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## Influence of Toys on Children

Did you ever think toys could play a larger role than just a form of entertainment in a child's life? Could toys possibly be serving as a reflection of the adult world and thus predisposing children to what the adult life should encompass? In 1957, Roland Barthes, a French literary philosopher, wrote an essay called "Toys" in which he stresses "that toys are essentially an adult microcosm; all are miniature reproductions of human objects." Barthes suggests that toys are not just frivolous distractions to keep children busy, but are actually made to prepare children for the future. Many of the toys children play with reinforce norms that are a part of adult society and so without realizing, parents end up buying their children toys which influence their thinking and aspirations to align with society. In present time, movies and TV shows are made on the toys children play with which personifies the toys, making them far more influential as children then have a character to emulate. "Avenger: Infinity War" is one such movie that presents many aspects of the adult world to young children as just a matter of fact, thereby portraying an image of the world children should simply accept. Produced by Kevin Feige and released in 2018, "Avenger: Infinity War" is a movie based on many superheroes that protect the world from evil. While characters such as Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk, and Black

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Widow, serve as great entertainment and send a great message of moral duty to young children, they also prompt children to accept societal inclination of glorifying superficial possessions and wealth, creating highly problematic norms of what men can be like, as well as holding women to incredibly unrealistic standards of beauty and body image.

Iron Man is a fictional character in the movie, "Avenger: Infinity War" who wears a special suit

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and has a contraption in his chest which gives him superhuman strength and the ability to fly. One may think that a child gravitating towards an Iron Man action figure or wanting to be like Iron Man is simply because of the colorful suit he wears or the heroic qualities he depicts in the film and thus, is completely harmless; however, the aspects of the adult world that the child learns and subconsciously incorporates into his/her thinking may not be so harmless. Iron Man is shown to be a confident, wealthy man with many possessions including cars, jewellery, and million dollar homes. Iron Man is also loved by the ladies. A child watching his/her favorite action figure and wanting to emulate him will learn that money and expensive items can give one confidence and a lot of attention; the desire to possess expensive things is planted in the child without any real depiction of how one should achieve said things. In his essay, Barthes stresses that “the child cannot constitute himself as anything but an owner, a user, never as a creator; he does not invent the world, he utilizes it”, and in the case of Iron Man’s character, the child does not invent ideas associated with riches but rather will utilize these existing ideas depicted through Iron Man to propel his/her future decisions. A little boy watching a scene of his idol, Iron-Man, wooing a woman and indulging in wealthy activities, will

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subconsciously learn that as an adult, he too must work to achieve the same lifestyle. A little girl watching a scene of her crush, Iron-Man, wooing a woman and indulging in wealthy activities, will subconsciously learn that as an adult, she too must look for similar qualities in her future partner. Young boys accept society’s association of money with success and young girls accept society’s association of money with a suitable partner. The toy figure children are used to playing with is being portrayed in a specific manner in the film and the effect of this extravagant portrayal of Iron-Man on the fans that are children is beyond innocent entertainment; rather, it is an illustration of what wealth represents and how wealth should be utilized in our society.

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The Incredible Hulk is another popular toy figure personified in the film, "Avenger: Infinity War" which show impressionable children the kind of temperament and physicality men should typically have. In his normal life, The Incredible Hulk is a scientist but when he loses his temper, he turns into a massive, green superhuman that is shredded like no other. The character of The Incredible Hulk is a highly a problematic example for young children to follow because they are learning to uncritically accept a sad reality of our society: violence out of anger. If a child's favorite hero can become violent and unstoppable when he is raged, then why would the child question a video of an angry costumer becoming violent with an employee? Such toys and their depiction in films has promoted the culture of violence as a form of entertainment to such a point that young children can no longer critically analyze the moral differences between a professional UFC fight and a high-school street fight. Such is the case because young children are watching movie scenes where The Incredible Hulk is beating up another character in the film

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named Thanos and a bystander character normalizes the whole act by stating, "let him have his fun". Toy manufacturers are launching products such as the big Hulk Hand sculpted into a fist for kids to use to playfully smash things. In addition to copying his actions, children may also be inclined to emulating The Incredible Hulk's angry temperament. Barthes mentions in his text that a toy "delivers the catalog of everything the grown-up does not find surprising" which also holds true in the depiction of The Incredible Hulk because an adult watching a man lose his temper and act out in violence may not be surprised as the act is, perhaps not openly, but, nonetheless, an accepted aspect of the adult world. In fact, the normalizing of serious issues such as domestic abuse may also be due to characters such as The Incredible Hulk. It would be a far stretch to say that a grown man would become abusive or a grown woman would accept domestic abuse after watching The Incredible Hulk act out; however, there is no denying that a young child, male or female, being shown such characters definitely works to normalize anger

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and violence, thus making children subconsciously accept wrong, though true, aspects of the adult world.

Black Widow is another character in “Avenger: Infinity War” which is preparing young children to accept aspects of the adult world without giving it much thought. In his text, Barthes mentions, “French toys literally prefigure the universe of adult functions [and] can only prepare the child to accept them all,” and provides examples such as the female children playing with baby dolls, feeding them milk, and cleaning their diapers so that, “the little girl can be prepared for household causality” and “conditioned” for her future role as a mother. From a young age, children have been taught to have certain interests through the toys presented to them by the

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adults that surround them. Women must perform domestic duties and men are the primary breadwinners. The ratio of female superheroes to male superheroes in the film aptly depicts this very fact and serves as subtle reinforcement that society primarily accepts males as heroes. Young girls are presented with very few role models breaking free from traditional gender roles and so are inevitably getting prepared to follow similar patterns and abide by societal norms. Some may argue that Black Widow’s character is a counter-response to the gender norms of society as she is a strong superhero who is not seen doing traditional jobs associated with women. So how exactly then, does her character prepare young children to uncritically accept aspects of the adult world? The answer lies in the heavy emphasis on her appearance. While Barthes presents examples of young girls being prepared for motherhood through toys, Black Widow serves as an example of preparing young girls to accept unrealistic standards of body image and beauty they will be held to as young adults. Black Widow is a superhero with a slim figure, blonde hair, and large breasts. She wears a tight costume and never looks anything less of beautiful, even in the most intense action sequences. Upon watching Black Widow fight the evil without a hair out of place, young girls may or may not get inspired to also steer away from

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traditional gender roles but will most definitely set a standard for what they too should look like. The issue of young women being insecure about their bodies and using unhealthy, sometimes life-threatening, measures to achieve a certain body type is, in fact, propelled by the presentation of women in films such as “Avenger: Infinity War”. Upon continuously seeing slim characters such as Black Widow, female children are subconsciously getting prepared to face and accept scrutiny regarding their appearance. In addition, the other female characters in the film also

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being slim and slender plants the idea that sameness is desirable and diversity is condemned into the minds of the female children watching. Furthermore, male children watching the female body being so greatly emphasized will learn to gaze women similarly and find it normal to only focus on a women’s external beauty (as per media standards) rather than her personality as a whole. The culture of cat-calling and hollering at women on the streets is embedded deep within our society and future generations are learning the same to be acceptable as they watch a film with both male and female superheroes but only the female superheroes’ appearance emphasized. Children are being prepared to value only specific features as beautiful and, as Barthes mentions, are having “gestures prepared for [them] without adventure”. The makers of the film could have used the physicality of Black Widow as a rebuttal to the current, unrealistic standards of beauty; however, Black Widow and her appearance only further reinforces ideas of body image that society holds and children will learn.

As Roland Barthes stressed through his writing, the toys that children are seen playing with daily serve a far deeper purpose in a child’s life than simple entertainment. The toys a child is exposed to inevitably shape their ideas, thoughts and predispose them to societal norms. Bringing a toy to life through films or TV shows only multiply the influence characters can have on children. “Avenger: Infinity War” is just one such film in which characters such as Iron Man,

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The Incredible Hulk, and Black Widow represent aspects of present society and foreshadow the thought processes that future generations will inherit.

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