
Setting a fantastical yet critical tone for their book, Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh frame the typical relationship between researchers and their child subjects as a fairy tale. In their portrayal, the researchers gallop in on strong steeds to rescue the innocent children who are victims of popular culture. They employ the dramatic nature of the genre to problematize the notion that children are in need of such salvation. Ironically, the authors themselves proceed by conducting a similar, albeit less problematic, rescue mission as they embark on a quest to obliterate traditional, homogenized concepts of passive childhood and save popular culture from the academic trash heap. While this secondary intention underscores their writing, Mitchell & Reid-Walsh’s primary interest is in the adaptation and development of methodologies for the study of children’s popular culture, a site they believe is an entry point into the study of childhood itself. Through their focus, the authors move beyond writing a standard methodology guide, becoming advocates, storytellers, and at times research subjects in the process.

Although the topics of both childhood and popular culture are expansive, Mitchell & Reid-Walsh narrow the field of study by approaching the subject matter from various conceptions of space. They employ the concept physically and metaphorically, framing each chapter by a particular space: political, memory, visual, physical, virtual, and historical. Each space/chapter not only covers different objects of study (movies, toys, bedrooms, etcetera), but different methodologies and bodies of literature as well. Some sections cover expected fare, such as Fiske’s work on active viewers of popular culture and Buckingham’s “situated audience.” The authors also incorporate a wide variety of at times unexpected bodies of work, including research on bedroom culture, art installations, and memory work. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh contextualize their work in chapter 1, “Political Spaces.” They consider the various investments of those who study children’s popular culture (toy manufacturers, toy collectors, and researchers often studying their own children), reflect on the issues that arise regarding the adult/child research dynamic, and map out children’s popular culture as a space of resistance that is often overlooked. In doing so, they establish the marginalized state of their subject matter and make a case for incorporating children as experts of their popular culture. In addition, they problematize the personal nature of such work, focusing on the inclination to react emotionally rather than analytically to work on children and popular culture.

After exposing this problem, Mitchell & Reid-Walsh suggest methodologies for incorporating personal experiences and memories into this work, while maintaining a more analytical approach. Chapter 2, “Memory Spaces,” shifts the emphasis from the memory itself to questions of how things are remembered and why it is that these are the moments recalled. Providing a protocol for this kind of memory work, the authors stipulate that while adult memory work is a useful supplement in studying children’s popular culture, it should not supplant children’s voices, once again establishing child experts as integral to this work.

The authors hit their stride in chapters 3 and 4, finding the right balance of literature review, methodological development, and case study. Chapter 3, “Visual Spaces,” focuses on methods for accessing children’s insights into their popular culture. Noting the visual nature of these objects, the authors recommend incorporating visual tools into their study, namely photographs and videos. Based on similar work by Wendy Ewald and Kamina Walton, among others, on documenting the experience of children and other marginalized groups, Mitchell & Reid-Walsh argue that by asking a child to visually document themselves, their toys, and their bedrooms, researchers can gain access to children’s spaces and perspectives.
Chapter 4, “Physical Spaces,” rivals the strength of the previous chapter, taking up McRobbie and Garber’s seminal concept, “culture of the bedroom.” Mitchell & Reid-Walsh identify the bedroom as the site that “offers the greatest possibility for child-in-control” (p. 114), a display of the transition from childhood to adolescence, and a safe, autonomous place less open to scrutiny than other public play areas. The authors develop a methodology for studying the meaningful arrangement of taken-for-granted objects in bedrooms. Their case studies on babies’ rooms and the representation of girls’ bedrooms in teen magazines not only demonstrate the methodologies they recommend, but provide an analysis of class-based decorating hierarchies.

Chapters 5 and 6 are primarily case studies built on research questions related to children’s popular culture. Although the questions and the findings are important contributions to the field, these chapters lack the depth found in chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 5, “Virtual Spaces,” presents case studies of commercial Web sites created for children, personal Web sites created by children, and adult-structured sites that incorporate child-produced content. Chapter 6, “Historical Spaces,” places Barbies and fashion dolls within a larger historical context, reviewing their origins and evolution. Both of these chapters provide substantial evidence to discredit the misconception that children are cultural dupes, providing an opportunity to adapt David Buckingham’s “situated viewer” to a concept of the situated child in play. Although the authors touch on methodological suggestions here, this section is not as strong as in previous chapters.

Mitchell & Reid-Walsh manage to integrate their six research “spaces” into a complex and comprehensive piece. That, if anything, emphasizes the abruptness of the book’s conclusion. The two-page “Coda” finishing off the sixth chapter quickly reviews their key ideas, but the authors cover such a broad range of methodologies, literatures, and case studies that the book would be better served if they took the time to reflect on the overlapping spaces and weave the common strands that they have developed in each chapter. Mitchell & Reid-Walsh wrote a thoughtful, fanciful introduction to set the tone of the book. Perhaps this reader just wants a fairy tale ending, or at least one that reflects the richness of this tome.

Researching Children’s Popular Culture: The Cultural Spaces of Childhood is not simply a book on methodology. The authors seamlessly incorporate their multiple agendas; they work to decolonize children as subjects of study and experts of their own popular culture, they adapt methodologies from a wide range of disciplines for the study of children’s popular culture, and, finally, they build a case for agency in children’s play. The book is at its strongest when these multiple agendas are balanced, but falters when one overshadows the others.

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