Indeed, Minow recounts an "average" week of after-school programming (31 January to 4 February 1994) and sees nothing but talk shows featuring extremely promiscuous teenage girls; transsexual prostitutes; white supremacists; parents who hate their daughters' boyfriends; a woman who attempted suicide nine times; a sadomasochistic couple who exchanged body piercings instead of wedding rings; a man who couldn't stop cheating on his wife; and other similar shocking revelations of adult deviance and frailty.⁹ Minow pays lip service to the nostalgia-laden notion of the ideal world in which no (American) children would be left with only the television for after-school company, but doesn't expand on

how such a thing could be accomplished. Interestingly, Minow's survey of afternoon television does not reflect other viewing opportunities available – surely at least one child in the entire nation might prefer an after-school cartoon, even if it is only a thinly-disguised marketing ploy as seemingly innocuous as *The Care Bears* (1985-1988). If children would be “better off protected by those in control,”¹⁰ media watchdogs then deem themselves qualified and push their altruistic agenda.

Pushing back, harder, louder, and with more money, are advertisers. Where the watchdogs appeal to parents and educators, marketers appeal directly to actual children in all their avaricious, self-centred glory. Instead of rhetoric formed around the symbolic Child, marketing agencies observe real kids, put them in focus groups, talk to them, ask questions, and use the concrete facts they obtain in their determinations of what will have meaning for children, and what they respond to most readily.

The marketers didn't have to assume that children's daydreams, hero worship, absurdist humor and a keen sense of group identity were meaningless distractions and artifacts of immaturity. Rather, they recognized that these attributes were the deep roots of children's culture which could be employed as effective tools for communicating with them.¹¹

However, it is naïve to position the marketers as evil brainwashers and parents/media watchdogs as saintly preservers of innocence. Cy Schneider, a children's marketing executive, points out that children are discriminating and savvy viewers,¹² but the fact remains that what is available for children to watch on television “is limited by the professional ideologies of advertising and entertainment industry workers, the capabilities of industrial production, and the influence of manufacturers and television producers on governmental regulation and broadcast policy,”¹³ not to mention the influence of lobbyists, such as the Center for Media Education, who had the U.S. Congress pass the

Children's Television Act (CTA) in 1990. This act restored time limits to commercials aired during children's programs, and required broadcasters to air at least some educational and informational children's fare.¹⁴ I am not unaware of the societal tensions between excess and restraint, played out in children's broadcasting and advertising, on the field of a capitalist, consumer society dependent on "brand loyalty"¹⁵ for its economy to function. Fostering unrelenting consumption by catching the very young, advertisers force parents and media critics to fight for their children to not be indoctrinated, yet their hands are somewhat tied, as their own position in the social hierarchy, their middle-classness, is dependent on this infrastructure. Jenkins notes, "social reformers typically justif[y] their own positions as cultural custodians, linking (either implicitly or explicitly) anxieties about violence, sexuality and morality to mandates of good taste and artistic merit. Within this protectionist rhetoric, children's 'purity' provid[es] a rationale for censorship and regulation."¹⁶ Television, and, more particularly, animated television, is a conduit through which corporations market their brands to children.

Yet, as I noted in the previous chapter, a brand is not always identical to a tangible product, though such things are not mutually exclusive. For example, the Disney brand is analogous with wholesomeness and nostalgia. As Henry A. Giroux points out, when watching a Disney movie or visiting Disneyland, or buying merchandise from The Disney Store, one buys (literally and figuratively) the false nostalgia of a long-gone, fairy-tale era.¹⁷ And, just as Adult/Child exist in relation to one another, some brands stand in opposition to other brands. Here I am making plain the polarities between Disney and Warner Bros. Steven Spielberg notes that "in the Disney cartoons, there's a kind of sweet harmony. The conflicts were pretend conflicts. With the Warner

characters...you know they really meant it.”¹⁸ Peddling sentimental yearnings, Disney is firmly associated with children and childhood; indeed, “Uncle Walt’s” commitment to animation for children has been well-documented by Richard Schickel, Henry Giroux, and two of his own animators, Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, among others. Warner Bros., on the other hand, is, or at least was, somewhat different.

In 1930, two former Disney animators, Hugh Harman and Rudolph Ising brought their character Bosko (of indeterminate species – he could be either a dog/monkey cross, or a caricature of an African-American, depending on one’s viewpoint) to Leon Schlesinger at Pacific Art & Title. Schlesinger brought the film to his contacts at the Warner Bros. studio, and an animated ‘star’ was born – well, sort of. Bosko lacked a distinct personality beyond “bland cheeriness.”¹⁹ By the mid-30s, it was readily apparent that the *Merrie Melodies*²⁰ in which he was featured “were not about to set the world on fire.”²¹ Fortunately for Schlesinger and Harman-Ising, at this same time, orchestrated jazz, or swing, suddenly took on a life of its own and became an embodiment of the national mood.²² Tied as they were to the Warner Bros. musical catalogue, the formerly bland cartoons became synonymous with the freewheeling anarchy of the “Swing Age.” *Looney Tunes*, as we know it now, was about to be born.

Schlesinger took a risk on fledgling director Fred “Tex” Avery, and put him in charge of “Termite Terrace,” a ramshackle bungalow on the Warner lot that housed young animators Robert Clampett, Robert “Bobo” Cannon, and Charles “Chuck” Jones, among others. From this humble hovel, Avery et al. injected the previously uninspired *Merrie Melodies* and its companion *Looney Tunes* with this new swing spirit, and their style drastically changed. They brought to the cartoons the “anarchic irony of anti-

intellectual knowingness.”²³ Disney, at the time, was busy converting fairy-tales into feature films, busting union organizers, building an empire, and continuing to strive for the elusive ‘illusion of life.’²⁴ Schlesinger’s main motivation was to produce maximum animation for minimum cost, and, so long as they stayed within budget, the animators of Termite Terrace were left mainly to their own devices.

While Disney’s cartoonists dreamed up and scribbled down a lovable Mickey and Minnie...the “Merrie Melodie” and “Looney Tune” folks banged off rubber walls, tore a real world into surreal shreds, and put it all back together with Bugs Bunny, Yosemite Sam, and Daffy Duck... Their animators tossed on the screen, as they often did in life, sketches ripped into confetti, to be reassembled in as yet undreamed of shapes.²⁵

Gags were based on contrasts in motion and speech; puns created from audio, visual and verbal juxtapositions; and these new cartoons began to reference the urban world outside – laying the groundwork for infinite animated possibilities. In short, “Warner Bros. cartoons... embarked on a quest to create a parallel cartoon world, an evil empire to battle Disneyland.”²⁶

In addition to jazz-inspired staccato pacing, the “Golden Age” *Looney Tunes* (mid-1930s to early 1950s) were renowned for their celebrity caricatures. Unlike Disney, Warner Bros. cartoons are full of subversive commentary in the forms of parodies of films, movie stars, and Hollywood social life.²⁷ The exaggerated quality of the caricature portrait suited the new, ‘hip,’ *Looney Tune* style. Some of the early films are nothing but caricatures – Friz Freleng’s *Coo-Coo Nut Grove* (1936), for example, is a continuous parade of singers and film stars represented as animals. Thus, caricature provides an iconic function, standing in for the recognizable person, but in such a fashion that it surpasses mere recognizability. The pleasure, so to speak, is recognizing the celebrity

and acknowledging the commentary inherent in the portrayal of celebrity's exaggerated features or the celebrity portrayed as animal. "Iconic caricatures are highly intertextual and depend on the viewer's ability to understand the character as a likeness of a specific individual, not just another character in the fiction."²⁸ However, it is not my contention that Warner Bros. was the only animation department doing caricatures – only that they were very, very good at it, to the point where, by the 1990s, zaniness, hipness, and an urban contemporaneity positioned them against Disney's saccharine, nostalgia-laden films. The essence of the Warner Bros. brand, which was set specifically in opposition to Disney's rose-tinted nostalgia for 'fairy-tale times gone by,' was a constant and unrelenting visual and verbal reference to topical matters and 'real life' concerns.²⁹ In Robert Clampett's *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs* (1943), a spoof of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Coal Black works as a maid in Harlem, but the evil Queenie dislikes that Prince "Chawming" prefers Coal Black. She pays criminals to kidnap Coal Black, drive her to the country, and kill her. As with Snow White, Coal Black is set free, and is rescued by seven GI's at a US Army Training Camp. In less than ten minutes, the animators of Termite Terrace successfully undermine Disney's privileging of whiteness, rural setting, and pre-industrial culture.³⁰ They reference swing and jazz music, World War II, and black subculture and dialect in Harlem – all urban, all contemporary.

But, by the mid-1990s, Warner Bros., having undergone a corporate merger to become Time Warner, saw Disney as a model of the perfect merchandising empire, and began to purge itself of its more questionable, less family-friendly material – anything that would cause the family dollar to spend itself elsewhere. Time Warner disavowed

films such as *Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips* (1944) and *Tokio Jokio* (1943), and sealed them away, never to be mentioned again in polite company. Racial stereotyping, even in a war propaganda context, violates the boundaries of good taste and social hierarchy by blatantly advertising the infantilizing means by which other cultures are positioned as inferior to American culture. In *Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips*, Bugs preys on the 'primitive' Japanese culture. The Japanese, having never seen an ice cream truck before, make it easy for Bugs to dispense ice cream cones with grenades inside them. Like popular conceptions of children, the Japanese soldiers are easily amused and easily fooled. Even Speedy Gonzales, champion of Hispanic mice everywhere, was deemed politically incorrect because of his accent, and suffered the same fate.³¹

Into such a conservative climate came *Tiny Toon Adventures* (1990-1992), *Animaniacs* (1993-1998), and finally, *Freakazoid!* (1995-1997), all under the auspices of Executive Producer Steven Spielberg. These shows were produced for and targeted to children, intended as a lighter-hearted and less-violent alternative to the Golden Age *Looney Tunes*. "What we've done to the old Looney Tune spirit,' says Spielberg... 'is sweeten it a little, without making it saccharine.'"³² The success of *Tiny Toons* spawned a veritable animation boom. *Tiny Toons* revolves around the premise that Bugs, Daffy, Porky, et al. are all professors at "Acme Looniversity," acting as mentors to Buster and Babs Bunny ("no relation"), Plucky Duck, Hampton J. Pig, among others. *Animaniacs* takes its inspiration from further back – Yakko, Wakko, and Dot Warner (the Warner brothers and their sister) bear a striking resemblance to Bosko, in that they are also of indeterminate species – sharing the early 'inkblot' design as animated characters from the 1920s and 30s – though with far more forceful personalities. Indeed, the premise of the

show is that they were deemed “too zany” when they were created in the 1930s, and, as ‘toons cannot be destroyed, they were sealed into the water tower on the Warner studio lot, and totally disavowed. Each episode they escape and must be rounded up and contained before they ruin the studio’s reputation. It is highly ironic that two shows dealing with the past history and characters of the Warner Bros. studio should come out at exactly the same time as Time Warner was suppressing all materials that would blacken the integrity of the Warners’ ‘brand.’ It is also ironic (and incredibly sad) that said brand made its name by challenging the status quo and championing anarchy, only to be homogenized in the name of big business under the aegis of changing taste norms.

This thesis, however, concerns itself with *Freakazoid!*. Unlike its predecessors, *Freakazoid!* does not look backward, but concerns itself with the immediate present, or at least, what was immediate in 1995 – the Internet. Grounded in the real world – that is, it does not feature any anthropomorphized animals – *Freakazoid!* provides more fertile ground for continuing the hip standards that had made the Warner Bros. name. *Freakazoid* protects Washington D.C. and Hollywood (and by extension, the world), and stars as himself making a show about making a show about being a teen superhero protecting Washington D.C. and Hollywood. He is also the alter-ego of Dexter Douglas, a computer nerd who is accidentally sucked into the Internet and transformed. Dexter lives at home with his parents and bullying older brother, Duncan. Like other nerds, he spends all his time in his room with his computer, unless he must “freak out,” become *Freakazoid*, and round up some supervillains. This allows for multiple arenas of topical matter to be explored – family, politics, and celebrity. Further, *Freakazoid!* evidences adherence to the Warner Bros. spirit of zaniness, hipness and

social commentary through caricature and parody. Freakazoid battles ridiculous villains like The Lobe, Cave Guy, Cobra Queen, all of whom are utterly ineffectual, not unlike Yosemite Sam, Marvin the Martian, Elmer Fudd, and other pompous characters that Bugs Bunny declared war upon in the 1940s and 50s. Their villainy is rarely wider in scope than petty theft, copying all the TV shows ever made as to not have to program a VCR ever again, or the capture and destruction of Freakazoid – which always fails. Only The Lobe, by virtue of his monstrously large brain, comes up with a single scheme to take over the world (by turning people into clown zombies), which Freakazoid halts by undermining The Lobe's self-esteem. I will acknowledge that Bugs most often antagonized his adversaries in his own interests, whereas Freakazoid is, in fact, a superhero, and has entirely different responsibilities. Freakazoid also hobnobs with the President of the United States (at the time, Bill Clinton), Princess Diana, Steven Spielberg, as well as Wakko Warner and the Brain from *Animaniacs*. The interconnectedness between these two programs is referenced in several *Freakazoid!* episodes. In "Next Time, Phone Ahead," a writer's meeting is adjourned early to show *Animaniacs* re-runs. The opening credits are played until (animated) Spielberg cuts in and reconvenes the meeting. In "The Freakazoid," Wakko Warner, the Brain, and Freakazoid make a trip to Spielberg's office to determine which of them is Spielberg's favourite. Naturally, he never has any idea who they are.

For a show with the potential to be another 'star' in the WB pantheon, *Freakazoid!* was only on for two seasons, with a mere 24 episodes produced. From its inception, *Freakazoid!* was pulled in two different directions. Originally conceived as Kids! WB's less-pessimistic answer to Fox's dreary *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-

1995), Spielberg pushed the show into the same comedic direction as *Animaniacs*, arguably the true “Swing Age” inheritor. Designer/director Bruce Timm recalls, “every time we’d have a meeting with Steven, the concept would kinda change, and it kept leaning more and more toward zany comedy.”³³ Changed so late in its development, the first season is uneven, in that some episodes are very, very funny, and others decidedly lackluster. Further contributing to *Freakazoid!*’s failure to achieve the same level of success as *Tiny Toons* and *Animaniacs* was the mismatch of intended audience and the actual audience. Advertising time was sold to marketers seeking the 7-11 age bracket. However, the audience tuning in was significantly older – the show was resoundingly popular with viewers age 16-30.³⁴ They were, of course, alienated by the advertising of toys, foods, and products they would never consider consuming. Producers at Kids! WB considered pulling the plug on the show, but first, like they had with *Pinky and the Brain*, tried shifting the show to prime time hours, which also failed to reach a significant audience.³⁵

Because *Freakazoid!* relies on self-referentiality and intertextuality, its humour is primarily generated by its own position as a Warner Bros. cultural product, making mention of its contemporaries, and its place in television history. Lamé as it is, the running hit-the-Network-Censor-with-an-anvil gag speaks to the history of falling-anvil gags (a staple of old *Looney Tunes*), the debate surrounding prolonged exposure to ‘violent’ cartoons (which began in the early 1960s and continues to this day), and the assumption that children are unable to tell animated television from real life. It is also an indirect reference to the myth of ‘double-coding,’ which portrays general audiences as divisible into distinct and separate categories of Adult and Child. The direct address by

the Network Censor (a dried-up 'old maid' figure with a quavery voice and unshaved legs) that "no one was hurt in the previous scene" is intentionally irrelevant and highly patronizing, implicitly supporting assumptions that children are easily led, and lacking in any higher analytical functions. The Network Censor is speaking to children, supposedly, but is also 'speaking,' in the heteroglossic sense, to the history of the multitude of ways by which children are subordinated, and expected to defer to adult control and judgement.

"Safe, calming, kid-friendly 'Relax-O-Vision'"

"Relax-O-Vision" foregrounds this patronizing attitude towards children as the "lesser" viewer as both comic nuisance and plot device. Whenever Freakazoid is about to battle the villains, who have joined forces to bring him down, there is an abrupt cut to stock footage of 'pleasant' imagery of flowers blowing in the breeze, a busy freeway, fish in a bowl, carnival rides, sunset on a beach, etc. while the musical "Theme from *A Summer Place*" intrudes. These stock images and music all hail from the 1950s, the neo-conservative decade of choice. The images feature with washed-out film stock, 1950s automobiles, modes of clothing, hairstyles, all underscored by the 1959 song. While beyond the scope of both this chapter and this thesis to offer an in-depth history of the 1950s, it is widely acknowledged that it was a time of ambivalent attitudes towards conformity and change, especially in a technological context. "Beneath the plastic, antiseptic, streamlined conformity of the Fifties, there was an unarticulated but widespread sense of dissatisfaction, a realization, though still unformulated, that the status quo was not the best way things should or could be."³⁶ The Relax-O-Vision iconography is absolutely not chosen at random, and serves to underscore the relationship of the script to

history. The 1950s were the first decade to acknowledge and exploit in a marketing context the murky new age of 'teenager,' a prolonged liminal state between child and adult with neither the fond indulgences of the former and the rights and privileges of the latter.³⁷ The reference to *A Summer Place* (1959) is not without meaning – the film revolves around teen romance and adult hypocrisy. The idyllic music is ironic in its original setting as well as in "Relax-O-Vision." Its inoffensive lameness underscores the ersatz nostalgia of the stock footage.

The choice of Ben Stein as the model for the design of and voice for H.A. Futterman, "Professor of Broadcast Standards at Kids! WB" is also significant. Stein's voice is instantly recognizable that of the boring Economics teacher in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986),³⁸ and is a signifier of both boredom and the vast gap between adults and teens, not to mention adults and children. There is also a double, possibly even triple, layer of caricature invoked here – Stein, in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is a caricature of The Boring Academic. Stein, in his actual life, is a former speechwriter for Richard Nixon and a notorious "Hollywood Republican."³⁹ As Futterman, he is both caricature of himself as caricature, and a biting portrait of the protectionist ideology espoused by Minow and Postman. Futterman, like the Network Censor (though they are not in the same episode), is depicted as joyless, and sanctimonious in his attitude towards children. He is completely certain that he knows what is 'best' for them, and takes a self-satisfied pleasure in denying the spectacle of cartoon violence. By the end of the episode, Freakazoid has had enough.

Freakazoid: I've had just about enough of this 'Relax-O-Vision,' buddy!

Futterman: Oh yeah, what are you gonna do about it?

The “Theme from *A Summer Place*” plays at accelerated speed over a cut to the initial footage of fish swimming in a bowl, but the crunch of breaking furniture and Futterman’s cries of “Ow!” and “Hey!” are clearly audible. The ending is in keeping with the visual play established at the beginning – Futterman and Freakazoid are not shown, but imagining the priggish Futterman getting his comeuppance is very, very satisfying.

“Relax-O-Vision” also addresses the myth of double-coding, again indirectly. Farley notes that the division of viewership is a “politically loaded construction, imagin[ing] audiences as polarized, and explains little of the texts themselves.”⁴⁰ As I touched upon briefly, double-coding assumes, among other things, a neatly-drawn and readily discernable line separating adult and child. I am not arguing that audiences are a homogenous mass, nor that everyone will get every joke, merely that double coding only reinforces the subordinate relationship to child to adult. Inherent in double-coding is the assumption that once one has crossed this magical line, one loses all appreciation of slapstick humour. The humour in “Relax-O-Vision” is created by denying the screening of cartoon violence. Double-coding as a method for understanding animation is insultingly patronizing – it denies that children are discerning and perceptive viewers, capable of understanding and appreciating irony. Seiter observes, “the [toy] industry’s characterization of the children’s audience as fickle and discriminating must be taken seriously.”⁴¹

Further, double-coding assumes that form can be divorced from content, which, as my examination of “Relax-O-Vision” demonstrates, is not the case. The mix of live action stock footage and animation *creates* the humour, which is then referred back to *in the dialogue* of the episode. After a cut to a busy freeway, Freakazoid observes “We

must have blown the animation budget for the whole season on that one fight!” Of course, the joke is that no one saw it – it was replaced by stock footage, which the writers use to get around complicated plot points (how *does* Freakazoid defeat the combined villains at the Smithsonian’s Hall of Nasty Objects?), reference the history of censorship and children’s television, mock patronizing attitudes towards children, and get a laugh. “Aieeeeeee!”

Freakazoid! does not depart from the Warner Bros. brand of social commentary through caricature and parody. Where caricature assumes a link with an individual, parody is an intertextual link to another text. As Linda Hutcheon observes, “parody...is imitation with a critical difference, not always at the expense of the parodied text.”⁴² Indeed, in addition to celebrity caricature, the show relies on parody to create humour. *Freakazoid*’s mutable nature ensures that he is able to transform his body to caricature anyone he pleases, female or male. The program itself, at least in the first season, mimics *Freakazoid*’s frenetic and fragmented personality to also showcase other characters and scenarios, most of which are parodies. The most notable of which is the extraordinary *Freakazoid!* episode, “Toby Danger in ‘Doomsday Bet,’” which is a dead-on parody of *Jonny Quest* (1964-1965). Dr. Benton Quest is a research scientist, called upon by the government for secret missions that require his scientific expertise. With him travels his son, the titular Jonny Quest, his magical adopted Indian son, Hadji, and their bodyguard, Race Bannon. They investigate mysteries and battle Quest’s nemesis, Dr. Zin. In the spoof, the Danger family, comprised of Dr. Vernon Danger, his son Toby, his non-magical adopted daughter Sandra, and ‘Dash’ O’Pepper must defeat Dr. Sin, who has stolen Dr. Danger’s “world’s largest semi-conductor” and is rampaging through Las

Vegas. The 'episode' starts with the semi-conductor being stolen by an "intern," the cheesily-disguised Dr. Sin – wearing a silly helmet that shades his features. Of course, Danger's lab is destroyed, and the other doctors page him to come to the rescue. There is a cut to a flying island – the Dangers are arriving at the semi-conductor testing lab. Dr. Danger determines, by glancing over, (accomplished by a pan to the right) that Sin has taken the semi-conductor to the very close city of Las Vegas, which, as the pan reveals, is less than 20 feet away, and already in flames. Dash destroys the semi-conductor (and the entire city of Las Vegas) by throwing a barrel at it. Interestingly, a year or so after the "Toby Danger" parody aired, yet another *Jonny Quest* was launched – *The Real Adventures of Jonny Quest* (1996). I am not suggesting any direct correlation, only that *Freakazoid!*'s writers, given that many of them had worked on *Tiny Toons* and *Animaniacs*, were well-aware of the trend towards recycling old texts and characters in 'new' series.

The nature of parody is, in this instance, two-fold – the series being parodied is a combination of both older series and the newer, which in many respects is much weaker than the original. *Jonny Quest* (1986-1987), while improving on Hanna-Barbera's earlier limited-animation style, watered down the plots and adventures, and drained them of interest. "Toby Danger" captures the quality of the limited-animation, with the heavy black outlines, chiarascuro 'lighting,' and, when Dash fights Dr. Sin on top of the world's largest semi-conductor, only their arms move in a ridiculous up-and-down motion, as their bodies and the background are totally static. The condensed length of "Toby Danger" (only 10 minutes) foregrounds the inanity of the prior *Quest* plots. "Toby Danger" in fact features the voice talents of Scott Menville as Toby Danger, Don

Messick as Dr. Vernon Danger, and Granville Van Dusen as Dash, who provided the respective voices of Jonny Quest, Dr. Benton Quest and Race Bannon, in the 1986-1987 re-visitation of the *Jonny Quest* series.

The (not so) subtle racism inherent in both the original productions is also foregrounded. In the original series, Hadji is depicted, as Other, in that he is marginalized by both his ethnicity and his magical abilities. Though clearly smarter and more useful than Jonny, he most often takes a back seat to his adopted brother's heroics. Furthermore, the villains the extended Quest family encounters are never American. If they are Caucasian, they are more often than not characterized by Eastern European accents. In the parody, At the "Ring-a-ding Bummer" hotel casino, Dash throws a barrel at a group of multi-ethnic gamblers at a blackjack table, shouting "Heads up, you heathen monkeys!" They of course, as does anyone in the originals when something goes horribly awry, respond with a heavily-accented "Aieeeee!" as the barrel comes at them. And of course, Dr. Sin is obviously Asian (and obviously pure evil). Considering that *Freakazoid!* was also broadcast while Time Warner was quietly rounding up and locking away its questionable and racist materials, this parodic foregrounding of racism serves as a reminder that television's history is not entirely lily-white, so to speak. Interestingly, Hadji, Dr. Quest's adopted second son from Calcutta, is replaced by Sandra Danger, who is a conflation of Hadji and Race O'Bannon's daughter Jessie (from the second series). She has no special powers, save that she is more practical and useful than all three of the males combined. When Toby gets himself locked up in the casino jail (for various schemes⁴³ to get into the casino and meet a Keno girl), Sandra frees him first by gambling for his freedom, then, as Dash is trying to bend the bars apart, uses a ring of keys to free

Toby. Subsequently, Dash is nearly drowned by a torrent of water rushing down from a clogged toilet overhead. I contend that Sandra Danger is a parody of the 'token' female character prevalent in the mid-1990s, written in for the sole purpose of having, however inferior she turns out to be, at least one female 'role' model for girl children.⁴⁴

Further instances of caricature and/or parody are frequent in *Freakazoid!*

Armondo Gutierrez, arch-villain in "The Chip, Parts 1 and 2," is based on and voiced by Ricardo Montalban, and the character is suspiciously similar to (i.e. exactly like) Khan Noonien Singh, Montalban's character from *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), right down to the dialogue. When Roddy MacStew asks why Gutierrez won't let Dexter go, he responds with lines from *The Wrath of Khan*.

Gutierrez: He *tasks* me! Around the moons of Veigo, I chuckle at thee. Around the suns of Andromeda I chuckle more at thee. Revenge is a dish best served with pinto beans and muffins! Kirk, old friend, I – oh...! I'm sorry.

In addition to those voluntarily lending their likenesses to *Freakazoid!*, many celebrity impersonations are merely one-offs, that is, *Freakazoid* transforms his body briefly to make a visual reference or complete a pun. This is especially prevalent in "Dexter's Date." Dexter, having finally cornered Steff into accompanying him on a date, must then excuse himself to transform into *Freakazoid* in order to stop The Lobe from stealing all the episodes of every television show from a nearby broadcast station. *Freakzoid* is shocked when he pulls a cable out of the wall to tie up The Lobe, and is unable to sustain a transformation back into Dexter. But, Dexter/*Freakazoid* does not merely shift between his own two bodies – he transforms into celebrity personalities past and present, including Oprah Winfrey, Alan Hale ("Skipper" from *Gilligan's Island*),

Judge Lance Ito (who was presiding over the O.J. Simpson trial at the time), Michael Jackson, Mae West, Barney the Dinosaur, and Louis Armstrong. Though many of these personalities were ubiquitous at the time (Barney the Dinosaur, Oprah) the other, lesser-knowns offer the addictive pleasure of the thrill of recognition when they are finally identified. The same pleasure is found in "Nerdator," in which The Nerdator is rounding up all the world's nerds in order to steal their brainpower. Freakazoid defeats The Nerdator by pointing out that no matter how smart he is, no girl will ever date him. He pulls in Steff from offscreen to illustrate this point.

Steff: Why spoil our special friendship?

The Nerdator is convinced to return the world's nerds and instead abduct "vapid airheads," but no one notices or cares. The thrill in this episode is recognizing Bill Gates, Steven Spielberg, Ross Perot, Bill and Hilary Clinton, etc. as nerds, then finding Brad Pitt, Keanu Reeves, Pamela Anderson, and Kato "I thought I heard a noise" Kaelin portrayed as vapid airheads. The latter provides an especial thrill of recognition, as he was only famous (or infamous, as the case may be) for milking the publicity surrounding the O.J. Simpson trial, in which he was a witness. *Freakazoid!* is full of these kinds of references – even if an episode is not constructed around them, momentary jokes and gags abound. This, again, speaks to the long history of caricature and frenetic celebrity references that made the Warner Bros. name in animation.

In "Freakazoid Is History," Freakazoid must rescue the Airforce One airplane from imminent disaster. However, he is sucked into a honey-roasted-nuts-loving vortex and travels back in time to Hawaii, just before the bombing of Pearl Harbour. Shortly after he realizes where and when he is, the episode takes a detour 'behind-the-scenes,'

with Freakazoid reading a script for *Quantum Freak* that is an explicit parody of *Quantum Leap* (1989-1993), complete with a mock credits sequence for *Quantum Freak*. *Quantum Leap* chronicled the adventures of scientist Sam Beckett (Scott Bakula), who leaped through time into the bodies and lives of others, “putting things right where they once went wrong.” Freakazoid then returns to the task at hand and stops the Japanese from bombing by inspecting them for fruit. One pilot is carrying grapes, so the entire squadron must return to Japan. The title of this episode is significant in that it not only sets up what is going to happen in the episode, but in that it is a handy ‘catch-phrase’ to define Freakazoid’s very nature. Crammed full of all the information on the Internet, which it is my contention that he embodies, then Freakazoid is, literally, history. I could press my argument further towards “*Freakazoid! Is History*,” in that the nature of parody and caricature depends heavily on a working knowledge of what has come before. Indeed, parody is a form of ironic discourse, and, as Hutcheon points out, irony is reminiscent of the way in which laughter and humour build “bridges” and enable intellectual connections.⁴⁵ While double-coding these episodes suggests that the parody and caricature would be the elements most appealing to the adult contingent of *Freakazoid!*’s potential audience, I argue that children are media-savvy – indeed, if they are watching as much ‘adult’ television as Postman and Minow conclude that they do, then how could they possibly fail to recognize contemporary references? The politics inherent in preserving the adult/child hierarchy open up the spaces between such rigidly maintained polarities. Double-coding is merely a means by which to subjugate a body of viewers in the name of preserving social order. *Freakazoid!*’s relationship to history is complicated in that it contains within itself the roots and branchings of all of these

debates, and carries the weight of being a Warner Bros. cultural product in a time when the meaning of such changed profoundly. Those changes and debates are reflected back through the mirror of humour, and it is grossly naïve to assume that only certain members of an audience will receive the ‘intellectual’ content. It is more rewarding to focus on what is happening in the gap between Adult and Child, as there we find Kincaid’s “subversive echo.”

NOTES

¹ Postman, Neil. *The Disappearance of Childhood*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 133.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ Ariès, Phillipe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 109.

⁴ And I mean brief – Disney gets two sentences on page 125, which pits him against Judy Blume, whom Postman demonizes for daring to write about the growing-up process, depicting real-life children's issues with honesty and integrity. According to Postman, "our culture is not big enough for both Walt Disney and Judy Blume. However, I digress.

⁵ Minow, Newton and Craig L. Lamay. *Abandoned in the Wasteland: Children, Television, and the First Amendment*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 3.

⁶ Farley, Rebecca. "From Fred and Wilma to Ren and Stimpy: What Makes a Cartoon 'Prime Time?'" Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, eds. *Prime Time Animation: Television and American Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 151-152.

⁷ Kincaid, James. *Child Loving*, 5.

⁸ See Seiter, Ellen, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* page 30 for an example of an illustrated ad from 1948 that depicts television as a unifying household force. Page 32 features ad copy circa 1966 on "how to get your kid away from TV." These ads are less than 20 years apart, and clearly reflect the roots of this ambivalence towards television.

⁹ Minow, Newton. *Abandoned in the Wasteland*, 8.

¹⁰ Kincaid, James. *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 64.

¹¹ Kline, Stephen. *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing*. (London: Verso, 1993), 19.

¹² Schneider, Cy. *Children's Television: The Art, the Business, and How it Works*. (Chicago: NTC Books. 1987), 2.

¹³ Seiter, Ellen. *Sold Separately*, 9.

¹⁴ Minow, Newton and Craig L. Lamay, *Abandoned in the Wasteland*, 21-22.

¹⁵ Naomi Klein, in *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* differentiates "brand" from "product," in that the product itself is incidental – the corporation itself, its "image" needs to resonate with consumers.

¹⁶ Jenkins, Henry. "Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Myths." *The Children's Culture Reader*. Henry Jenkins, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 14.

¹⁷ Giroux, Henry A. *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 17-21. The fact that this bygone perfect time has never existed does not seem to trouble anyone, neither Disney, who makes billions of dollars from it, nor consumers, who are more than content to have a monolithic corporate entity facilitate their relationship with history.

- ¹⁸ Quoted in Sandler, Kevin S. "Introduction: Looney Tunes and Merry Metonyms." *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*. Kevin S. Sandler, ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 1.
- ¹⁹ Putterman, Barry. "A Short Critical History of Warner Bros. Cartoons." Kevin S. Sandler, ed. *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 30.
- ²⁰ a direct reference to Disney's *Silly Symphonies*.
- ²¹ Putterman, Barry. "A Short Critical History of Warner Bros. Cartoons," 30.
- ²² Ibid., 30.
- ²³ Ibid., 31.
- ²⁴ Schickel, Richard. *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney*. (New York: Avon Books, 1968), 153-159.
- ²⁵ Bradbury, Ray. "How Merry the Melodies, How Looney the Tunes: You Realize This Means War." Steve Schneider. *That's All Folks!: The Art of Looney Tunes*, 10.
- ²⁶ Schickel, Rickard. *The Disney Version*, 33.
- ²⁷ Crafron, Donald. "The View from Termite Terrace: Caricature and Parody in Warner Bros. Animation." Kevin S. Sandler, ed. *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 103.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 105.
- ²⁹ Schneider, Steve. *That's All Folks!: The Art of Warner Bros. Animation*. (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 23.
- ³⁰ Langer, Mark. "Regionalism in Disney Animation: Pink Elephants and Dumbo." *Film History*. Volume 4, 1990), 306.
- ³¹ Sandler, Kevin. "Introduction," 4-5.
- ³² Ibid., 14.
- ³³ Laner, Brian Samken. "The Ever-Lovin' Blue-Eyed Timm!" <http://www.twomorrrows.com/comicology/articles/01timm.html>
- ³⁴ Rogers, Brett. "Freaking Out with Paul Rugg." <http://members.aol.com/baltohoya/rugg.htm>
- ³⁵ Weinman, Jaime J. "Something Old, Nothing New: Freakazoid!" <http://zvbxrpl.blogspot.com/2004/07/freakazoid.html>
- ³⁶ Veith, Errol. *Screening Science: Contexts, Texts and Science in Fifties Science Fiction*. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 78.
- ³⁷ My second chapter, "Zapped to cyberspace," tackles this issue head-on.
- ³⁸ "Bueller? Bueller?...Anyone? Anyone?"
- ³⁹ <http://www.hollywoodinvestigator.com/2003/benstein.htm>
- ⁴⁰ Farley, Rebecca. "From Fred and Wilma to Ren and Stimpy," 147.
- ⁴¹ Seiter, Ellen. *Sold Separately*, 9.
- ⁴² Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of 20th Century Art Forms*. (New York: Methuen, 1985), 6.
- ⁴³ The funniest scheme is Toby dressed as Mr. Peanut, the Planters peanut mascot, complete with monocle.
- ⁴⁴ As Kevin Sandler recounts, Lola "don't call me doll" Bunny in *Space Jam* only exists as a "pseudofeminist" distraction.

⁴⁵ Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 93.

“Zapped to cyberspace” – “Freakazoid!” and the Internet

**“...I prefer to regard transition as a process, a becoming, and
in the case of *rites de passage*, even a transformation...”**

Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*

This chapter is concerned with exploring the space between Adult and Child, as pertaining to the Internet¹ as a new technology integrated into the lives of children and adolescents, and as the means by which Dexter Douglas is transformed into Freakazoid. Using the writings of anthropologist Victor Turner, my objective is to position cyberspace as “liminal;” a place where transformation is possible, and the body in a state of flux. Further, I examine the mutable nature of Freakazoid in terms of Elizabeth Grosz’s analysis of the ‘freak’ body as interstitial; that is, the body outside the human norm as object of fascination and article of power. Finally, furthering ideas discussed in the prior chapter, as well as setting up concepts to be addressed in the subsequent chapter, I address *Freakazoid!* as heteroglossic, especially as pertaining to the decentralized nature of the Internet. This follows logically from the previous chapter on television, as many of the criticisms of this ‘new medium’ are borrowed heavily from those surrounding children and television. If cable television brings adult skeletons out of the closet, then the Internet, where libraries, weblogs and sites devoted to the collection of Beanie Babies rub (uneasy) shoulders with Neo-Nazi hate propaganda, hard-core pornography, and *The Anarchist’s Cookbook*, must be cause for even greater concern. Any ‘schmo’ with a computer and a modem can create a web site on any possible topic, from the banal to the provocative.

To write about the possibilities and the problems which the Web poses for any form of research, it is necessary to cope with its chameleon-like nature....It is at once a newspaper, a bookstore, a library, a museum, a shopping mall and so forth. It can be superficial, profound, entertaining, boring and a tremendous source of information and tool for communication.²

Interestingly, the years of *Freakazoid!*'s production, 1995 to 1997, coincide nicely with the years that household Internet use spiked from 35 million users to 80 million.³ The Internet (and the computer in general) is a locus around which family power is now focused, and children most effectively adapt to the new technology. As Harold Innis points out, most communications innovations destabilize established modes of cultural authority and give power to new institutions.⁴ Prior to the Internet, household authority was embodied by the remote control. Now, the remote control has lost its phallic power,⁵ and the TV set is not the only source of television programming. iFilm's Viral Video⁶ allows the replay of television's best bits, and long-lost television shows can be found (for free) on You Tube and in2tv.⁷ The 'Slivercast'⁸ – a broadcasting phenomenon allowing producers with programming that would never gain huge numbers nationally, to serve special intetest audiences via the Internet. My purpose in highlighting these very recent broadcasting opportunities is to underline how the personal computer and the Internet have shifted the balance of power in the household.

Dialogue on the Internet encompasses anxieties about increased dependence on technology, a further drift from indexical media relationships, and online 'addictions' to chatting, gambling and pornography. Worst of all (it seems), the Internet facilitates increased agency of children, due to their greater facility in adapting to and using the new medium to its full potential. "Burn" a 14-year-old "FreeZoner," tells Donald Tapscott, "I am making my Dad's business' home pages. He knows zippola about HTML. He knows how to go places (on the Net) but that is not hard."⁹ This pits children and adult on opposite sides of the issue, compounded by the fact that adults acknowledge the omniscience of the new media and know that their children will be handicapped if their

computer skills are not cultivated. Simultaneously, they resent how easily their children gain in skill and barely disguise the contempt they feel towards adults' struggle to gain proficiency. "Technical skills are not only seen as a necessary requirement for children's smooth transition into future labour [sic] markets....There is a strong sense in which parents understand access to a home computer to be a prerequisite for academic success in the present (itself also a passport into the future labour market)."¹⁰ Indeed, implicit in the relationship between Freakazoid and the Huntsman, a 'real' adult, is the spectre of obsolescence. Freakazoid has, in effect, 'stolen' the Huntsman's job. After yet another unproductive visit to Lt. King, he asks himself, "I wonder if they hired another superhero behind my back?" Freakazoid, created and empowered by the Internet, has rendered Washington's former superhero bitter, confused, and unemployed. The Huntsman had obtained his powers the 'old-fashioned' way; that is, eating a sack of "magic corn" gratefully provided by a rescued "chunky elf," gaining "strength, and speed, and shiny teeth," reborn into his new identity.¹¹

Within this shifting matrix of power relations, "the prefix cyber seems to be ubiquitous."¹² As a metaphor, cyberspace evokes a place that is not a place, yet still habitable and navigable. The virtual world represents an imaginary domain that actually removes users from "the exigencies of real life."¹³ However, as Holloway and Valentine (rightly) point out, there is a general tendency (especially in the case of minors) for adults to segregate and enforce the separation of virtual or online and Real lives/selves, without taking into account that online interactions take place in real space (i.e. wherever the family computer is located) and in real time. Further, online relationships – both nurtured and failed – have genuine emotional impact in real life, and information collected while

browsing or surfing the Net is added to the user's real-life body of knowledge.¹⁴ In other words, online culture does not exist in a vacuum.

Further, cyberspace functions on both an actual and a symbolic level. The gap between the symbolic Adult and Child reveals the liminal figure of the teenager within. As Victor Turner points out, the liminal, or transitional, state is "an interstructural situation within society's structure of positions."¹⁵ Further,

during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the "passenger") is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state...The arcane knowledge [of the Internet] or '*gnosis*' obtained in the liminal period [in cyberspace] is felt to change the neophyte, impressing him as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state.¹⁶

Freakazoid is "that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both."¹⁷ The so-called magical power of the Internet subverts the symbolic Innocent Child by virtue of the power of knowledge it instills. In "The Chip, Part 1," Roddy MacStew must assist Freakazoid to stop Gutierrez before he executes the flaw in the Pinnacle chip. To do this, he activates the flaw himself, and disappears into cyberspace. He is not seen again in this episode. His next appearance, in "Wrath of Gutierrez," depicts him as unchanged by his trip to cyberspace. Further, in "Mission: Freakazoid!," Roddy zaps himself into the computer of the prison where the Douglas family is being held, and again is unchanged. I contend that he is not affected because he has already completed his transition to adulthood, and it is too late for him to be transformed further.

Gutierrez, however, has a juvenile streak that manifests itself in extreme selfishness (refusing to withdraw the chip from the market; wanting the power of the Internet for its own sake), elaborate revenge schemes ("ooey, gooey worms"), and name-calling ("Weenie!") that positions him as immature, and thus a candidate to be able to

exploit the darker nature of the liminal transformation. In “Wrath of Guitierrez,” he gains access to the Internet from prison, exploits the flaw in the chip, and becomes more powerful than Freakazoid.

Guitierrez: I took the liberty of improving on the flaw that created us both. I am now more powerful than you can possibly imagine.

Freakazoid: Yes, but can you dance?

Guitierrez [performs dance step]: Yes.

Freakazoid: Wow.

Dexter/Freakazoid occupies the gap between the child-adult polarity in that he is explicitly positioned as a teenager (“super-teen extraordinaire”) in the lyrics to the opening theme song. Dexter, as teenage nerd, is uniquely positioned to obtain the arcane knowledge of the Internet, as his literal encounter with cyberspace changes him profoundly. And Freakazoid is in a unique position to interface with political figures and famous persons in both his capacity as superhero, and as ‘actor’ making a show about being a superhero. Dexter is subject to his parents’ rules and regulations, but Freakazoid has the adult responsibility of keeping Washington, D.C. (and, by extension, the world) safe from supervillains.

Because its very nature is heteroglossic,¹⁸ the Internet opens up the realm of interpretation and language. Mikhail Bakhtin defines dialogism as a characteristic of the heteroglossic. Or, “everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole – there is constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others.”¹⁹ All “utterances,” then, are many-voiced. They contain within themselves their past, present and future contexts. It is my contention that Freakazoid embodies the Internet, on several levels. At the level of animated text, the scripts themselves function most often and most successfully as parody, as I have explored in the previous chapter.

This animatedness is exploited in “The Chip, Part 1,” Dexter is confused by his spontaneous and uncontrollable transformations into Freakazoid. Alone in his bathroom, Freakazoid continually “unzips” Dexter’s head to reveal his own underneath.

Dexter: Don’t do that!

Freakazoid [unzipping Dexter’s head]: Don’t do what?

Dexter [zipping his head]: Stop unzipping my head!

Dexter, dancing in agitation, then lifts his shirt, expecting to see the flesh of his abdomen, but instead encounters Freakazoid’s face. Of all the 24 episodes, this one most explicitly depicts not only Dexter and Freakazoid inhabiting the same body; it depicts them speaking to one another. It is the only episode in which Dexter and Freakazoid appear simultaneously – otherwise, Dexter “freaks out”²⁰ and is transformed into his other self. Or Freakazoid’s “Freakalair” and “Freakazone” (where he works and relaxes respectively) are positioned through dialogue as being “inside” Dexter, but Dexter’s body is never seen. Further, if Freakazoid possesses the power of the Internet, then it follows that he embodies the heteroglossic. He mimics, parodies, and impersonates others; all while ostensibly within the confines of his own mutable body. This transformation would be impossible to depict without animation. This speaks, then, to the history of animation, and evokes a faint echo of the early ‘transformation’ films, such as James Stuart Blackton’s *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906). Visual pleasure is inherent in the spectacle of the transformation of each drawn face. As Paul Wells notes, “the creation of ‘impossible’ events becomes, of course, the stock-in-trade of all animated films.”²¹

The intertextuality inherent in a program such as *Freakazoid!* capitalizes on its animatedness, given that the titular character is fragmented and prone to celebrity

impersonations, is exemplary of what Bakhtin means by heteroglossic.²² The writers ‘speak’ to the film and television texts that have gone before, and transform the way in which an audience perceives both the original text and the parody. Gutierrez, voiced by Ricardo Montalban, affects the reading of “The Chip, Parts 1 and 2,” as well as subsequent viewings of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. I challenge anyone to watch the *Freakazoid!* episode, then the film, and have Gutierrez’s assertions that “revenge is a dish best served with pinto beans and muffins”²³ not intrude into the *Star Trek* experience. Further, *Freakazoid!*’s nature, within the animated text, is purely heteroglossic. He speaks with his own voice, as well as mimicking famous personages. His body is simultaneously Dexter’s, his own, and the celebrity impersonation. All of this can be accomplished in split-seconds to create humour. Anything goes, to make the gag work. It can be argued that the gag is also heteroglossic – something as classic as the old man-slips-on-banana-peel gag recontextualizes the banana peel from ‘garbage’ to ‘agent’ of humour. In *Freakazoid!* terms, parody of individuals and texts speaks to the historical Termite Terrace penchant for caricature, and a poke at the ubiquitous nature of Hollywood celebrities and would-be celebrities, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The fact that *Freakazoid* transforms into the superhero-self relates as well to other superhero transformations, such as Superman, Spider-Man, or Batman. The latter’s dour nature is referred to on several occasions in various episodes, most conspicuously in “Dance of Doom.”

Announcer: Only one hero can track down Cave Guy. Only one hero has enough heart to fight this fiend. [zip-pan to silhouette of Batman-like figure restraining a burglar.] That hero is – on another network.²⁴

The most obvious parallel to Freakazoid would, in fact, be Spider-Man.²⁵ Peter Parker is also a teenager, who achieves his super-status by technological means – he is bitten by a “radioactive spider.” However, Freakazoid is a *comedic* super-hero. This is not to assert that there have not been super-hero parodies before, nor that Spider-Man is not, on occasion, funny, but Freakazoid’s schizophrenic personality and ridiculous behaviour (instead of transforming into lightning, Freakazoid most often runs around with his arms over his head, making ‘whooshing’ noises) mock the gravitas of other superhero texts and render them laughable. This is particularly the case with *Freakazoid!*’s relationship to *Batman* and its moody film noir aesthetic, which I will examine further in the next chapter. However, I will point out here that the superhero is also a liminal figure, most notably in that they are simply not like other people, by virtue of their superpowers.

“Check out Dexter Douglas, nerd computer ace”

Similarly, the computer nerd is also a liminal figure, by virtue of his or her technical interests and specialized knowledge. The term ‘nerd’ is most often used to refer to an enthusiast whose interest is regarded as too technical or scientific, and whose social skills are underdeveloped, either as consequence or cause of the ‘misdirected’ enthusiasm. The emphasis is on the problematic nature of too-intimate a relationship with technology. Dexter, for example, is an archetypal teenage computer nerd, and looks younger than sixteen. He is short and a little pudgy, exacerbated by slouching.

Far from winning them the respect of their colleagues, the techno boys’ skills earn them labels such as ‘boffin’ [geek], ‘computer freak’ and ‘nerd’, further compounding their isolation in the classroom.... Here, widely understood ideas about computer ‘nerds’ as socially inadequate, rather unmasculine men informed social attitudes within the school leading to the marginalisation of those boys who had an interest in computing.²⁶

The word 'geek' originates with side-show 'circus geeks' — performers at carnivals who swallow assorted disgusting things such as live animals and bugs. The circus geek was usually a former circus performer that had been injured, and later lost his job. Because of the 'crippledness' of the entertainer, they would not be able to find work and would become homeless and desperate, therefore becoming this circus sideshow just to stay alive.²⁷ And yet, somehow, this original, arguably horrific, meaning was transmuted to, again, refer to someone who enjoys using computers to what most people would consider an excessive degree, thereby becoming nearly synonymous with 'nerd.' Dexter's 'nerdiness' and lack of physical appeal are foregrounded in *Nerdator*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is the Nerdator's dread of being considered 'uncool' that changes his mind about the validity of his plan. However, there is a core of ambivalence in how the nerd is both revered and reviled. This is more clearly delineated when The Nerdator gives Dexter his reasons for kidnapping the world's nerds..

Nerdator: What they lack in physical prowess, they make up in brains. Tell me — who writes all the bestselling books? Nerds. Who makes all the top-grossing movies? Nerds. Who makes computer programs so complex only they can use them? Nerds. And who runs for high public office? No one but nerds.

Dexter: You don't have Newt Gingrich.

Nerdator: He's not a nerd. He's a chubby boy.

As global politics and economics grind to a halt without them, the world's power and influence are explicitly placed in the figure of the nerd. While Dexter and other teenage nerds may not get the dates and respect they wish they had, all they have to do is grow up, and the world will belong to them.

However, 'freak' shares the same sideshow connotations as 'geek,' but without the later association with technology. 'Freak,' while most commonly used as a

perjorative for an individual with a congenital physical abnormality, also refers to those with unusual and hard-to-cultivate talents, such as sword swallowers or contortionists. Its more modern usage is diluted to connote someone with a particularly distinctive personality, but the taint of abnormality remains. Further, the carnival associations evoke a degree of performativity – while ‘nerd’ may be a somewhat involuntary social condition, ‘freak’ is a choice. Elizabeth Grosz points out that “freaks are those human beings who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition.”²⁸ She notes further that what distinguishes freaks from the merely disabled, is that “the freak is an ambiguous being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life.”²⁹ Dexter can only transcend what he perceives as his physical and social (i.e. nerdy) limitations by transforming into Freakazoid, the literal merging of body and technology – he becomes a freak. By choosing to become a superhero, instead of seeking medical attention, Dexter makes an informed decision to choose to stand outside the realm of the ordinary. The freak-body is heteroglossic, in that it refers to both the normal body, and the flawed concept of ‘normal.’ Freak and normal are both performative, though it can certainly be argued the one is more interesting than the other. The freak-body, malleable, mutable, transformed, is a reminder that normal is only an illusion; like ‘power,’ it only exists in relation to deviation. The freak-body stands in opposition to so-called ‘official’ body representations, just as the cartoon-body is positioned against the Real body.

Animation has the capability of rendering the body in a way which further blurs traditional notions of gender, species and indigenous identity...enabling revisionist readings which use the ambivalence and ambiguity of the animated form to support the view that traditional orthodoxies in society itself must be necessarily challenged.³⁰

“Island of Dr. Mystico,” a riff on the execrable 1996 remake of *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, indirectly references the body. Freakazoid, transporting the villains by plane to France, crashes on a tiny island inhabited by an evil scientist and extraordinarily large apes. While timely in its parody, it still takes on the themes of the original film – the ‘man-made freak.’ The “orangu-men” that Dr. Mystico (voiced by Tim Curry) creates are human-animal hybrids. He desires to hybridize Freakazoid, Cave Guy, The Lobe, and Longhorn to his primates, creating super-freaks. What is of especial interest in this case is that they are all *already* freaks. In fact, Mystico is the only fully human villain in the series.³¹ The Lobe might be human, but his enormous, exposed brain could also be indicative of alien-ness. He is never given a back-story, and thus is a figure of constant conjecture. Cobra Queen is the victim of a horrible cosmetics accident – she tries an experimental skin cream left in the sun too long; so wanted by the police was Longhorn, that “he had a doctor turn him into a steer.” They are created by technology, willing or unwilling, much like Freakazoid himself. More importantly, they *choose* their super, and ultimately marginalizing, identities. The Lobe does not view himself as disfigured – his physically massive brain stands in for his heightened intellect. Cobra Queen could have also sought medical attention to normalize her features, but instead she goes with it, so to speak, and assumes the identity of supervillain. Most interesting of all, is Longhorn’s decision to have a doctor turn him into a steer, as he was so wanted by the police. It seems contradictory that someone who is a wanted fugitive from the law would make himself *more* noticeable by being surgically transformed into a human-bull hybrid, but this, in fact, underscores my assertions that freak is both a choice and a performance. Longhorn, a notorious criminal, already on the margins of society, hangs a metaphorical

sign around his neck to proclaim his liminal status. Thus, as cyberspace occupies the murky territory between real and imaginary, so too does Dexter/Freakazoid ride the fine teenaged line between child and adult, and, perhaps more importantly, confuses distinctions between normal and abnormal.

It may certainly be argued that Freakazoid is a kind of cyborg, since his natural, i.e., human, state is certainly augmented by technology, however unwittingly accomplished. Dexter, already ambiguous, moves from human, to data, emerging transformed – a hybrid of biology and technology. What he is, in fact, what Roddy MacStew calls “a freak-a-zoid;” that is, the quasi-human manifestation of an ‘intimate’ interface with technology. These two categories of, shall we say, enhanced human, are not mutually exclusive. Further, anxieties over mergings of the body and technology were, and still are, prevalent. By corollary, and with humour, *Freakazoid!* does shed some light on that anxiety, if only by virtue of the fact that the cyborg, like the figure of the freak, occupies, the grey area between human and not-human.

If, as Foucault has already attested, differentiation exists in binary oppositions, then the transitional state between these two polarities is fraught with both peril and power. The Internet is portrayed ambivalently in that it isolates Dexter from taking part in real life, but instead offers him the opportunity to transcend his marginal social status. It creates Freakazoid, crammed full of all the information on the Internet. The Internet, then, is a force for good, in that it is a valuable research tool and keeps people connected, but is also not-so-good, reflecting adult anxieties about a medium based on the dissemination of information (without censorship) and the creation of shifting identity possibilities. By

virtue of the transformative properties of the space-within-space of cyberspace, Freakazoid embodies the gap between Adult and Child, which visibly undermines the forced enculturation of social hierarchy, underlined by his freak status.

If the Web is a “space where *magic, metaphor and power* converge,”³² then it follows that cyberspace is both a practical and heavily symbolic location. “The magical quality of the World Wide Web lies not only in its complexity but in the conjuring effect of calling a world into existence.”³³ This world, made entirely of code, has no “real” geographical counterpart, no weight, no substance, yet wields tremendous power in that it has displaced “traditional” modes of communication (television, telephone, letter-writing)³⁴ and muddled power relations between children and adults. A significant portion of the allure of the Web can be attributed to its transformative nature. No longer is identity tied to the physical body or even the name one is born with; further, there is no limit on the number of secondary or “virtual” identities that can be constructed. It becomes an elaborate hub³⁵ for the formation of new identities. Cyberspace literally gives Dexter Douglas a second body, name and voice.³⁶ Accepting the responsibility for public safety, Freakazoid is more than simply a figment of Dexter’s imagination. Because Child and Adult are polarities and one distinction cannot exist without the other, the marginalization of the figure of teenager, as well fear of the Internet is, in fact, fear that these boundaries are not concrete – they are symbolic, and ultimately imaginary. As Postman has already indicated, the real fear is that children will gain access to adult secrets – the real secret being that there is no Child, and no Adult.

NOTES

¹ The initial purpose of the Internet was, in fact, military information and research. In the mid-1980s, the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the United States provided funding to increase the number of universities connected to the network, effectively jump-starting the Internet's phenomenal growth.

² Burnett, Robert and P. David Marshall. *Web Theory: An Introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.

³ Tapscott, Donald. *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 22-23.

⁴ Innis, Harold. *The Bias of Communication*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), 111.

⁵ The male 'anatomical affinity' for the remote control I think by now has been well-established.

⁶ www.ifilm.com/viralvideo

⁷ www.television.aol.com/in2tv, www.youtube.com

⁸ Hansell, Saul. www.nytimes.com/2006/03/12/business/yourmoney/12sliver.html

⁹ Tapscott, Donald. *Growing Up Digital*, 42.

¹⁰ Holloway, Sarah L. and Gill Valentine. *Cyberkids: Children in the Information Age*. (London: Routledge Falmer, 2003), 28.

¹¹ See Appendix C, Song Lyrics, for the full account of Marty Feeb's miraculous transformation.

¹² Burnett, Robert and P. David Marshall. *Web Theory*, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ Holloway and Valentine. *Cyberkids*, 10.

¹⁵ Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. (New York: Sage House, 1970), 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-102.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁸ Literally, 'many-voiced.'

¹⁹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 426.

²⁰ The phrase "ohhhh, freak out!" is a direct allusion to the lyrics of "Le Freak" (1978) by disco-group Chic.

²¹ Wells, Paul. *Understanding Animation*. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 19.

²² I am confident that were he still with us, Bakhtin would agree. I also think he would have profoundly enjoyed *Freakazoid!*.

²³ Gutierrez's dialogue is quoted in full in Chapter Two.

²⁴ At the time, *Batman: The Animated Series* was broadcast on Fox Kids.

²⁵ Both Superman and Batman are already adults when they gain their powers. Further, Superman isn't even human – merely humanoid, since he is from another planet (Krypton). Bruce Wayne, a.k.a. Batman, isn't even super – he is just filthy rich, which enables him to buy neat-o gadgets that compensate for his ordinary human-ness.

²⁶ Holloway and Valentine. *Cyberkids*, 52.

²⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geek>

²⁸ Grosz, Elizabeth. "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit." Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 57.

²⁹ Ibid., 57.

³⁰ Wells, Paul. *Understanding Animation*, 188.

³¹ Waylon Jeppers is most likely human, but he's such a weird brown colour!

³² Herman, Andrew and Thomas Swiss. "Introduction," 1. Emphasis in original.

³³ Shields, Rob. "Hypertext Links: The Ethic of the Index and Its Space-Time Effects." Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss, eds. *The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 155.

³⁴ Tapscott, Donald. *Growing Up Digital*, 29.

³⁵ Burnett and Marshall, "Introduction," 78-80.

³⁶ See Appendix A, Characters. Note that Dexter and Freakazoid are performed by two different voice actors.

“You really have no life, do you?” – *Freakazoid!* and Friends, er, Fans

“Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons.”

Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*

This chapter concerns itself with one character out of the many ‘supporting’ *Freakazoid!* characters. Fanboy embodies a larger, if largely oppressed, cultural movement. This is integral to the further understanding of the Adult/Child polarities, and how they are subverted when approached from the other side. My prior chapters have been motivated primarily from the children’s perspective, and that of the liminal teenager. Thus, flipping my examination around provides fertile ground upon which for me to conclude my analysis of *Freakazoid!*. There are very fine lines between high and low (a.k.a. ‘popular’) culture, just as there are between the imposed states of adulthood and childhood, and which is why the distinctions between them are so rigid and rigorously policed. Fans, adult consumers of devalued cultural materials,¹ subvert expectations of taste, and further muddle the boundaries between levels of culture.

As evidenced in Rebecca Farley’s criticisms of the double-coding model, adults are aligned (symbolically) with good taste – that is, witty repartee, ironic discourse, and dry humour. Children are living examples of bad taste – fart jokes, loud noises, and garish colours. Children’s humour represents excess in all its forms, and these things offend the tender sensibilities of good taste. Using Henry Jenkins’ arguments in *Textual Poachers*, an examination of how fan culture functions, this chapter will reconcile and integrate the arguments I have made about social hierarchy, nostalgia, and power in the previous chapters. Jenkins tackles popular (and perpetuated) misconceptions about fans and fan culture that have their roots in what Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural capital. He

notes that capital is not only economic – it is “the set of actually usable resources and powers.”² Mark Langer observes further that “[c]apital can be either economic, cultural or social;”³ artists may have little (or no) economic capital, but this is compensated by having more cultural capital. Of course, with their interests falling well outside the realm of the acceptable, fans are in a distinct and often marginalized position, struggling against the boundaries of good taste. I would like to make it very clear that while fans are infantilized and depicted as childlike, I am not suggesting that fan and child are entirely synonymous, though there is enough of an overlap to indicate that this could be done.

As Jenkins points out, taste is an integral method by which class, identity and social distinction are formed. Good taste/aesthetic merit is enforced by groups of higher social standing (i.e. adults), and reinforced by cultural institutions and espoused by those eager to belong to said group – those who wield power, in the form of cultural capital. As I have noted, bad taste is that which is culturally unacceptable, and is often accused of “harmful social effects or negative influences on consumers.”⁴ Distinctions between tastes must be vigilantly policed and strictly enforced to prevent the collapse of social hierarchy. Fans and fan culture blur these distinctions, treating devalued texts “as if they merited the same attention and appreciation as canonical texts.”⁵ However, how does a text become canonical? The answer is readily evident; its ‘cause’ is espoused by those in positions of cultural (and oftentimes economic) capital. Perhaps a better question would be, is the designation ‘canonical’ a fixed one? Or, in other words, can a text become canonical, from being previously devalued? Jenkins cites the example of Shakespeare’s plays – in his own time, they were popular entertainment, attended by all social classes. However, 400 years later, they are confined to the echelons of high culture. This

transition from popular to high culture was facilitated by the study of Shakespeare in schools and universities – rendering living theatre an academic exercise. Children, of course, must be protected from the “‘corrupting’ influence of undesirable cultural materials,”⁶ regardless of how much they would rather be protected from studying Shakespeare.

The fan stereotype plays on and projects anxieties about the solidity of cultural hierarchy. Underneath the rhetoric, the boundary between class, age, and taste is only so much smoke and mirrors. This helps to account for why, no matter how specious the reasoning, the double-coding model of children’s text analysis is so persistent – it confirms and underlines deeply entrenched beliefs about social hierarchy and cultural capital. “Fans’ resistance to the cultural hierarchy goes beyond simply the inappropriateness of their textual selections, and often cuts to the logic by which fans make sense of cultural experiences.”⁷ The archetypal figure of the Fan, not unlike the Child, must be portrayed as Other to preserve precious illusions about the nature of social conventions and hierarchies. As Jenkins notes, fans are depicted as

- a) brainless consumers who will buy anything associated with the program or its cast;
- b) devot[ing] their lives to the cultivation of worthless knowledge;
- c) plac[ing] inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material;
- d) social misfits who have become so obsessed with the show that it forecloses other types of social experience;
- e) feminized and/or desexualized through intimate engagement with mass culture;
- f) infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature;
- g) unable to separate fantasy from reality.⁸

The question remains, however, and it is Herbert Gans who asks, “is popular culture something that is created in New York and Hollywood by skilled profit-seeking enterprises...or are these enterprises themselves often unwitting agents of culture...?”⁹

While beyond the scope of this thesis to comprehensively answer these questions, if there even is a conclusive answer, what makes *Freakazoid!* so interesting is that it explores, albeit subtly, the relationship between aggressive merchandising and fandom. What makes the character of Fanboy especially relevant in this context is how the Internet is immediately integrated into his fan experiences, and that the technology itself is depicted as an agent of culture.

“I’m Fanboy! Even my folks call me that!”

Freakazoid! addresses and, I must admit, reinforces fan stereotypes in the recurring character of Fanboy. He is first introduced in “And Fanboy Is His Name,” in a comic book shop, where he sees George Takei (Sulu from *Star Trek*). He does a series of Tex Avery-style ‘wild takes;’ his eyes bug out, his tongue hangs out of his mouth, etc. Takei is so eager to get away from Fanboy that he is nearly hit by three cars while making his escape. Fanboy, distraught, is distracted by a “Special News Bulletin” that *Freakazoid* is without a sidekick, as Expendable Lad has been “severely milked” while assisting *Freakazoid* defeat The Milk Man.¹⁰ *Freakazoid* is now without a sidekick, and Fanboy believes he would be an ideal replacement. After various failed schemes, *Freakazoid* is only able to get rid of him by pawning him off on Mark Hamill (Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*).

Fanboy is exemplary of the negative characteristics that Jenkins pinpoints as the fan stereotype. Fanboy is unable, or unwilling, to differentiate Takei and Hamill from Sulu or Luke Skywalker. He conflates actor and role, and will address each actor with both names. When he first sees George Takei in the comic shop, he addresses him by his real name, but following him down the street, Fanboy announces, “Sulu! I’m walking

with Sulu!” to the disconcerted passers-by. Subsequently, Freakazoid plays on this conflation by pointing Fanboy’s head in the direction of Mark Hamill signing autographs, whispering “why settle for being a mere sidekick, when Jedi Knighthood awaits?” Fanboy’s pupils dilate, and he moves towards Hamill as though being pulled by a magnetic power.

Fanboy: Yes, the force is strong in this one! Luke, join me!

Mark Hamill: Come again?

Fanboy: Join me, and together we can end this destructive conflict and rule the galaxy as Fanboy and son!

Hamill: No! I’ll never join you!

Fanboy: It is your destiny.

Hamill: Noooooooooooooo!¹¹

This exchange is significant in that it depicts Fanboy as a lunatic, but it depends on the extra-textual knowledge of Hamill’s role as Luke Skywalker; that the dialogue is lifted from the second *Star Wars* film, and that *Star Wars* fans are particularly vocal and enthusiastic. Indeed, Lucasfilm has made millions of dollars from merchandising and novel tie-ins to the *Star Wars* series franchise. The interaction between Fanboy and Hamill is ironically double-edged – Fanboy is marginalized, because he is depicted stereotypically, but the same brush, so to speak, tars those viewers who get the extra-textual references.

Fanboy is also socially immature; he does not respect boundaries between himself and others, especially his idols. He refuses to take “no” for an answer in dealing with Takei, Freakazoid, and Mark Hamill. It is his contention that being someone’s “biggest fan” (literally and figuratively) places him in a privileged position to utterly ignore social niceties. Fanboy’s devotion to cultivating worthless knowledge is what inspires him to assume that he is entitled to being selected as Freakazoid’s next sidekick. He

strives to make real his interaction with the text. I use the term “real” in this context to signify Fanboy’s desire to affect his favourite program. This episode fuses the real of Freakazoid fighting crime with the text of the animated television program *about* Freakazoid fighting crime. In the world of *Freakazoid!*, the relations between these two spheres are exaggerated for comic potential. As I have argued previously, *Freakazoid!* capitalizes on its animatedness to call attention to topical matters through humour.

Indeed, what inspires Freakazoid to panic when contemplating what having Fanboy as a sidekick would actually mean is the thought of Fanboy alienating Freakazoid’s female admirers. Fanboy’s age is ambiguous – he could be anywhere from twelve to his mid 30s – but his costume of t-shirt, underpants and blanket tied around his neck is infantilizing, not to mention aesthetically offputting. Fanboy is morbidly obese, and in subsequent appearances, carries around a pizza. Fanboy’s prime motivation in attempting to become Freakazoid’s sidekick is presumably sexual, as in handling “the overflow babes,” but he is hopelessly out-of-tune with his own stylistic limitations. When Freakazoid envisions himself and Fanboy at a disco (oddly enough, the disco is only attended by women), Fanboy is wearing a 1970s-style blue tuxedo, and is comically unable to dance. The female disco attendees run screaming in horror. Freakazoid cannot allow this to happen. Freakazoid’s masculine super-identity cannot be compromised by a close association with the desexualized Fanboy.

The negative stereotype embodied by Fanboy on one hand serves to uphold and further entrench fan stereotypes, but on the other, undermines them, given the parodic nature of the program. The key to understanding these brief minutes of animated comedy is knowing that boundaries and distinctions between high and low culture are traversed

with ease by fans, and the evident espousal of stereotype in this instance only reveals how rickety the stereotype is. There is a certain amount of hypocrisy inherent in the depiction of Fanboy. The stereotype exists to provide the pleasure of distancing 'us' from 'them.' That is, it distinguishes between 'those other, crazy fans' and those of us who merely enjoy a particular program. This underscores taste hierarchies, but also raises important questions about the relationship between broadcasters, merchandisers, fans, and children, which is the battleground where the lines between cultures are drawn. Phrased differently, what is the difference, then, between fans and consumers, especially when advertisers appeal to children in order to foster life-long loyalty?

"How toyetic can you get?"

There is a paradox contained within the relationships between children/merchandise and fan/program. Rhetoric surrounding children's desires for toys and junk food bear a suspicious resemblance to criticisms of fans and fan culture. Ellen Seiter points out that "two important reservations have been raised regarding the hedonism explanation for consumer activity: it has usually been used to explain the consumption of stigmatized and relatively powerless social groups and it relies on an implicit, ultimately untenable distinction between luxuries and necessities."¹² Further, children are characterized as pleasure-seekers and indiscriminate consumers, sorely lacking in the self-restraint prized by adults. A comparison of Seiter's observations with Jenkins' list of negative fan stereotypes reveals a similar language: "brainless consumers;" "infantile;" "immature." Implicit in both of these negative portrayals is, again, the assumption that there is a concrete and readily enforceable hierarchy of goods and tastes, with marshmallows and cartoons on one side and Shakespeare and caviar on

the other. However, this is hardly news, and I have covered it already. What is of interest to me, is the paradox of fans being portrayed as childish in their desires, when children have already been described as savvy and discriminating viewers. Cy Schneider, a children's marketing executive, notes that children are difficult to persuade, and will not watch something simply because it is placed in front of them. "In reality, children are intelligent, discriminating, and skeptical. Despite their lack of experience, they are not easily fooled."¹³ Though Schneider can be considered self-serving, the fact remains that there is a definite disparity between Schneider's assessment of children, and those of other, perhaps more conservative, media critics. What happens to adults, that they have such a need to both disavow and gaze with nostalgia on their own childhoods past?

The answer comes partly from Jenkins' recounting of a study he and Lynn Spiegel conducted of 'thirtysomethings,' recalling their memories of the live-action *Batman* television series of the 1960s.

Remembering *Batman* evoked images of a personal past and also of the intertextual network of 1960s popular culture...centered on moments when they resisted adult authority and asserted their right to their own cultural choices...Yet remembering *Batman* also evoked a more reactionary response – an attempt to *police contemporary children's culture and to regulate popular pleasures*.¹⁴

It seems, then, that the duty (and newfound pleasure) of the Adult is to adopt and internalize the hierarchy of taste, and enforce it. These individuals, as children, were once avid consumers of what is arguably the campiest manifestation of *Batman*, remembered it with nostalgia for their childhood enjoyment, and chagrin, when acknowledging its violation of taste standards. Their remembrances of *Batman* are ambivalent in that the show's subversive elements are simultaneously acknowledged, celebrated, and eschewed. When considering what they would allow their *own* children

to watch, they oscillate between adult and child points of view, “at once condemning, at once embracing, the social structure that regulates childhood...memory works to maintain the ideological construction of adult authority over children.”¹⁵ Thus, the care and maintenance of Childhood seems to be somewhat of a paradox – the Child must not be tainted by adult materials and attitudes, but, also must be protected from failing to complete the growing-up process. To never start, or, like the fan, appear to be stuck half-way through, is yet another reminder of the illusory nature of the alleged start and finish points.

These observations on *Batman* add to my analysis of *Freakazoid*. The program is not without its self-consciously campy moments, especially when incorporating 1950s stock footage, or featuring fake commercial advertising. As I have argued, *Freakazoid!*, as a comedic super-hero, points out the contradictions inherent in the superhero persona, especially in the context of fan culture. The comic book, source of the modern superhero archetype (in the tights-and-cape sense), is a marginalized and misunderstood form of literature. The comics subculture is as renowned as that of *Star Trek* (in all its incarnations) for its body of fans. Certainly, a clearer understanding of both *Freakazoid* the character, and *Freakazoid!* the show depends a great deal on the conventions of the superhero genre, and how they, like fan stereotypes, are both subverted and upheld to create humour. This section of the chapter will answer how the character and the program function in terms of the comic book subculture.

As I have just noted, there are many references to the various incarnations of *Batman* in *Freakazoid!*. *Batman*, in this instance, is an interesting text because of both its ‘dark’ and ‘light’ interpretations. *Batman: The Animated Series* is true to the *film noir*

overtones of the original comics, as first seen in *Detective Comics* 27, published in 1939, as well as the graphic novels *The Dark Knight Returns* (published in 1986) and *Arkham Asylum* (published in 1989). Conversely, the television series, *Batman* (1966-1968) is considered the epitome of campy ridiculousness. Thus, Freakazoid (as a superhero) is positioned on a continuum somewhere between *Batman* and *Batman: The Animated Series*. The former is, as I have mentioned, notorious for its lighthearted treatment of struggles between good and evil. The intercuts of “Pow!” and “Sock!” evoke the comic book, but not necessarily the *Batman* style, and evades the issue of billionaire Bruce Wayne’s questionable vigilante behaviour. *Batman: The Animated Series* foregrounds this conundrum through its *noir* stylings and the ambiguity inherent in the personas of the villains, but I am somewhat ahead of myself. First, who, or what, is a superhero?

The superhero genre’s conventions date all the way back to Superman, the first of his kind. Much of what would become integral to the genre was established in the very first Superman publication in 1938, *Action Comics* 1. These conventions do vary, even within the Superman texts, but can be condensed into four major paradigms: lost parents, the Man/God, justice, and the secret identity. Lost parents refers to the separation, estrangement, or, like Batman, the death of the natural parents. Either way, the parental relationship is a negative one, and underscores the paradox inherent in the superhero’s relationship to the law and authority figures. The Man/God paradigm refers to the superhero’s special nature which establishes her/him, from infancy or childhood, as superior to the ordinary citizen, and thus in a liminal and solitary position. The superhero’s relationship to justice, embodied by ‘those in need,’ is often beyond the scope of the law. The law, of course, can be portrayed either positively or negatively, but

is never as effective as the superhero. The superhero often holds the mechanics of justice in contempt for being too slow, but still works in league with the police for the same goals. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the secret identity is the superhero's price for superpowers. Ostensibly to ensure the safety of family or friends, the superhero "pays for his great powers by the observance of the taboo of secrecy."¹⁶ This keeps the superhero in a liminal position, unable to form bonds or achieve genuine intimacy with others and society at large.¹⁷

Freakazoid, more or less, fulfils these generic expectations, but, because he is a teenager he is spared a good deal of the existential torment that plagues Bruce Wayne as Batman. In fact, Dexter/Freakazoid's relationship with the rest of the Douglas family is nearly normal, for a teenager. His parents drive him to his date with Steff ("Dexter's Date"), they take road trips together ("Hot Rods From Heck"), and Mom and Dad buy Dexter the fateful Pinnacle chip for Christmas ("The Chip, Part 1"). In "Mission: Freakazoid," this positive relationship with his family leads to the revealing of his secret identity, which really isn't altogether that secret, anyway.

Freakazoid: Okay, we're going in to rescue the, uh, Huntoon family.

Cosgrove: I thought we were going to rescue *your* family.

Freakazoid: Cosgrove!

Cosgrove: It's not like everybody doesn't know you're really Dexter Douglas.

Steff: Freakazoid is Dexter Douglas? Dexter "Creepy" Douglas?

Freakazoid: Cosgrove! My secret identity was supposed to be *secret*! But you just blurted it out in front of everyone!

Cosgrove: Sorry, kid – I thought Steff knew. After all, she is your girlfriend.

Steff: Too much! I've got to call Val and Jill.

Professor Jones: So you're Dexter Douglas. Hm, interesting.

What should be a momentous revelation at the time of Freakazoid's choosing, implying a great faith in his confidante, becomes merely Cosgrove's *faux pas*, and thus, anticlimatic. Shortly thereafter, the plane is followed by "enemy aircraft," and the entire incident is forgotten, never to be referred to again. Further, the question of identity and protection is also nullified, as all the villains know that Steff is Freakazoid's girlfriend, anyway. In many episodes, she is kidnapped by the villain in order to lure Freakazoid to his doom. In the episode within "Relax-O-Vision," The Lobe kidnaps her on behalf of all the villains. In "Candle Jack," she is a camp counsellor, and is rounded up with the rest of her charges when they utter the fateful words, "Candle Jack." In "The Lobe," she is hypnotized into playing nurse at The Lobe's staging of Freakazoid's lobotomy. In "Statuesque," she is turned to stone by Waylon Jeepers' "Medusa watch." The secret identity doesn't protect anyone but Freakazoid, and only ostensibly from the ridicule that comes with being Dexter Duncan.

Freakazoid's relationship to the law, in the form of Sgt. Mike Cosgrove, is worth examining. In "The Chip, Part 2," Cosgrove turns up at the end to take Gutierrez into custody, and chats with Freakazoid, asking him what he'll do with his superpowers. Freakazoid is lured into serving justice and punishing wrong-doers by Cosgrove's observation that it will make him very popular with the ladies. As teenager, questions of right and wrong are trumped by hormones. Further, Cosgrove is not threatened by Freakazoid's superpowers, and is more than happy to point Freakazoid in the direction of any crimes, with a pit stop to visit the Hall of Spackle, Acton Honey Harvest Festival, Make Mine Mint, the Public Mud Baths, Spumoni Land, get a snow cone, or watch a bear

ride a motorcycle. There is never any sense of real urgency to apprehend villains, and the ersatz suspense creates humour.

Freakazoid is no Man/God – in fact, he often borders on incompetent himself. He either waits for Cosgrove to point out that a crime has been committed, and suggest, after a detour to one of the above zany locations, that it should be looked into; or, he puzzles it out for himself, scratching his head like an idiot and talking to himself out loud. Further, Freakazoid cannot fly. The best he can do is to transform into lightning to travel quickly, but he almost never does this. Instead he runs while making “whooshing” noises. In “Hot Rods From Heck,” featuring the Hall of Freakmobiles, only one Freakmobile of the twenty or so depicted actually works. Later in the episode, Freakazoid forgets that the Freakmobile does not have underwater capabilities. In “Dance of Doom,” instead of using his super-strength to overpower Cave Guy, he does Jerry Lewis impersonations until Cave Guy is utterly befuddled, then hits him with a basketball net and hands him over to the police. In “Sewer or Later,” Freakazoid refuses to go into the sewers after Cobra Queen, on the grounds that “it smells like poo gas.” However, Freakazoid’s most hilarious and ridiculous defeat is the one that he himself contributes to – in “Wrath of Gutierrez,” he reveals his secret weakness to Gutierrez and helps build his own cage. Lastly, Freakazoid gives in to his baser instincts. In “Dance of Doom,” he is more than happy to kiss a girl who had previously rejected him as Dexter.

Freakazoid: That was shallow, cheap and based solely on hormones.
Works for me!

Freakazoid the character, and *Freakazoid!* the show, then, both work to subvert the superhero genre for comic effect. While the superhero conventions are, nowadays, widely understood and accepted, the subtle nod to fandom must not go unremarked-upon.

The animated superhero television program unites three media: comics, cartoons, and television. All of these are, or have been, considered marginal by those who work to keep hierarchies of taste well and functioning; policing the divide between high and low culture, and between Adult and Child.

In the popular imagination, fans are children who have never grown up. They are most commonly portrayed as having never passed beyond a certain stage of development, and are thus doomed to live in their parents' basements forever. The interest vested in keeping fans 'in their place,' as it were, is considerable, which begs the never-asked question, what does it mean if fans have *chosen* to stand outside the hierarchy of taste? "Too often, entertainment 'provides alternatives to capitalism which will be provided by capitalism.'"¹⁸ The figure of the fan is similar to the teenager in this respect – they both possess enormous subversive potential. I use the term 'potential' because dominant ideologies have a vested interest in maintaining rigid distinctions between polarities to maintain the illusion of their own power, and, as we have seen with the negative fan stereotype, must negate the Other. However, within this positioning, I have identified a conundrum: how does a mass-society, dependent on mass-media and mass-manufacturing, reconcile the fact that its economy rests on mass-consumption, with consumer habits indoctrinated into the very young? How does lifelong consumer loyalty differ from fandom? In plainer words, there is a paradox inherent in the push-and-pull between restraint, identified with the Adult, and indiscriminating consumption, viewed as a characteristic of the Child. Further, in the symbolic figure of the Child, there is again a division between children as innocent angels, free from any taint of corruption, be it excessive or sexual in nature. The other, catered to by marketers, is of a gleeful, tasteless

savage, consuming junk food and junk culture as fast as it can be produced, then begging her or his parents for more. To attempt to answer this, I must momentarily turn my attention from Fanboy, the locus around which my argument is formed, and examine how *Freakazoid!* addresses the relationship between animation and advertisers.

“Hot Rods from Heck” is the first episode to feature The Freakmobile. What makes this episode remarkable is its nod to the long history of product-based animation and toy tie-ins. While on a car trip with his family, Dexter must transform into Freakazoid to prevent Longhorn from “holding Nashville for ransom” with a Titan II missile until he is offered a recording contract. To accomplish this, Freakazoid must go to the Hall of Freakmobiles and select one. He turns to the camera and asks, “how toyetic can you get?” There is a freeze-frame while Joe the Announcer reads a dictionary definition in a mock-patronizing tone of voice.

Joe: ‘Toyetic’ is a word created by marketing people. It means an object or device featured in a cartoon that could easily become a mass-produced toy.

At the end of the episode, Freakazoid is heartily congratulated by the marketing department. Before turning away to count a stack of money, he shrugs and half-heartedly apologizes, “What can I say? It’s part of my contract.” I will take a moment to point out the irony of *Freakazoid!*’s mockery of toy advertisements, given that it’s own ad time was sold to marketers looking to sell to children ages two to eleven. This, among other things, may have contributed to the show’s cancellation, though there was an attempt in the second season to cross over into prime time. *Freakazoid!*’s viewers were, in actuality, a good bit older than that – it was very popular with the 16-30 crowd.¹⁹ While a proponent of double-coding would see this as proof that children don’t get dialogue-

based humour not involving bodily functions, a more plausible explanation is that in addition to a multitude of production difficulties, the voice of Freakazoid, Paul Rugg, left the show to pursue other interests.²⁰ The Freakmobile turns up again in “And Fanboy Is His Name,” this time with a “boot” attachment and a “chubby little Fanboy” figurine for kicking – “It’s the toy *we* think *you* should buy!” Clearly, the references to the relentless assault of advertising is recognizable to children and non-children alike. Further, the fake commercial is a kind of nudge-wink to the so-called ‘hip’ viewer, who is aware of the simultaneous espousal and rejection of consumer principles. I am not implying that the writers are engaging in an active act of subversion, but I maintain, as *Freakazoid!* is concerned with exposing the machinations of television production, that the fake commercials cannot be dismissed as meaningless beyond their function of being amusing. The fact that Fanboy is also immortalized as a figurine also contributes to this understanding. Is, then, Fanboy’s interaction with the text of *Freakazoid!* real, in the sense that he is now a component of it? Or, in a less convoluted sense, is Fanboy’s relationship to *Freakazoid/Freakazoid!* more valid because of the tangible nature of the Freakmobile and its chubby little Fanboy for kicking? This, to me, would seem the crux of the relationship between television program and its accompanying merchandise. The intangible cultural product, i.e. the show is mediated in real life by the tangible cultural product, i.e. the toy. Whether the Freakmobile with boot attachment is collected or played with, it serves a talismanic purpose in relation to the program itself: it’s a bit like owning a piece of *Freakazoid*; or, it would be, if the Freakmobile were actually manufactured and marketed. This relationship is doubly abstract, given that *Freakazoid!* is an animated program, and there is no real actor, acting as agent for the character. One

might argue that the voice actor could stand in in this fashion. However, this only works in the cases of Armondo Gutierrez (Ricardo Montalban) and H.A. Futterman (Ben Stein), as well as Takei and Hamill in the Fanboy episode, as they are either playing themselves, or the characters are based on their physical likeness.

In this respect, the relationship then becomes heteroglossic, in the sense that Bakhtin, among others, such as Roland Barthes,²¹ rejects concepts of 'original authorship,' favouring the notion that each text contains and confronts the history of other, prior authorships. "Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life."²² As I have argued in my television chapter, the layers of relationship surrounding Gutierrez as animated villain versus Ricardo Montalban as voice versus his parody of himself as Khan interact to provide deeper understanding of the parody at work, and to create humour. Similarly, the multi-authored nature of superhero comics is also heteroglossic, and contributes to understanding the relationship of the fan to the text, the text to the merchandise, the merchandise to the fan, and the fan to her or his own fanfiction texts. Applying the heteroglossic to the complex and complicated relationships between children/merchandise and fan/merchandise exposes the symbolic relationship between the intangible and the tangible. Further, *Freakazoid!*'s animatedness foregrounds this relationship, as "animation is defined by the way that it uses the hypothetical and propositional in its interrogation of social reference points."²³ The trick, then, is to strike a balance between being an avid consumer of television and related goods, without being too avid, as this violates the restraint and good taste that are hallmarks of adulthood. Caricaturing the lurid 'come-ons' of children's advertising ("it's the toy we think *you* should buy!") calls attention to, although without commenting

directly on, the paradox of consumption/restraint contained within the capitalist, consumer society.

"I was talking to Harlan, on the Internet...."

The Internet functions as a nexus for these relationships between fans and the in/tangible. It serves as a means by which fans can reach out to other fans, and as a distribution network for fan fiction. It is not my intent to evaluate the writing itself, merely to point out that this unauthorized (by the studio or network) production aspect of the fan/program relationship is often the most problematized. Instead of, or in conjunction with the (authorized) purchase of tie-in merchandise fans generate their own scripts and stories, using well-known television characters. This is what Jenkins means by "textual poaching," and is also where fans' activities are potentially their most subversive. Interestingly enough, there are very few *Freakazoid!* collector's items around – especially when compared to those from *Animaniacs*, most notably the Burger King kids' meal tie-ins. I speculate that this could be due to the wider distribution of *Animaniacs*, as it was broadcast on cable network affiliates, where *Freakazoid!* was only shown on Kids! WB at the time. (Regardless, merchandise, especially rare stuff, was a hot commodity, back in the day.) Bill Mikulak chronicles the lawsuit between Time Warner and Anthony Hartman, who maintained a fan fiction site that problematized representations of the *Tiny Toon Adventures* characters – they were placed in sexual and semi-sexual situations by fan writers. "According to Warner's lawyers, a number of these fans are pirates, guilty of violating intellectual property laws with respect to copyright, trademark, and unfair competition."²⁴ The fans, however, responded that they were merely picking up on and writing about subtexts that they felt were already

suggested in the original texts. It is of little relevance to this particular thesis to argue whether or not fans are right or wrong in their interpretations of the characters' sexuality, or, whether they are, in fact, violating copyright in posting their observations in fictional form online. I, like Henry Jenkins, am more interested in the connection of the fan to the original, authorized text, and the relationship of both to the unauthorized text.

Umberto Eco wonders, "what are the requirements for transforming a book or movie into a cult object? The work must be loved, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world."²⁵ Interaction with this level of intensity will oftentimes lead fans to create new texts and stories, featuring the characters of the favoured program. While *Freakazoid!* does not explicitly deal with the existence of these extratextual texts, I argue that the figure of Fanboy raises the issue by connotation. Especially in the age of the Internet, references to fandom bring with them the spectre of fan-fiction, or, at the very least, what I would like to refer to as 'the enthusiast's web page.' (Googling *Freakazoid!* revealed, in addition to cartoon or television program databases, a high number of still-active fan sites, many of which have not been updated since 1999, and many others which are still circulating online petitions for Warner Bros. to release *Freakazoid!* on DVD.²⁶) On some strange, metaphoric level (and here I recall my assertion that cyberspace does indeed have transformative properties), fans are able to concretize their love of the program by creating stories or webpages that assert their fandom. This begs the question: so what's the big problem?

Fan sites and fan fiction, to a certain extent, subvert concepts of 'intellectual property.' Time Warner and other huge conglomerates depend on the single, focused,

and controllable interpretation of their cultural materials. Theirs is the only Real (or, authorized) manifestation of the program in question. This of course is the alternative to Bakhtin's heteroglossic view of language and cultural materials – that a single, unified interpretation is not only possible, but deemed mandatory by the culture-producing institution. While elements of sexuality may exist in the *Tiny Toons* characters, calling attention to it is to be considered anathema. Perhaps I overstate my case, but, what the figure of Fanboy does is serve as a reminder of the existence of unofficial interpretations of texts. In "Limbo Lock-up," Freakazoid is sentenced to 30 days in the county jail or 30 minutes of listening to Fanboy as punishment for being "too idiotic." The cut to Fanboy on the other side of the courtroom depicts him in costume – in his underpants with a blanket around his neck, carrying his ubiquitous pizza.

Fanboy: Wow, Freakazoid. Cool! I was just talking to Harlan on the Internet, and I told him that I hadn't seen a good cyberspace scene like that one since *Tron*. Which is *not* the film that broke the bank at Disney in 1983, as *some* believe. No – *Tron* came out in '82, two years after Disney's *The Black Hole*, which was Movieland's equivalent to the Hindenburg – what a disaster! And the robots – they made R2-D2 look like Laurence Olivier!

Freakazoid: Lock me up and throw away the key!

[Freakazoid is dragged off and settled into his cell.]

Fanboy: So anyway, back to 1983 at Disney. Their big film that bombed in 1983 wasn't *Tron*. No – it was *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, which is actually pretty fun, but it comes across as too soft, and it lost a *fortune*! Anyway, that brought about the arrival of Eisner and Katzenberg, and slowly...

I quote this exchange in full for two reasons: 1) because it showcases Fanboy's accrual of detailed trivia; and 2) it airs a bit of Disney's dirty laundry. Further, the exchange explicitly depicts Fanboy as part of an on-line fan community (well, there's two of them, at least), which serves to foreground the Internet as a means of fan communication. This bit also underlines Fanboy's adherence to negative fan stereotype, but more importantly,

his discussion of Disney's 1980s woes is both a subtle jab from Warner Bros. at its main competitor, and, more significantly reveals how fans are oftentimes privy to information and materials that have been forcibly forgotten, and in this respect calls attention to the dubious power of fans and fandom.

While I am certainly not arguing that fans have the power to bring down the system, I will assert that their symbolic function, the one that requires they be depicted in the most negative, non-adult terms possible, is that their very existence opens up the possibility that hegemonic culture and culture-producers are not entirely omnipotent, nor invulnerable to alternative interpretations of the culture they produce. Fans' disregard for the conventions of intellectual property, reveal the gaps between rungs on the ladder of good taste. Their generation of their own texts inspired by mass-produced culture subverts, in a symbolic sense, notions of creativity. And before these writings are dismissed on the basis of quality, Jenkins reminds us that "fans as a group cannot be dismissed as intellectually inferior; they are often highly educated, articulate people who come from the middle classes."²⁷ Further, their insistence on the validity of their own interpretations is a direct challenge to institutions whose bread-and-butter comes from pushing a singular, unified interpretation of their cultural products – 'cartoons don't mean anything, they're just for kids.' Fans and fan culture, with their strains of heteroglossia, stand as an "open challenge"²⁸ to the alleged 'natural' nature of dominant ideologies that govern taste and power. This is not so much a mere violation of copyright, but the assertion that a so-called 'official' and monolithic interpretation of cultural materials is ultimately meaningless.

NOTES

¹ This can be defined as anything from comic books, to the various *Star Trek* incarnations, to animated children's television....

² Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 115-119.

³ Langer, Mark. "Animatophilia, Cultural Production and Corporate Interests: The Case of 'Ren and Stimpy.'" (*Film History*, Volume 5, 1993), 126.

⁴ Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16. The history of the demonization of the comic book is one such example; indeed, Fredrick Wertham and others accuse the comic book of everything from increased school truancy to 'heavier' crimes such as drug use and murder.

⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Gans, Herbert. *Popular Culture and High Culture*. (New York: Basic Books, 1974), viii.

¹⁰ Expendable Lad and The Milk Man are only ever depicted in this episode, for a total of about three seconds. Expendable Lad serves only as a catalyst for Fanboy's ambitions.

¹¹ This dialogue is taken verbatim from the pivotal scene in *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) when Darth Vader reveals to Luke Skywalker that he is his father, and invites him to join the Dark Side.

¹² Seiter, Ellen. *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 40.

¹³ Schneider, Cy. *Children's Television: The Art, the Business, and How it Works*. (Chicago: NTC Books, 1987), 2.

¹⁴ Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers*, 35. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Spiegel, Lynn and Henry Jenkins. "Same Bat Channel, Different Bat Times: Mass Culture and Popular Memory." William Urrichio and Roberta Pearson, eds. *The Many Faces of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 140.

¹⁶ Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*. (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1992), 14.

¹⁷ Ibid., 12-15.

¹⁸ Seiter, Ellen. *Sold Separately*, 11.

¹⁹ Weinman, Jaime J. "Something Old, Nothing New: Freakazoid!" <http://zvbxrpl.blogspot.com/2004/07/freakazoid.html>

²⁰ Rogers, Brett. "Freaking Out with Paul Rugg." <http://members.aol.com/baltohoya/rugg.htm>

²¹ Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*. Stephen Heath, ed. New York: Hill, 1977.

²² Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 293.

²³ Wells, Paul. *Animation and America*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 14.

²⁴ Mikulak, Bill. "Fans versus Time Warner: Who Owns Looney Tunes?" Kevin S. Sandler, ed. *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 193.

²⁵ Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality*. (London: Picador, 1986), 197.

²⁶ I would like to acknowledge, here, the fine work of the Digital Archive Project, a collective which bootlegs onto DVD series that have not been 'officially' released by distributors. Without them, I would have had no primary texts to work from. My original wish for my thesis was to analyze *Animaniacs*, but was not able to gain access to the source materials. Ironically, as I complete this chapter, the first season of *Animaniacs* has now been officially released on DVD. I will shortly reward myself for all my hard work by buying a copy.

²⁷ Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers*, 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

"That's it from the Lawn Gnomes" – A Conclusion, of Sorts

"Power must be analysed as something which circulates..."

Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures"

As I noted in my Introduction, the medium of animation itself has subversive properties, given that it has the potential to undermine laws of physics and gravity. Comedy also shares these subversive tendencies, as it is very difficult to take social hierarchy and boundaries of good taste seriously when laughing one's pants off. It is not my contention that the writers and animators of *Freakazoid!* had a specific mission to bring down society – it is, still, the cultural product of a major studio, dependent on contented advertisers for revenue. By examining the program in the context of both its 'animatedness' and the scripts themselves, I was able to identify the undercurrents of subversion and destabilization that run through the program. Dividing them into 'sectors,' it was possible to examine how they build upon each other.

Because animation, television, and children's culture are marginalized mediums, they often slip through the cracks of wider media discourses, relegated to their own little ghettos for discussion. As I have argued, the merging of animation and children's broadcasting recontextualized the Golden Age cartoons, and endless repetition imprinted them firmly into the memory of pop culture. These old-school cartoons were (and still are) on the front lines in the debates surrounding the effects of prolonged exposure to violence, and whether animation can truly be dismissed as a 'harmless medium.'

Freakazoid! plays with, and thus calls attention to, the incongruencies contained within the anti-cartoon, anti-TV rhetoric. This can be interpreted as a direct act of subversion, but only in the sense that all comedy is subversive – it points out the ridiculousness of the illusion of civilization and social hierarchy. And yet, I am keenly aware that mass-media

cultural products operate within that same system. One cannot bite the hand that feeds, but one can nibble it a little.

My introductory chapter provided a brief overview of animation history, outlining how it came to be so closely entwined with children's programming. Further, I reviewed the ranges of literature and sources that were to be the foundations of my analyses of *Freakazoid!*. I demonstrated that espousals of protectionist rhetoric (Postman, Minow, Kline, Kapur, etc.) are only concerned with children and children's culture in the symbolic sense – that is, how can they be used to serve the interests of ersatz nostalgia and conservative politics. They take very seriously the fixed oppositions of Adult and Child, as it is the foundation upon which their arguments rest. If The Child is but a blank slate, then anything may be written upon it. The contrast in the methodology of Jenkins, Seiter, Cy Schneider, and Holloway and Valentine is far more active – they draw supportable conclusions from the empirical evidence offered from interacting with actual children. I rehash this literature survey only as a reminder that the central thesis of my thesis, if you will, is that by examining the gaps and overlaps of the symbolic polarities of Adult and Child, it is possible to clarify truths from assumptions regarding these two states of being that *Freakazoid!* uses as grist for its comedy mill.

These same arguments are reframed in my chapter on *Freakazoid!* and its place in television history. Using the decline in exhibition and production of animated short films for cinematic distribution as my starting point, I outlined how these cinematic shorts found themselves first on television, then on television's borderlands of the 'Saturday Morning Ghetto.' This transition to a state of marginalization is the direct result of the assumptions inherent in double-coding about the (alleged) nature of children and adults.

All children are portrayed as indiscriminating viewers, unable to comprehend satire, irony, or double entendre. This directly countermands both Ellen Seiter's and Cy Schneider's observations about the savvy nature of the child viewer in a marketing context. Conversely, all adults are depicted as urbane and sophisticated, eschewing shoddy drawings and slapstick humour. This myth of double-coding is hauled out of the metaphorical mothballs to examine nearly every animated text. While animation's cachet has improved somewhat of late, this fruitless methodology consistently undermines its relevance by insisting that form and content can be divorced and examined separately. Indeed, my study of "Relax-O-Vision," inspired by Rebecca Farley's arguments, proves that they are indivisible. This works to create humour that can be appreciated by any variety of audience. Further, the double-coding argument has its roots in protectionist rhetoric – assertions that children and adults have vastly disparate tastes, as written in stone, are particularly specious, as concepts of children and childhood, as we currently understand them, have only been with us for 200 years. The "Relax-O-Vision" case study furthers the argument I set out in my Introduction – that by examining how the double-coding argument *doesn't* work, the field is opened up to a wider field of discussions and examinations of animated texts that aren't nearly so problematic.

The third chapter of my thesis looks at how in-between, liminal spaces are given physical form, embodied by Freakazoid. Cyberspace plays a key symbolic and transformative role, and the figure of the teenager corresponds with cyberspace. In other words, cyberspace, as I have argued, exists between real and symbolic spaces. The teenager exists between Adult and Child, undermining the symbolic function of both, as it introduces a previously unaccounted-for addition to the purported polarities. Further,

the Internet has reconfigured household power, offering the kind of agency to children that keeps Neil Postman awake at night, in a cold sweat. The *possibility* that the patriarchal nuclear family can be undermined is central to criticisms of the Internet. Traditional, procreative concepts of 'body' are thrown out the window, as it were, when examining the teenaged body. Via its merger with cyberspace, it becomes Other – neither fully human nor fully data. Freakazoid's mutable super-nature is problematized when physically located in a teenage body, which should still be under parental, Adult control. Freakazoid's mutable, hybrid nature thus subverts concepts of normal and abnormal, as it is the Adult who symbolically polices these boundaries. Abnormal, then, falls within the tenets of bad taste, as does the freak body.

Taste distinctions and marginal fan cultures provide the basis for my fourth and final chapter. Again, I assert that the figure of the fan contains subversive potential, as fans choose, in an educated and willing fashion, to stand outside the boundaries of good taste. This choice exposes the frailty of taste distinctions – they are encultured by those with the economic capital to enforce taste hierarchies. Consumers of superhero comics are certainly not members of this exalted group, nor are consumers of children's animated television. Ironically, the superhero, in comics, functions as an agent of hegemony, however much protectionist rhetoric blames comic books for drug use and murder. Of course, the paradox of a mass consumer society attempting to police boundaries segregating good taste and restraint from bad taste and excess seems amusingly ludicrous, which further underlines how these hierarchical distinctions are simply not able to hold water. Again, I am not asserting that watching *Freakazoid!* will change the world – only that, in the hip Warner Bros. tradition, topical, real-world, current issues are

used as materials for scripts. As a fan of the show, it has been my privilege and my pleasure to examine the subversive motifs. "I'm not one of those fans" – but I could be. Fanboy and fan stereotype subvert expectations of taste – he should 'know better.' Fanboy's ambiguous age only foregrounds this assumption, as attempting to determine how old he is only serves to more clearly delineate how age functions as a stratifying agent. Coupled with the early indoctrination of children to both television programming and advertising, it is very difficult, as Seiter maintains, to navigate outside the consumer realm. Fans, of course, with their "indiscriminate" habits and "mindless" consumption of show-related merchandise, call into question whether it is even possible to eschew consumer society at all, and that the so-called restraint exhibited by adults is again, only illusory; the privileging of one kind of consumption over another.

There are gaps in my examination of *Freakazoid!*. I would like to think I am generously allowing room for other *Freakazoid!* fans to conduct their own scholarly investigations, but the truth of the matter is that a full-scale empirical study of the animation industry 1995-1997 was simply not to my taste. Further, I have skirted issues of gender representation, or lack thereof, in *Freakazoid!*, as the show has very few female characters. And, due to the unavailability of primary sources when I started my research, I was not able to expand this thesis to accommodate an analysis of and comparison to *Animaniacs*. As I conclude my arguments, I look picking up my long-awaited DVD copy, as I promised myself in the previous chapter.

That's all, folks.

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APPENDIX A

Episodes

Season One

Episode 1

(Air Date 9 September 1995)

Five Day Forecast

Freakazoid describes a series of oncoming plagues and disasters which turns into a weather report.

Dance of Doom

Cave Guy takes students attending a dance at Harry Conick Jr. High School hostage. This happens to be Dexter's high school, so he "freaks out" into Freakazoid and annoys Cave Guy with Jerry Lewis impersonations before defeating him by hitting him in the face with a basketball net.

Hand Man

This episode of "The Sidekick Chronicles" sees Freakazoid teaming up with his right hand, which has a face drawn on it. After punching The Lobe in the face, "Handman" marries "Handgirl," which is also Freakazoid's left hand.

Episode 2

(Air Date 16 September 1995)

Candle Jack

Freakazoid visits Steff at the camp where she is a counsellor. The children tell scary stories around the campfire, and afterwards, in their cabins, discuss a scary boogeyman called "Candle Jack." Of course, his name is spoken several times, and he comes to collect all the kids. Freakazoid defeats him by luring him with a freshly-baked pie into a cage.

Toby Danger in Doomsday Bet

A parody of *Jonny Quest*. The Danger family must stop Dr. Sin from destroying Las Vegas with the world's largest semi-conductor.

The Lobe

The Lobe has kidnapped Freakazoid and is about to open up his cranium to perform a lobotomy. However, Freakazoid's unconscious body is a decoy, and when The Lobe opens his skull, his brain is actually a ticking bomb.

Episode 3

(Air Date 23 September 1995)

Mo-Ron

An mind-bogglingly stupid and morbidly obese alien comes to Washington D.C. with a "message for all mankind," if he could only remember it. Turns out that a giant meteor is coming to destroy the city, but it takes the entire episode for him to figure this out.

The Sewer Rescue (featuring Lord Bravery)

Lord Bravery's first attempt at a superhero rescue goes very badly. He refuses to go into a sewer to fetch someone who has fallen in and broken his leg. He gets a rope, but is then pulled into the sewer. Both he and the fellow in the sewer begin calling for Superman.

The Big Question

Another alien spacecraft lands in Washington D.C. to ask the name of Barbie's little sister. The answer is "Skipper."

Legends Who Lunch

Freakazoid acts as waiter in a diner. The elderly and curmudgeonly superheroes he serves discuss other, more famous superheroes.

Episode 4

(Air Date 30 September 1995)

And Fanboy Is His Name

Fanboy decides he would be Freakazoid's ideal replacement sidekick. Freakazoid cannot get rid of him until he passes him off onto Mark Hamill at a comic book convention. The first appearance of the Freakalair and Ingmar the Mute Butler.

Lawn Gnomes Chapter IV: Fun in the Sun

In 985 C.E., a group of mischevious gnomes are cursed by a wizard to become stone statues by day. To break the curse, they must help mankind without gain or profit, but so far they haven't mended their ways at all.

Freak's French Lesson

Freakazoid teaches viewers how to say "Who cut the cheese?" in French.

Episode 5

(Air Date 7 October 1995)

Foamy the Freakadog

Freakazoid rescues a truckload of dogs on its way to the SPCA. Freakazoid adopts the rabid one to be his new sidekick, and calls him "Foamy." Foamy does nothing but attack Freakazoid, or urinate on fire hydrants.

Office Visit (featuring Lord Bravery)

Lord Bravery pays a visit to the Hall of Records to register his name as a trademark, only to find that someone is already using it.

Ode to Leonard Nimoy

Fanboy recites the following poem to Leonard Nimoy, hoping to get his autograph.

Ode to Leonard Nimoy

Leonard Nimoy, Leonard Nimoy.
 Dear Mr. Spock, oh golly gee boy.
 It sure would make me smile and laugh
 If I could get your autograph.
 If I don't get it, I'll be blue,
 But then I know what I will do.
 I'll call you up on the telephone,
 And bother you while you're at home.
 You hang up, the line goes dead.
 But then a new idea pops in my head.
 I'll visit you right where you live.
 I'll ring the doorbell and ask if you'll give
 That autograph I've been waiting for.
 You give it to me, and so much more.
 Oh thank you, thank you, Mr. Spock.
 Now please call Bones? I need a doc."

Emergency Broadcast System

Freakazoid makes the Emergency Broadcast noise until he runs out of air.

Conversational Norwegian

Freakazoid teaches viewers how to say "Where is the narwhal?" and "happy little narwhal" in Norwegian.

Episode 6

(Air Date 4 November 1995)

The Chip, Part 1

Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), hosts the story of Freakazoid's origins. At Apex Microchip, Armondo Gutierrez and Roddy MacStew debate whether or not to recall the flawed Pinnacle microchip. Roddy is thrown out a window. Dexter receives the chip as a Christmas gift, installs it in his hard drive, and is transformed into the Freakazoid. Roddy finds the confused Dexter at home, and they are both kidnapped by Gutierrez.

Episode 7**(Air Date 11 November 1995)****The Chip, Part 2**

Gutierrez wants to know how Dexter activated the flaw. Roddy gives him the code, but Gutierrez plans to kill them, anyway. Dexter panics, "freaking out," and transforms into Freakazoid. He and Roddy escape, and defeat Gutierrez. Freakazoid is congratulated by Cosgrove, who suggests that Freakazoid put his powers to good use and become a superhero. He agrees when Cosgrove mentions it will make him popular with the ladies.

Freakazoid is History

Freakazoid must stop the Airforce One airplane from crashing into the ocean. Following this, he is sucked into a vortex and back in time, to Pearl Harbour. He sends the Japanese bombers back to Japan by conducting a fruit inspection, and changes history forever.

Episode 8**(Air Date 18 November 1995)****Hot Rods From Heck**

The Douglas family, on the way to visit Grandpa, is run off the road by remote-control cars. Dexter transforms into Freakazoid to stop Longhorn from holding Nashville for ransom with a purloined Titan II missile. He accomplishes this by leading Longhorn to Wrigley Stadium for the seventh-inning stretch. While Longhorn is singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," Freakazoid binds him with rope.

A Time for Evil (featuring The Huntsman)

The Huntsman visits Lt. King at the precinct, and is baffled as to why he has no crime to fight. He decides to visit his brother, instead.

Episode 9**(Air Date 25 November 1995)****Relax-O-Vision**

While helping Freakazoid run a kissing booth for charity, Steff is kidnapped by The Lobe. All of the villains gang up on Freakazoid at the Smithsonian Hall of Nasty Objects, but scenes of Freakazoid fighting the villains are cut out and replaced with stock footage of so-called "relaxing" imagery, as to not upset the kids at home.

Fatman and Boy Blubber

The overweight duo defend a fat kid named Louis from a pair of playground bullies. Fatman then fights with Louis over a sticky bun.

Limbo Lock-up

Freakazoid is apprehended by the Idiotic Police and sentenced to 30 days in jail or 30 minutes of listening to Fanboy. Freakazoid chooses 30 days in jail, but this does not deter Fanboy from finishing his monologue on Disney.

Terror Palace (featuring The Huntsman)

The Huntsman is summoned accidentally by a rookie playing with "The Horn of Urgency." So The Huntsman pays a visit to the all-night aquarium, instead.

Episode 10

(Air Date 16 December 1995)

In Arms Way

Freakazoid, while Christmas shopping, encounters Arms Akimbo, a male model-turned-racketeer. Akimbo is out and about selling "Oops Insurance" to small business owners. The two fight in a department store before the police intervene.

The Cloud

High in the Swiss Alps, The Lobe's most dastardly plan yet is to transform people who venture inside a mysterious cloud into clown zombies. Freakazoid convinces The Lobe that his plan is the most ridiculous plan he has ever heard of, and The Lobe runs off in tears.

Episode 11

(Air Date 31 December 1995)

Next Time, Phone Ahead

The writers decide to end the episode early and show some *Animaniacs* re-runs, but Steven Spielberg instead concocts a story in which Mo-Ron (whose name has inexplicably changed to Bo-Ron) from Episode Three becomes Dexter's pet.

Nerdator

The world's nerds keep disappearing! Nerdator is kidnapping nerds to drain their brainpower, but Freakazoid convinces him that the negative social side effects of being a super-nerd just aren't worth it.

Episode 12

(Air Date 10 February 1996)

House of Freakazoid

Lonny Talbot, werewolf, pays a visit to Dexter, hoping that his hairy curse can be removed. After sending him into cyberspace, Freakazoid shaves the werewolf bald, and pronounces him cured.

Sewer or Later

Freakazoid must grudgingly go down into the sewers to stop Cobra Queen from having her giant snakes steal jewelry and housewares. He tricks the snakes into attacking each other by luring them with a yummy chocolate mouse.

Episode 13

(Air Date 17 February 1996)

The Wrath of Gutierrez

While in prison, Gutierrez gains access to the Internet and activates the flawed Pinnacle chip. He sabotages Freakazoid's energy field, and traps him in the Internet. Freakazoid escapes, and kicks Gutierrez off a ledge. He then attends a screening of *Congo* (1995) with Roddy and Cosgrove.

Season Two**Episode 14**

(Air Date 7 September 1996)

Dexter's Date

Dexter finally gets Steff to accompany him to Washington Gardens. Meanwhile, The Lobe has taken over the TV station next door. When Freakazoid intervenes, he is electrocuted, and is unable to permanently change back into Dexter. The Lobe refuses to help until Freakazoid chases him around the restaurant.

Episode 15

(Air Date 14 September 1996)

The Freakazoid

On his birthday, Freakazoid cannot accept gifts, he can only grant everyone's requests -- it's in the superhero code book! While he is mowing lawns and visiting Steven Spielberg, The Lobe and the other villains engage in a massive crime spree.

Episode 16

(Air Date 28 September 1996)

Mission: Freakazoid

The Douglas family is being held in Chesky Baresh prison in Bukanova as hostages, until the U.S. government releases two Bukanovans. Freakazoid and his "crack team of experts," Cosgrove, Steff, and Professor Jones, have to break into the prison to rescue the Douglasses and a mime.

Episode 17**(Air Date 2 November 1996)****Virtual Freak**

Freakazoid and Cosgrove test a virtual reality helmet that traps them in the game. The Lobe, in the shopping mall to buy a giant hat, capitalizes on their absence to go on a crime spree. Steff rescues Freak and Cosgrove, but accidentally frees a digital pterodactyl. Mayhem ensues.

Episode 18**(Air Date 9 November 1996)****Hero Boy**

Gutierrez returns! He makes a clone of Freakazoid, which he sends on a crime spree. However, Cosgrove discovers the clone's identity when he asks it to attend the Yakov Smirnoff Film Festival and the clone refuses.

Episode 19**(Air Date 16 November 1996)****A Matter of Love**

Freakazoid is edged out of Cosgrove's affections when Cosgrove begins dating Mary Beth, the cosmetics magnate. Fortunately, she is a green, fire-breathing monster, and after they defeat her, Cosgrove and Freakazoid resume their friendship.

Episode 20**(Air Date 29 November 1996)****Statuesque**

Waylon Jeppers finally perfects the Medusa Watch. He summons Vorn the Unspeakable to keep Freakazoid busy while he goes around turning people into stone, Steff included.

Episode 21**(Air Date 7 February 1997)****Island of Dr. Mystico**

Freakazoid, transporting the villains to France, crash lands his airplane on a mysterious island. The island's owner is determined to merge Freakazoid and the villains with orangutangs, creating super-monsters to do his bidding.

Episode 22**(Air Date 14 February 1997)****Two Against Freak**

The "Real Life Police" crew follow Cosgrove and Freakazoid around while they fight crime. In the meantime, Cave Guy and Cobra Queen perform a jewel heist, which means that Freakazoid has to go back in the sewers.

Episode 23 (on Cartoon Network)**(Air Date 31 May 1997)****Freak-a-Panel**

Looking for Cave Guy, Freakazoid gets stuck at a sci-fi convention. Freakazoid is then forced to sit on a Kids! WB panel and answer questions about the show

Tomb of Invisibo

An evil, invisible Egyptian wizard is awakened and gets up to all kinds of mischief. Freakazoid must come up with a way to fight a villain he can't see.

Episode 24 (on Cartoon Network)**(Air Date 1 June 1997)****Normadeus**

The Lobe kidnaps master carpenter Norm Abrams to build a giant wooden horn that will emit a sound that will cancel out Freakazoid's sonic frequency. He invites all the villains to a party, and raffles off a tickets. The raffle winner gets to blow the horn that will destroy Freakazoid.

APPENDIX B

Characters

The Douglas Family

Debby “Mom” Douglas (Tress MacNeille)

A red-haired, spaced-out Donna Reed-type prone to blurting out inappropriately blunt comments.

Douglas “Dad” Douglas (John P. McCann)

An ineffective *Father Knows Best* dad, with grey hair and green cardigan. When vexed, he makes empty threats.

Duncan Douglas (Googy Gress)

A bullying meathead obsessed with lifting weights and beating on Duncan.

Dexter Douglas (David Kaufman)

Archetypal computer nerd, with a secret identity.

Allies

Sergeant Mike Cosgrove (Ed Asner)

A brusque, heavy-set, soft-hearted cop. He is Freakazoid’s best friend, and instigates many side-trips and diversions just as Freakazoid has decided to take action against the villains.

Roddy MacStew (Craig Ferguson)

An ill-tempered Scotsman, formerly employed by Apex Microchips. He becomes Freakazoid’s mentor. Provides plot exposition when required.

Steff (Tracy Rowe)

Freakazoid’s perky blonde girlfriend. Full name: Stephanie.

Ingmar

Freakazoid’s mute butler. A reference to Alfred from *Batman*, he maintains the Freakalair. He quits to become a rodeo clown.

Professor Jones (Johnathan Harris)

Ingmar’s replacement. He is snooty and easily frightened. Harris recreates his character of Dr. Zachary Smith from *Lost in Space* (1965-1968).

Foamy the Freak-a-dog

A rabid dog whom Freakazoid rescues from the Animal Control van.

Enemies

The Lobe (David Warner)

A super-genius whose head is a giant pink brain. No information on The Lobe's background is ever revealed.

Cave Guy (Jeff Bennett)

A brutish blue Neanderthal with a posh upper-crust accent and a subscription to *The New Yorker*. His real name is Royce Mumphries.

Cobra Queen (Tress MacNeille)

Formerly Audrey Manatee from Skokie, Illinois. She became a cobra-woman after using an experimental cosmetics cream left too long in the sun.

Longhorn (Maurice LaMarche)

Formerly Jubal Nixon, a petty thief from Odessa, Texas. He was so wanted by the police that he underwent plastic surgery to become a steer. Voice reminiscent of Johnny Cash.

Armando Gutierrez (Ricardo Montalban)

CEO of Apex Microchips, the company who manufactured the flawed Pinnacle chip responsible for the transformation of Dexter Douglas into Freakazoid.

Candle Jack (Jeff Bennett)

A spooky, supernatural, scarecrow-like villain who abducts anyone who speaks his name aloud. He speaks in a whisper, and has a secret weakness for pumpkin pie.

Waylon Jeepers (voice actor not listed in credits)

A creepy little man who created the Medusa Watch, which turns people into stone, or, beavers into gold.

Invisibo (voice actor not listed in credits)

An invisible, snarky Pharaoh. The staff he carries is his only visible part.

Arms Akimbo (voice actor not listed in credits)

A former teen model turned neighbourhood extortionist whose arms are frozen into a "jaunty" pose.

Mary Beth (voice actor not listed in credits)

A reference to the Mary Kay cosmetics empire. She is Cosgrove's former girlfriend, who is actually a monster in disguise.

Other characters

Mo-Ron/Bo-Ron (Stan Freberg)

An overweight, monstrously stupid space alien who turns up in one episode with the name "Mo-Ron," and another as "Bo-Ron."

Fanboy (Stephen Furst)

An obese, acne-ridden "fan" stereotype. He obsesses about comic books, movies, and television shows. Dreams of being Freakazoid's sidekick.

Deadpan (voice actor not listed in credits)

A plain, blank-faced woman with a monotonous voice. Once tried to take over Washington D.C. by impersonating Freakazoid.

Lord Bravery (voice actor not listed in credits)

A *Monty-Python*-esque would-be superhero. As he is snooty, cynical, and utterly unwilling to do any superheroics, he gets little respect or recognition.

The Huntsman (voice actor not listed in credits)

If Charlton Heston were Robin Hood. The Huntsman is unaware that he has been replaced by Freakazoid, and cannot understand why there is no crime for him to fight.

Lawn Gnomes (voice actors not listed in credits)

A group of four mischievous, unrepentant, nuisance gnomes that were cursed to become stone statues by day. They revert to their mobile forms at night, with the opportunity to mend their ways, but have yet to do so.

APPENDIX C
Song Lyrics

Freakazoid Theme Song (Opening Credits)

Super-teen extraordinarire
Freakazoid! Freakazoid!
Runs around in underwear
Freakazoid! Freakazoid!

Rescues Washington D.C.
Freakazoid! Freakazoid!
Unless something better's on TV
Freakazoid! Freakazoid!

His brain's overloading
It has a chocolate coating
Textbook case for Sigmund Freud
Freakazoid! Freakazoid!

Check out Dexter Douglas
Nerd computer ace
Went surfin' on the Internet
And was zapped to cyberspace

He turned into the Freakazoid
Strong and super-quick
He drives the villains crazy
'Cause he's a lunatic!

His home base is the Freakalair
Freakazoid! Fricassee!
Floyd the barber cuts his hair
Freakazoid! Chimpanzee!

Rides around in the Freakmobile
Freakazoid! Freak-a-zoo! (alternate: Free kazoo!)
Hopes to make a movie deal
Freak-a me! Frea-ka you!

He's here to save the nation
So stay tuned to this station
If not, we'll be unemployed
Freakazoid! Freakazoid!
Freeeeekaaaazoid!!

The Huntsman Theme

Hunt, hunt, hunt
 He's the Huntsman
 "Into action!" is his cry
 From the forest to the city
 He will be there in a jiffy
 To sock evil in the eye

Marty Feeb was a poor hunter
 Hungry without dough
 'Til the day he saved a chunky elf
 From being eaten by a crow

The elf rewarded Marty Feeb
 With a magic sack of corn
 He gained strength and speed and shiny teeth
 And as the Huntsman was reborn

Hunt, hunt, hunt
 He's the Huntsman
 He'll whip the pants off the bad guys
 If there's an emergency
 Sound the Horn of Urgency
 And summon the Huntsman
 "Into action!" is his cry.
 HUUUUUUUNNNNNNTTTT!

Lord Bravery Theme

He feels no pain
 He can fly quite fast
 In feats of strength
 He is unsurpassed
 His grip is firm
 Never quavery
 Britannia's superhero
 He's Lord Bravery
 Lord Bravery!
 Lord Bravery!
 Lord Braaaavvvveeeerrrryyyyy!