'GREAT MINDS START LITTLE': UNPACKING THE BABY EINSTEIN PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT

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Baby Einstein Company, a forerunner in the 0-3 children’s video market, has expanded over the past decade from a former teacher’s small, in-home business to a Disney-owned brand with annual sales topping $200 million. The brand has become a watchword in infant development among households with young children thanks to its first and best-known products, enrichment videos bearing titles like Baby Shakespeare, Baby Van Gogh, and Baby Da Vinci. The company, with its implied promise of visual, verbal, and scientific literacy, harnessed metaphor and cultural myth and surmounted parental anxieties about television viewing to become an influential cultural phenomenon.

This thesis explores the cultural phenomenon of Baby Einstein Company, including the social context and public relations efforts that facilitated its rise to popularity, how the format and content of the videos accomplish stated goals, issues of representation and consumerist ideology within the texts, how the company’s popularity reflects notions of American middle class childhood and parenting, and finally, the future of the controversial 0-3 digital media market.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. PUBLIC RELATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS: MANIPULATING CULTURAL</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYTH, METAPHOR, 'MOM' CACHET AND MIDDLE-CLASS ANXIETIES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harnessing cultural myth: the Mozart effect and early intervention</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor and the Fetishization of ‘genius’</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Aigner-Clark as ‘Mompreneur’ role model</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Middle-Class Anxieties about Children and Television</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos as ‘Digital Board Books’</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt-Free Content</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television as ‘Plug-In Drug’</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. THE PRODUCT</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION AND CONSUMERIST IDEOLOGY</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representations of Class, Gender, and Race</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representations of Parents</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geniuses and Their Namesakes</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers in Training</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V. CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Einstein and Notions of American Childhood</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Future of the Controversial 0-3 Video Market</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A. ALPHABETIZED LISTING OF BABY EINSTEIN VIDEO TITLES</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B. SELECTED LISTING OF OTHER HUMANITIES-BASED AND ‘SMART BABY’ VIDEO TITLES ....................................................................................................... 59
INTRODUCTION

My interest in Baby Einstein Company began long before I embarked on the research for this thesis, before, in fact, this project had been conceived. As I’ve looked toward having children of my own, I’ve been drawn into the world of children’s media texts and toys and the advice literature and parenting magazines that decree which products deserve consumer trust and investment. Baby Einstein Company products consistently appeared on my radar—always a top shower gift suggestion at Babysrus.com, always highlighted in large in-store displays—and the idea of them initially appalled me.

I remember asking a friend about her recent purchase of a Baby Einstein video, inquiring as to why she thought her two-year-old needed it. “To make her smarter,” she replied, a mischievous glint of sarcasm in her eye. Another friend’s son owned a Baby Einstein toy that, when prompted by a button, pronounced a composer’s name and played a brief excerpt of his work. “It’s kind of annoying,” she confided. I wondered why parents would purchase and use products that they only believed in tongue-in-cheek or that they found aesthetically unpleasant. In addition to questions about where the company came from and how it came to be so popular, I wondered about claims the media made about Baby Einstein Company videos. Does Baby Einstein Company “capitalize […] on customers’ desire to raise brighter babies” (Cotliar)? Has it “helped moms and dads feel less guilty about their VCR habit” (“Bringing”)? Were reports in the popular press true, or were they exaggerations?

While textual analysis of the videos that launched the brand is central to my assessment of Baby Einstein Company, it comprises only part of this thesis. Analysis of Baby Einstein Company would not be complete without consideration of the larger cultural trends it has
influenced and embodied as well as contextual circumstances, both created and coincidental, that precipitated its success. In this thesis, I seek to unpack the cultural phenomenon of Baby Einstein Company using detailed textual analysis and research to explore the social context and public relations efforts that facilitated its rise to popularity (Chapter One), how the format and content of Baby Einstein videos accomplish stated goals (Chapter Two), issues of representation and consumerist ideology within the texts (Chapter Three), how the company’s popularity reflects upon notions of American middle class childhood and parenting, and finally, the future of the 0-3 digital media market (Conclusions). This introduction provides historical background of children’s products and the founding of the Baby Einstein Company.

Child-focused consumerism emerged in the late nineteenth century (Cross 8), when numerous factors, including changing circumstances of production, availability of inexpensive consumer goods, and new attitudes toward parenting (Cross 12, 122) led to a shift in the social value of children. “By 1900 […] adults increasingly cherished [children] as emotional assets, bringing meaning, love, and vitality to the home” (Cross 85) and these parents purchased consumer goods intended to reward, enrich, and entertain these beloved children. With a growing uncertainty about the future following the First World War and the Great Depression came an elevated interest in children’s physical and mental development and their readiness for adult life. This era introduced the precursors of Baby Einstein products—educational toys endorsed by child psychologists and teaching professionals. These toys purported to prepare children for an uncertain future. “[Early educational toys] aimed to pass on to the next generation the traits of the individualist and the innovator which had been so prized in nineteenth century America” (Cross 134).
This faith in educational products grew in subsequent decades, as did the number of available products promising, implicitly or explicitly, to prepare children for school, social life, employment, and adulthood.

*From Basement to Boardroom: A Brief History of the Baby Einstein Company*

The Baby Einstein Company began in 1997 when former teacher and new mother Julie Aigner-Clark and her husband, entrepreneur Bill Clark, produced the first video in their basement using a borrowed video camera, an editing program on a home computer, and approximately $15,000 in savings. Described by *USA Today* as “a homegrown phenomenon that has helped ignite the infant-through-toddler video market” (della Cava), the Baby Einstein Company went on to produce *Baby Shakespeare*, *Baby Van Gogh*, *Baby Da Vinci*, and others whose titles seem to promise visual, verbal, and scientific literacy and creativity to any child who watches.

Realizing that she needed a national distributor, Aigner-Clark sought representatives from The Right Start, an upscale toy company with “about 40 stores nationwide, a huge mail-order business and customers like herself -- educated moms who wanted to invest in their children's future” (Bartiromo). Three years after production of the first video, Buena Vista Home Entertainment International signed a deal to market the first six videos in the U.K. and Ireland (Fitzpatrick, “Both” 99) and Artisan Family Home Entertainment obtained North American video distribution rights for the videos and CDs, moving quickly to place the products with mass merchants and chain stores (Fitzpatrick, “Artisan” 79). Wal-mart, Kmart, Target, and Toys ‘R’ Us swiftly signed on, guaranteeing a much wider distribution of the video line, which continued
to grow with the addition of *Baby Dolittle: Neighborhood Animals* and *Baby Dolittle: World Animals*¹ (McCormick, “Sony” 129).

In 2001, growth of the brand exploded with a toy merchandising deal with Hasbro, Inc. and collaboration with Walt Disney’s Hyperion Books earlier in the year (Neff 30). By November 2001, Walt Disney Company had acquired Baby Einstein Company for an undisclosed amount (rumored to be $25M). The deal with Disney retained Julie Aigner-Clark and her husband, Bill Clark, as consultants and plans were announced to extend the brand via the *Little Einsteins*² line for preschool-age children (Maughan 20).

Prior to Disney’s acquisition, a representative from Baby Einstein Company’s North American video distributor remarked that, while toy and book merchandising beyond the videos was a priority, corporate sponsorship “might negatively affect the value of the brand. […] That kind of deal hurts the series’ integrity” (Fitzpatrick, “Artisan” 79). A year and a half later, *Advertising Age* reported that Baby Einstein had signed for promotional tie-ins with Clorox, Cheerios, and Huggies (Neff 30). In addition to appearing on four million Cheerios boxes in December 2001, the brand was advertised on 2.1 million Langer’s Juice bottles from June-November 2001. Both deals included mail-in coupon offers (Finnigan 11). In *The Disneyzation of Society*, Alan Bryman discusses business practices The Walt Disney Company has successfully employed in the management of their theme parks and other properties. Bryman asserts: “No one can match Disney for such a synergistic complex of mutually reinforcing commercial activities” (88). Subtle synergistic tactics can be found within the videos themselves. In *Baby Neptune: Discovering Water*, amidst stock footage of waterfalls and oceans we see the impressive fountain display near Epcot Center at Disney World. The familiar Epcot looms in the

¹ “Baby Dolittle” was later deleted from both titles.
² The brand was originally titled *Little Einstein*. For this project, the current name, *Little Einsteins*, is used throughout.
background of the shot as well as a jumbo, easily recognizable Mickey Mouse hand. The *Baby Noah: Animal Expedition* video is less discreet, following the featured presentation with a commercial for Disney’s Animal Kingdom theme park. A sweepstakes offering a grand prize of a five day, four night vacation for eight people at the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida, and admission to Disney’s Animal Kingdom ran concurrent to the release of *Baby Noah*.

Bryman also observes that films and television shows appealing to children always produce a larger crop of successful merchandising options via ‘cute’ licensed character images. Indeed, “the potential deriving from franchising such characters is so great that it seems unlikely that they are not being developed with their capacity to be merchandised as a major consideration” (89-92). Three dimensional, often electronic tie-in toys such as “Baby Einstein Sing and Learn Plush Baby Galileo” and the “Baby Einstein Classical Violin” may reflect the themes of the videos but Baby Einstein infant care products like body wash and lotion point solely to the commercial expansion of the brand since Disney’s acquisition. Disney’s spin-off series, *Little Einsteins*, premiered as a DVD in summer 2005 and is now a fixture on the Playhouse Disney channel and in stores. Individual episodes are available through Apple’s iTunes Store at $1.99 each for on-the-go viewing. Licensed characters from this brand, targeted to preschoolers, appear on toys, books, plush dolls, apparel, sleepwear, and backpacks, with a more complete product line due to be released in 2007.

In the three years following Disney’s acquisition, annual sales increased from $25 million to $165 million (Pomerantz 62) and a year later, in 2005, Baby Einstein Company logged retail sales of $200 million (Oldenburg C01). Chapter One explores the social context and public relations efforts that aided the extraordinary growth of this brand over the past decade.
CHAPTER I. PUBLIC RELATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS: MANIPULATING CULTURAL
MYTH, METAPHOR, ‘MOM’ CACHET AND MIDDLE-CLASS ANXIETIES

A number of factors both fortuitous and contrived converged to create a fruitful market for Baby Einstein Company and perceptions about the brand may have proven more influential than the products themselves. This chapter explores the myths, metaphors, and consumer anxieties that factored into the brand’s precipitous ascent into the popular consciousness.

Harnessing Cultural Myth: The Mozart Effect and Early Intervention

The infamous ‘Mozart effect’ craze began in a respectable enough place—an academic journal. In 1993, researchers at the University of California at Irvine found that visual-spatial thinking in college students exposed to ten minutes of a Mozart sonata prior to completing a standardized test scored eight to nine points higher than students in the control group (who did not listen to anything) and students in a group that listened to a relaxation tape. The ‘effects’ of the Mozart music were found to persist around ten to fifteen minutes. Findings in follow-up studies with college-age students were similar. A 1997 study, attempting to prove the same impact on younger children showed longer-term enhancements of spatial-temporal reasoning skills in preschoolers as a result of exposure to classical music, but the improved children in this study did not merely listen—they received private piano lessons over a six month period. The piano group produced higher scores than children in singing, computer, and no-lesson groups.

Although neither of these studies produced findings that could affirm a ‘Mozart effect’ on young children who merely listened to music, non-scientific media outlets exaggerated the facts
and numerous companies eagerly began producing goods reflecting a Mozart effect theme. “American capitalists seeking profits” and “politicians seeking votes” (Zigler 146) have not been discouraged by the lack of empirical data to prove the efficacy of the Mozart effect:

in spite of its scientifically weak base, the Mozart effect has gained a durable reputation with the public […] Entrepreneurs, not surprisingly, have capitalized on the phenomenon, and the Mozart effect has quickly found its way into a variety of products for families with infants and small children. (Zigler et al. 146-148)

Through the media and the market, the Mozart effect became an established cultural myth and early intervention via books, DVDs, and CDs referencing the “geniuses” and musical prodigies of history have flourished. Examples of classical music products reflecting this boom include *The Mozart Effect Music for Babies: A Bright Beginning*, *Build Your Baby's Brain 2: Through the Power of Mozart*, *Beethoven for Babies: Brain Training for Little Ones* and *Mozart for Mommies and Daddies - Jumpstart your Newborn's IQ*. The Mozart effect craze proved fortuitous for the budding Baby Einstein Company. As founder Julie Aigner-Clark explains in an online interview:

> Right around the time that our video "Baby Mozart" hit store shelves, there was a study published which received a tremendous amount of national media attention. Called "The Mozart Effect," it explored the positive relationship between the development of a child's intelligence and exposure to classical music. It seemed like our timing was perfect! (“Talking”)

*Baby Mozart* was released in 2000, seven years after the initial Mozart effect study. Aigner-Clark is likely referring to Don Campbell’s popular book *The Mozart Effect for Children*:
Awakening Your Child's Mind, Health, and Creativity with Music, the publication of which brought even more media and parent attention to the topic. Still, the research had already been around for almost a decade, so it is possible that the concurrent release of Baby Mozart was less than coincidental.

In 2006, the Mozart effect has been thoroughly and publicly debunked on a scientific basis, yet the infant market is still saturated with the products it advanced. Either consumers have not heard the news, or, more interestingly, they have chosen to ignore it. Perhaps there is something romantic about the idea of a child prodigy posthumously ensuring mighty brains in other children, hundreds of years later. Maybe it doesn’t matter if the Mozart effect is an unsubstantiated cultural myth. An editorial review on Amazon.com for Build Your Baby's Brain 2: Through the Power of Mozart, states: “Can Mozart give brainpower a boost? That's not certain, but since there's nothing uncertain about babies' responsiveness to music, why not a little milk 'n' Mozart?” (Heffley).

Metaphor and the Fetishization of ‘Genius’

Semantic linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphors are “so natural and so pervasive in our thought that they are usually taken as self-evident […] The fact that they are metaphorical never occurs to most of us” (28). In naming the Baby Einstein Company thusly, the Clarks harnessed a convincing metonymic model: PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT. Of course the infant Albert Einstein is not the auteur of a Baby Einstein video, but we could say that Albert Einstein is best known as a producer of genius-level thought, therefore his name could be (and frequently is) applied as a metaphor for ‘genius.’ American popular culture has fetishized Albert Einstein’s brain, and our vernacular lexicon reflects this. It would be difficult to determine whether the
metonym originated in common usage and spread to media texts, or vice versa. Lakoff and Johnson also observe, “Most of our metaphors have evolved in our culture over a long period, but many are imposed upon us by people in power—political leaders, religious leaders, business leaders, advertisers, the media, etc” (160). Baby Einstein media texts did not engender associations of ‘Albert Einstein’ and ‘genius,’ but they do propagate it, pairing their company name with the tagline, “Great Minds Start Little” and an image of a child’s face with glasses and Albert Einstein-styled hair.

If we assume then that ‘Einstein’ is a metaphor for genius, consider the attractive incentives for utilizing this name for a children’s video production company. It is not a stretch to suggest that the name ‘Baby Einstein Company’ indicates a merchant of products that will help babies attain Einstein-level genius. This is certainly the assumption made by writers in the popular press, who have written stories about the company with titles like “The Race to Raise a Brainier Baby” (USA Today), “Mom’s ‘Baby’ Vids Sharpen New Minds” (Billboard), and “Disney’s Bet on Baby Brainiacs” (Business Week Online). Developmental psychologists, however, are quick to question videos or music that claim to affect brain development:

> When we naively come to believe that IQ can be raised substantially by intervention—whether in the form of a […] crib mobile or Head Start—we set ourselves up for failure. […] The wild claims being made for the brain-stimulation products are simply too grand to be achieved. (Zigler et al.152)

Baby Einstein Company (and ultimately, Disney) are not, however, making any ‘wild claims’ about the potential of their products to raise IQ. Interestingly, they’re saying the exact opposite. The official website reveals that “Baby Einstein products are not designed to make babies smarter.” Rather, Baby Einstein products endeavor “to engage babies and provide parents
with tools to help expose their little ones to the world around them in playful and enriching ways — stimulating a baby's natural curiosity.” If the goal is stimulation and discovery, not intelligence, it seems strange to reference Albert Einstein, a man whose surname is arguably synonymous with ‘genius.’

Baby Einstein Company has figured out a way to have their metaphorical cake and eat it too. The official website explains, “the company's name was inspired by Albert Einstein — someone who truly embodied a love of the arts, simple curiosity, and a passion for discovery.” While I cannot claim with certainty that consumers would not independently arrive at this interpretation of ‘Einstein,’ I believe it is unlikely that they would. In this clever management of intentions and perceptions, the company can appear to offer a brain-development product while voicing intentions of enrichment—a decidedly more qualitative goal. For consumers who want a product that will improve a child’s intelligence, Baby Einstein products seem to fit the bill; consumers who are repulsed by the idea of pressuring kids to be smarter can take comfort in the enrichment objective expressed by Julie Aigner-Clark in *People* magazine: “I’m not into pushing kids—I’m exposing them to the arts” (“Bringing Up Baby”).

*Julie Aigner-Clark as Mompreneur Role Model*

The Baby Einstein Company has capitalized on the highly visible presence of creator Julie Aigner-Clark. An attractive stay-at-home mom with a background in education and a passion for enriching children’s lives, she offers an enticing blend of real-mom, former teacher, and grassroots entrepreneur that may resonate with consumers, not only because her motivation seems so pure but because her success story is so compelling. At first glance, Julie Aigner-Clark exemplifies the American “idealized success model” (Coulson 174), combining her savings, long
hours in the basement with a borrowed video camera, and tenacious pursuit of distributors to deliver award-winning children’s videos to humanities-deficient families. Aigner-Clark does not appear to be a success due to class situation; she is the daughter of an electrician and a secretary and has earned her millions through personal hard work, tenacity, and, essential in this case, her desire to be a good parent. Reflecting on a speech she gave at the Harvard Business School, Aigner-Clark says:

I was surrounded by these people who wanted to start businesses and make jillions of dollars. But I didn't start my company for that reason. I started it because I believed in what I was doing and believed I could make a difference. Sometimes when you start a company for the right reasons, it comes to fruition even more so than if you just wanted to make a million dollars. And that's a great place to be. (Bartiromo)

Julie Aigner-Clark is a highly visible member of an emerging group of ‘mompreneurs,’ mothers who create products to address “needs in the marketplace that their parenthood gives them the vision to see” (Cotliar). Their ingenuity often ensures a secure financial future for their children and allows them to spend time at home rather than an office.

Playing the ‘mom’ card to gain support predates Baby Einstein Company. In his introduction to The Children’s Culture Reader, Henry Jenkins recalls political speeches of summer 1996 and how close-ups of Hillary Clinton and Susan Molinari with their respective children provided “concrete images to anchor more abstract claims about childhood and the family…[both women] gained authority from their status as ‘moms’” (Jenkins 1). Aigner-Clark always identifies herself, or is identified, as a parent in popular press articles about the company. In an “About Baby Einstein” spot that appears on several of the DVDs, we see parents and
children using the products and shots of Aigner-Clark alone and with her daughters. Here, she ardently evokes this ‘mom cachet,’ commenting, “As moms, we’re all looking for help, I mean, all of us, you know, and if a mom tells you, try this, it works, you automatically try it if you’re a mom.” Immediately the scene cuts to an Asian mother with a toddler who explains that she is pregnant and plans to introduce the products as soon as her new baby is born, to reinforce the ‘moms recommend it’ message.

Because Aigner-Clark’s motives seem so commendable and her background as a parent and former teacher is so appealing, consumers may not question the ideology inherent in the product. Aigner-Clark’s involvement with the early videos is evident from the inclusion of her own daughters, to her narrating voice, to the anonymous ‘mom hand’ that viewers can assume is hers. Later Disney videos maintain her lilting voice inviting parents to visit the Baby Einstein website and a few videos feature her as a narrator, but end credits on these later videos indicate that her creative control has become limited. Her smiling face still graces the ‘Founder’ page on the Baby Einstein website alongside a blurb about why she started the company. She appears in the brief promos for the company that still appear on the DVDs and these spots provide an opportunity to further analyze her image. Not surprisingly, in the “About Baby Einstein” segments, Aigner-Clark is shown seated in front of a large piano; a violin rests on top of the instrument and a music stand is at its left. She is the maestro, the founder, an admirable blend of nurturing mother and cultured artist.

The *Baby Mozart* DVD includes a ‘Video Tutorial’ that shows how consumers should use the product but is mainly a promotional spot for the products and the person behind them. The spot begins with soft focus footage of Julie Aigner-Clark, cascading golden hair and straight white teeth, holding her older daughter on her lap reading a Baby Einstein book. She identifies
herself as (a non-hyphenated) Julie Clark. After clips of an anonymous mother and baby using a video and hand puppet and shots of children playing while listening to CDs in the “Concert for Little Ears” series, we return to Aigner-Clark and her youngest daughter in a room bathed in natural light. They are seated at a gleaming grand piano. The child is pressing piano keys and we hear the tinkling sounds of re-orchestrated-by-Baby Einstein classical music. Aigner-Clark’s voiceover continues, “Like most parents, my highest aspirations are reserved for the future of my children. Like your own, my kids are full of natural curiosity and wonder.” Scene cuts to Aigner-Clark’s older daughter with father Bill Clark, outdoors. The child is holding a jar that presumably contains an insect. Aigner-Clark concludes, “It’s both a great challenge and reward of parenting to satisfy these uniquely human traits. At Baby Einstein Company, we take great pride in making this our mission. Thanks so much for your support” (speaker’s emphasis).

The soft focus maintained throughout the scenes of the Clark family gives them a dream-like quality. The anonymous mother and baby using the video are filmed in a clear, realistic way—this is an attainable state for the viewer. The ideal world of soft focus and grand pianos seems considerably less accessible. The spot contains scenes of Aigner-Clark and her daughters using Baby Einstein books and flash cards but we never see the Clark children watching the videos—we see them satisfying their ‘natural curiosity and wonder’ through hands-on, experiential learning—playing the piano, not listening to someone else play it, and interacting with nature outdoors, not via TV screen.

This interesting paradox illustrates that the image presented of Julie Aigner-Clark is an idealized one. She has admitted that Baby Einstein generated “more money than we ever thought we'd make in our lives,” although, initially, it was simply “a fun way to have a professional life outside of my mommy life” (Bartiromo). The decision to sell the company to Disney is also
credited to her children, with whom she has since enjoyed trips to the Galápagos Islands and Africa, places most of her customers will only ‘experience’ through the twenty-second flashes of stock footage on her videos. Julie Aigner-Clark has achieved the stay-at-home mom’s American dream and exists in a class of creative genius and leisure. She is to be admired, perhaps emulated, but never attained by the middle-class consumers who purchase her products.

Overcoming Middle-Class Anxieties about Children and Television

As long as there has been television there have been arguments about its benefits and detriments to health, learning, children, and the family. Initial reviews of the new technology were positive, like the 1948 Parents magazine article that applauded television’s ability to ‘unify’ the family with time that was spent in the same room (Spigel 116). After initial positive reviews of television faded, paranoia about its potential negative effects began and “experts assigned mothers the job of censoring, monitoring, and accompanying the child’s viewing. If a mother heeded the experts advice, she lost the free time the television provided; if she did not, she used television as a babysitter only at the cost of feeling guilt about it” (Seiter, “Children’s” 311). Producers of children’s videos and programming face parental guilt as well as other resilient stigma in their quest to broaden their middle class audience.

Ellen Seiter, who has explored the attitudes of white, middle class parents toward television and video viewing through ethnographic research, indicates that “the middle class belief in the badness of television viewing for children has proven to be exceedingly durable” (“Notes” 131). Marie Winn, author of the popular book The Plug-In Drug: Television, Computers, and Family Life (1977, 1985, 2002) stridently opposed television viewing’s negative impact on development, play, school performance and the family. Nat Rutstein, in his 1974 book
Go Watch TV! What and How Much Should Children Really Watch?, spurned the use of television as an “electronic pacifier” and accused parents of using the television “to anesthetize their children” to keep noise levels down in the home or because they “feel they don’t have time to talk to their children or play with them” (1). Parents’ anxieties about television viewing are unlikely to be assuaged by the biting, critical rants of “alarmists who demonize children’s media culture as a terrible contemporary aberration […] in contrast to ‘the good old days’ when children were vibrantly active, creative, and innocent” (Kinder 2).

Producers of children’s videos do have one advantage over television programming—videos usually don’t contain advertisements for anything but other videos. Videos offer predictable, familiar content without unmediated commercial interruptions. In the case of educational videos, perceived benefits of repetition could be gained—the more the child is exposed to the content, the more he or she will retain. Baby Einstein Company also enhances the image of their videos by eschewing the word ‘video’ in some cases in favor of a term with greater instructive potential.

Videos as ‘Digital Board Books’

By characterizing their videos as ‘digital board books,’ the Baby Einstein Company further distances its products from traditional criticisms of televisual programs for children, although the videos are book-like in name only. Several videos do include book-like formats, but lack book-like interaction. In Baby Noah, windows in an illustrated landscape of the savannah, for example, open to reveal an animal that is then identified. The camera pans across this landscape and stops at each window in turn, always in the same order. Unlike a real book, which requires action from
the child to reveal the hidden image, these windows open ‘magically’ to reveal the animals. The child is unable to repeat a favorite animal or alter the order in which the animals are revealed.

*Baby MacDonald: A Day on the Farm* includes in its special features an electronic version of the video’s tie-in board book of the same name, read by Julie Aigner-Clark. The segment begins with a shot of the book resting on an illustrated wooden surface; we zoom in as the cover flips open and a virtual book-reading experience commences. Aigner-Clark’s voice narrates each page, but something is missing: the written words. The child is not afforded an opportunity to see the words and associate them with the sounds as they are pronounced by the reader.

**Guilt-Free Content**

Ellen Seiter writes: “Every middle class mother knows that children should not be watching television; they should be doing something else—something else more stimulating, more educational, more creative” (“Notes” 141). Baby Einstein Company’s emphasis on creativity and the arts seems to address this concern. *People* magazine concurs, declaring, “[Aigner-Clark] has helped moms and dads feel less guilty about their VCR habit” (“Bringing”). Baby Einstein Company products, like the earliest educational toys that debuted in the 1930’s, have become today’s “perfect symbol[s] of the status-conscious middle-class family” (Cross 139) through their promise to dispense elite culture to nascent minds. If Baby Einstein Company is offering guilt-free video time, it is in their best interests to offer it to consumers with the greatest guilt. Seiter also suggests that parents in the privileged position of feeling their child’s future is more secure socially and financially can and do worry less about television’s effects or the judgment of others for their parenting choices (“Notes” 141).
French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu writes: “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil [sic] a social function of legitimating social differences” (7), a notion applied to parents specifically by Ellen Seiter in “Children’s Desires/Mothers’ Dilemmas.” She writes, “upper middle class parents want their children to like things that are ‘better to like;’ they struggle to teach them the tastes for classic toys, the aesthetics of natural materials, and the interest in self-improving ‘educational’ materials favored by their class—and to spurn children’s consumer culture as mass, TV-based, commercial, and plastic” (298). Perhaps this explains why Baby Einstein products are not advertised in upscale parenting magazines like Cookie or Martha Stewart Kids but in middle-class publications like Woman’s Day, Family Circle, Baby Talk, Parents, and Parenting. Through Baby Einstein Company (and Disney) the elite catalog of classical music, fine art, and scientific discovery—the things that are ‘better to like’—have been sanitized, distilled, democratized and packed in plastic cases for commercial distribution to a mass middle-class audience.

Television as ‘Plug-in Drug’

Perhaps the greatest charge imposed on televisual texts for children is that viewing of these texts is passive, whereas children are expected to benefit from being active and mentally engaged. Seiter attributes this widespread belief in the passivity of television viewing to the media: “The most quotable and attractive sources for journalists—the storytellers—are people who will say that the children’s audience are passive, unwitting victims of the devil television” (“Notes” 131). Baby Einstein Company counters this criticism with the claim that their videos are meant to encourage parent and child interaction—that the videos are designed to be watched together. As Julie Aigner-Clark explains, “Probably the most important thing we’ve done is to encourage
parents to sit with their children, to interact with their children, to dance with their children. […] We make videos that are meant to be used as tools to inspire your child to get up and clap their hands with their mom or dad” (“About Baby Einstein” spot, speaker’s emphasis).

A “Video Tutorial” included on the Baby Mozart DVD demonstrates appropriate use of the video. We are shown a perky, attractive young mother kneeling before an infant in a carrier seat; both people are within twelve inches of a large television set. The mother is wearing a Baby Einstein brand hand puppet and makes animated expressions at her child as Aigner-Clark’s voiceover explains, “Our [products] encourage parents and caregivers to interact with children in delightful, stimulating, and developmentally sound ways […] we encourage you to use our videos as multi-media blackboards—point to objects and action on the screen and name them for your child.” We see the mother pointing to a banana on screen and pronouncing the word ‘banana’ before the camera cuts to the delighted, grinning child. Here, school-related words such as ‘developmentally sound’ and ‘blackboards’—like ‘digital board book’—characterize Baby Einstein videos as educational and engaging tools for interaction and distance the products from the banal, unwholesome, passive fare of other children’s video texts.

Baby Einstein Company did not phenomenally impact the market solely on the merit of its videos, as one might initially assume. Strategic manipulation of cultural context and a careful response to the traditional criticisms of children’s videos were essential to its success. Not only did the company present positives via flowery language about art and the humanities and happy enriched babies, they worked to dispel the negatives, the familiar stigma of passivity and the damaging potential of guilt. These clever public relations tactics, and perhaps a bit of luck, have created a brand that in the year 2002 accounted for 90% of the infant videos sold in the United
States (Brady). With this impressive statistic in mind, I turn to the matter of the videos themselves.
CHAPTER II. THE PRODUCT

The videos rely on a canon of child-appropriate learning categories that include animals, colors, shapes, numbers, and objects of everyday life. These staples are set to classical music, which injects a humanities emphasis. The format borrows from tried-and-true tactics employed in earlier children’s television texts, particularly Sesame Street. They can be divided into three viewing-age groups: infants aged zero through nine months, infants over nine months, and toddlers. The format and content of the videos vary dependent on the age of the target audience, but several features are constant. First, each video is scored with music by classical composers (e.g. Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Vivaldi) ‘re-orchestrated’ to appeal to ‘little ears.’ The arrangements are lilting and mellow, much like the tinkling sounds of a music box—hence the name of the unseen ensemble performing the pieces—the Baby Einstein Music Box Orchestra. Other conventions in the early Baby Einstein formula are: the use of puppets, toys, the ‘mom hand,’ and studio footage of children, and poetry and fine arts.

Each video features a hand puppet ‘host’ whose illustrated image graces the packaging and who usually appears more frequently in that particular video than other puppet characters. In some cases, the puppet and video share a name—the tuxedoed giraffe in Baby Beethoven is referred to by the same name in the opening credits; in others, the puppet’s names are referenced on the packaging or through tie-in products—Bard, the dragon puppet host of Baby Shakespeare and Baby Van Goat, the goat puppet host of Baby Van Gogh, are examples of this. These are simple hand puppets that cover the hand and forearm of the puppeteer—essentially, a head and body without limbs. They appear in vignettes between or during the music segments. The puppet characters interact with balls, silk flowers, paintbrushes, other puppets, and sometimes children.

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3 These soothing renditions of the classics are also available on numerous Baby Einstein Company compact discs.
although this usually occurs during the end credits in a style that suggests a ‘backstage’ environment or outtakes. The puppets do not speak; they sigh, squeak, giggle, gurgle, and emote by contorting their faces. Some later videos, including Baby Newton and Baby Neptune, feature more elaborately constructed puppet hosts that more closely resemble the style of the package and tie-in book illustrations. The puppet vignettes take place in front of neutral backgrounds in the earlier videos; later, illustrated backgrounds pulled from Baby Einstein Company books published by Hyperion provide a more defined sense of place.

Studio footage of toys comprises the bulk of visual content in the earlier videos. Wind-up, battery-operated, and kinetic motion toys appear alongside more traditional wooden playthings and plush animals. Toys seem to be chosen for their visual interest and potential for motion that complements the tempo of the musical selections. The toys always appear against a neutral, usually black or white background; this frequently gives the effect that the space of the scene goes on well beyond the borders of the TV screen and creates a feeling that there is a larger world or space within the video. Many toys are accented with sound effects like squealing tires for cars, clucking for chickens, whistles and chugging for trains, etc. The toys come from companies like Brio and Manhattan Toy, producers of higher-end playthings, the type sold in those small independent toy stores where Aigner-Clark originally sold her early videos. It is likely that this created a win-win situation for Baby Einstein Company, whose content was provided via the complimentary use of these toys, and the toy manufacturers, who received free, repeat exposure to their target audience. Not only are the toy manufacturers receiving free advertising each time the videos are played—the manufacturer and website for each toy is listed on the Baby Einstein website and DVD special features sections include a “Toy Chest” with a photo, manufacturer name, and website for each toy that appears in the video, aiding consumers
who wish to purchase their child’s favorites. The use of toys seems to diminish in the later videos produced by Disney.

Most toys that appear in the videos rely on wind-up mechanisms or batteries for their motion, but some simpler toys require human assistance, and for these, the ‘mom hand’ comes into play. The ‘mom hand’ is a white, adult woman’s hand, well manicured and sporting a conspicuous wedding band in most appearances. The hand moves in a gentle, deliberate manner, stacking rings, filling a wagon with blocks, dropping balls into a tube, fitting blocks into a shape sorter cube, and pressing the buttons on pop-up toys. The ‘mom hand’ can be construed as instructive as it demonstrates the intended use of a toy, though one wonders why an adult hand was chosen to interact with the toys rather than a child’s.

Though they do not receive as much screen time as toys and puppets, children also appear in the videos. Earlier videos produced by Aigner-Clark feature her young daughters, Sierra and Aspen. The children in the videos clap their hands, play peek-a-boo, and occasionally interact with toys, puppets, or toy instruments (this is the case for Baby Beethoven). Shredded paper, fruit, blankets, and other thematically appropriate props are introduced throughout the series.

Though not common to every video, poems appear in Baby Shakespeare: World of Poetry and Baby Van Gogh: World of Colors. Julie Aigner-Clark explains in an “About Baby Einstein” promotional spot, “One of the greatest ways to introduce children to language is through poetry. In Baby Shakespeare, your child is being introduced to the flow of language, the rhythm and cadence of language.” Baby Shakespeare is structured around a dozen words with poetic potential: train, flower, apple, cat, grass, frog, leaf, snow, tree, cow, butterfly, and moon. The segment on each word features Aigner-Clark’s melodic voice reciting a relevant passage of
poetry. We learn from the end credits that only one piece is the work of Shakespeare; other featured poets include W.B. Yeats and Robert Frost.

Videos with an artist namesake, like *Baby Van Gogh: World of Colors* and *Baby da Vinci: From Head to Toe*, include images of artworks produced by those artists; the works of other painters and sculptors appear in the series as well. All artworks and artists are listed in the end credits of the videos, but nowhere can the viewer access a gallery that pairs the image with the title and artist name. These videos purport to ‘expose’ children to art, and that is exactly what they do—and no more.

For the humanities-enthused parents who want their child to see and learn about fine art, this separation of image and context affords no opportunity for parents watching with their child to identify the paintings or sculptures or to gain any insight beyond naive partiality to a particular composition. The masterpieces are a distraction, a colorful diversion like the wind-up toys, and as such are given no more weight than a generic landscape or clip art image might deserve. An opportunity to link the artist and a title to the work would be a nice bonus in a video that uses an artist’s name and fine art content as a selling point.

Later videos, particularly those produced following Disney’s acquisition of the company in November 2001, incorporate some additional elements. With presumably bigger budgets come videos with higher production values and stunning stock footage of running flamingoes, time-lapse blooming flowers, blowing clouds, seascapes, and exotic birds and butterflies in flight. Representations of people in the stock footage are discussed in the next chapter.

In *Baby Shakespeare*, sketches appear and sometimes become animated on the white background before materializing into a photo of the real thing. *Baby Newton* (2002, 2004) introduces digitally animated crayon characters that dance, cavort, and draw shapes and a clown
figure comprised of various shapes that acts as the ‘host’ more than the lion puppet whose image appears on the packaging. The crayons and clown represent a significant departure from the aesthetic of earlier videos.

*Baby Newton* also introduces a contemporary song complete with lyrics, “I Know My Shapes.” This song is a departure from the established Baby Einstein style and is comparable to music commonly found in the children’s video genre with its infectious tune, arguably vapid lyrics, and intermittent chorus of children’s voices piping in with an adult female lead singer. A similar song, “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes,” sung by a children’s chorus, is featured in *Baby Da Vinci: From Head to Toe*.

The deal with Disney’s Hyperion books in 2001 brought about, along with the inclusion of stock footage, some of the most significant alterations to the ‘look’ of the series. The availability of related illustrations from tie-in books meant that puppet vignettes were no longer performed in front of neutral backgrounds and that illustrated figures could at times replace puppets. The Hyperion illustrations are crisply and simply drawn, clearly the products of digital illustrator software. The colors are cheerful, but the overall tone of the simplified landscapes and backdrops is soothing and mellow. Animal character illustrations, with their large, round eyes and vacant, fixed expressions, appear pleasant but lack personality. These character illustrations are placed into the videos as stills, not as fully animated cartoons. In some cases, direct manipulation animation is used to suggest leg movements like walking.

A description of key elements in Baby Einstein videos is not as illustrative as firsthand viewing, but should give the reader a sense of how the texts look and feel. The ‘homemade’ stylings of the earlier videos may have been crucial to the company’s breakout success. These early texts were distinctive—not in content so much as style. The Disney-produced videos, with
their detailed book illustration backdrops and live action footage, present a fixed fantasy world, a
defined space that simple puppets, random toys, and neutral backgrounds never attempted to
define for viewers. Some education experts suggest that playthings with "low realism," those not
based on the exact likeness of a licensed character, inspire children to improvise and imagine
more than they would interacting with a well-known character with a prescribed voice and story
(Schoenherr). For Disney, reliance on viewers’ attention and devotion to those licensed
characters is vital to commercial success in merchandising beyond the videos. The end results
are slick texts with high production values that, devoid of their ‘homegrown’ legacy and
carefully constructed image, would be indistinguishable from most other children’s video fare.
CHAPTER III. ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION AND CONSUMERIST IDEOLOGY

My analysis uncovered evidence that the impact of Baby Einstein Company videos may extend beyond their stated enrichment purpose into the realm of ideology. In *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood*, Joseph Zornado discusses Walt Disney’s anti-semitism and his commitment to the white, Protestant, Victorian ideals imposed on him by his abusive father—an ideology that later manifested in Disney’s business practices and the texts produced by his studios. Zornado argues that Disney internalized his father’s values and subconsciously imbued his creative works with racism and patriarchal, elitist depictions of gender and class. Prior to discussing his reading of fascist values in Disney’s 1940 animated adaptation of *Pinocchio*, he predicts that many people will be surprised by such a reading “simply because of the ideological static that interferes when one attempts to seriously consider a children’s film as a product of cultural and ideological processes” (148-149). We may want to believe that children’s films are protected by the same cultural myth of innocence that we assign to childhood. Even if children themselves are innocent, they are not the producers of mass media texts. Children’s films, like any other popular culture text, are created by adults with strong ideological leanings and political viewpoints that consciously or subconsciously infiltrate their creations. It is thus essential that we consider children’s media texts—products of a “complicated system of economic, social, political, legal, and human factors” (Gotz et al. 21) just as critically as we would examine texts created for adults.

In a feature-length children’s film, ideology may be revealed through plot events and characterizations. In texts like the Baby Einstein videos, which are basically collages of thematically related scenes strung together and set to music, ideological content is revealed
through content choices and representations of class, gender, and race. These issues of representation are most visible in later texts—those created following the Disney acquisition in November 2001.

Representations of Class, Gender, and Race

While earlier, pre-Disney texts rely heavily on puppet vignettes and shots of visually engaging toys for their content, the later videos downplay toys in favor of exhilarating, high quality stock footage. This footage is offered to represent the world in which the young viewers will mature. Viewers are shown a real house as they are taught the word ‘home’. Frequently, though, the video clips selected may be inconsistent with the real life experiences of young viewers. Baby Wordsworth: First Words—Around the House (2005) devotes considerable screen time to images of homes, families, and everyday objects and the representation of these warrants further investigation. The format of Baby Wordsworth differs slightly from the other videos because it includes an educational sign language component. When words around the house are introduced, actress Marlee Matlin translates the words using a blend of American Sign Language and Conceptually Accurate Signed English. The words are then illustrated via studio footage, puppet vignettes, toys, historical paintings, and stock footage. In the interest of simplicity, I will refer to people in the footage based on my understanding of the roles they are meant to represent (e.g. mother, son, grandfather).

The introduction of ‘real’ footage of people and places introduces a host of other concerns—issues of class, race, and gender. Unlike the classless, simple world of the hand puppet vignettes, the world of the footage is used to further define in a more ‘real-life’ way what a word like ‘home’ means, and in doing so, may deviate from what, for many viewers, ‘home’
Baby Wordsworth truly is. Baby Wordsworth begins with the host puppet, a yellow tabby cat, and a bird puppet locating the word ‘home’ in their dictionary. The illustrated backdrop shows a pleasant, generic yellow house with bushes, flowers, and lawn. This vignette introduces a series of stock clips of beautiful, well-maintained homes on landscaped lawns—footage that looks more like a real estate brochure than a children’s video. The houses are large, twice the size of most middle-class homes, accented by details like a dog bounding playfully across the well-tended lawn.

When we look inside these homes, in later segments on the kitchen and bedroom, we find spacious rooms, bright white or cream-colored cabinets, ornate moldings, columns, large arching windows, hefty stainless steel appliances, and predominantly white inhabitants. In one scene, a mother sits in bed reading to her two daughters. The bed canopy, linens, and upholstery on the carved wood head and footboards are rendered in delicately patterned, coordinating toile fabric. In the kitchen, another mother, well dressed and wearing a heavy, conspicuous wedding band set, assists her son, clad in snow white bib, in drinking from a delicate china teacup. These signifiers—ornately detailed decor, teacups, and expansive white spaces—suggest an exceedingly anglicized upper-class aesthetic.

Not surprisingly, the videos also lack adequately diverse representations of careers. Incidental scenes of service sector workers do appear, but blue-collar employment is rarely represented. The bank in Baby’s Favorite Places: First Words – Around Town (2006) is populated by customers in business dress and the illustrated cat withdrawing cash from the ATM outside wears a suit and tie. Two men who stroll down their expansive driveways to check the mail are clad in khaki slacks and polo shirts. The video teaches that it is white-collar workers who belong at a bank, possess wealth, and deserve to live in the Baby Einstein world, a world of fantasy homes inhabited by stay-at-home moms who care for children and tie-wearing,
businessmen fathers who occasionally make an appearance on the scene. Little effort is devoted
to representing the real-life families of the audience, families likely comprised of greater race, or
at least class, diversity. The stock footage used, in *Baby Wordsworth* especially, shows us
people of the race and class who are traditionally expected to create, to understand, and to
appreciate classical music and elite culture.

As the previous paragraph hints, gender also receives normative treatment—a more
appropriate subtitle for *Baby Wordsworth* might well be ‘Gender Roles Around the House.’
Stock footage in this video is far more likely to show female caregivers interacting with children
than male, and these females are usually participating in domestic or child-nurturing tasks inside
the home. In one scene, a mother pours cake batter with two daughters in the foreground while,
in the background, a father and older boy sit in the breakfast nook reading a newspaper, clearly
isolated and unengaged in the nearby activities of the domestic sphere. Similarly, ‘bed’ is
illustrated with footage of a woman spreading a quilt over a bed and a painting of two women
and a girl putting linens on a bed.

Fathers are more likely to appear outdoors. To illustrate ‘yard’ we see (against the
ubiquitous white picket fence backdrop) a father rolling in the grass with his son, pushing a child
on a swing, and lifting a pink sweater-clad daughter delicately from a low tree branch with an
indulgent smile. (One wonders if a male child would have required this assistance.) A
grandfather is shown in a vegetable garden with some granddaughters and later in the video the
father and son in yard are shown again. When a ‘father’ figure is shown indoors, he is pouring
himself a cup of coffee, sitting at the computer, or sitting with the children on a couch eating
popcorn and watching the TV.
Reinforcement of gender norms permeates Baby Wordsworth’s representation of children as well. The word ‘puzzle’ is illustrated by studio footage of a white boy putting together puzzle pieces followed by an illustration of two suit-clad businessmen fitting pieces of a puzzle together. Boys dominate the footage for ‘blocks’ as well. Girls, on the other hand, exemplify domesticity and the humanities. Several of the historical paintings used depict prim, Victorian-era female children quietly reading books, playing piano, and cuddling with porcelain dolls and teddy bears. In the stock footage, girls help mother bake a cake, set the table for dinner, play the piano (five out of six images for ‘piano’ are female) and practice attaining the expected standard of beauty—the ‘mirror’ segment includes a painting of a woman at a vanity table and footage of a young girl in ‘dress-up’ clothes contemplating her reflection. In general, male and female children are given equal screen time over the course of a video; a notable exception is Baby Shakespeare: World of Poetry, which features only female children—possibly an indication that poetry and language are too feminine for a boy’s participation, despite the fact that mostly male poets’ works are featured.

The producers seem conscious of the need for diversity among the babies and children in the videos and at times respond satisfactorily; other attempts are not as successful. In Children’s Journeys Through the Information Age, developmental psychologist Sandra Calvert remarks: “Children are looking for someone they can identify with and use as a model for behavior […] that’s one reason Sesame Street has been so effective. People from many cultures live and interact with each other on Sesame Street” (188). Children of different ethnic backgrounds are common in studio footage for most videos, although earlier efforts understandably utilized Aigner-Clark’s own daughters more than other children. Later videos, especially those that rely
heavily on content from stock footage, include some stock clips that attempt to represent minorities, but this representation is rarely balanced.

In one *Baby Wordsworth* scene, a Hispanic father and children sit on a sofa eating popcorn and watching television. The room is decidedly darker and smaller than spaces in the white households discussed earlier. This father is not active in the yard with his kids like the white fathers; his interaction is minimal due to the television’s presence—the same is true for the ethnic father reading the newspaper in the cake batter scene. Representation in *Baby MacDonald: A Day on the Farm* is worse yet: only two minority adult males appear in the video and one is a migrant worker picking apples in an orchard—this juxtaposed with white male farmers strolling with their children/grandchildren, leisurely driving expensive tractors, and surveying their fields. Men of color are characterized as hired hands, or as less physically active than their white counterparts.

In *Baby’s Favorite Places: First Words – Around Town* (2006), men of color do appear outdoors and also engage in intellectual activities, like browsing at a library, in rare scenes. A backyard scene shows two men, one white, one black, conversing and laughing—if only they were not separated by the barrier of a brown picket fence. Unpainted picket fences appear in several scenes with ethnic actors, as if to demonstrate that the romanticized ‘white picket fence’ is only available to light-skinned families. To illustrate the word ‘fence,’ footage of a young white boy running joyfully along a white picket fence is followed by footage of an ethnic boy peering out from behind a wooden fence, as if caged. Another brown picket fence confines a young female of color glimpsed fleetingly as she jumps on a trampoline behind the enclosure.

Other troubling juxtapositions are found elsewhere in the video. The ‘sidewalk’ segment includes a scene of a Hispanic grandfather assisting his toddler grandson. The sidewalk
available to these Hispanic characters is in a decidedly neglected neighborhood: unruly weeds border the sidewalk, which runs alongside a decrepit building marred by peeling paint; behind the actors, a sooty wall and unsightly air conditioning unit. The scene cuts to a pristine, wide sidewalk bordered by neatly edged green lawn. A blonde, Caucasian mother is similarly assisting a toddler; their sidewalk conjoins a neatly groomed patch of healthy grass, lush landscaping, a blossoming vine-entwined mailbox, and the ubiquitous white picket fence. While the ghetto setting of the Hispanic grandfather certainly offers more realism than the fantasy homes and picket fences, the problem lies in the consistent depiction of white families in higher class surroundings and exclusive use of minorities in the (infrequent) representations of middle or working class settings. These gender, race, and class stereotypes all appear in videos that purport to ‘enrich’ children.

Representations of Parents

If we assume that parents are watching these videos with their children, as Baby Einstein Company insists they should, the parents could face greater unease than their children from the identities represented. Any text that presents positive images of parents and their children—be it an advice magazine, a billboard, or an enrichment video—offers not only an idealized picture of childhood, but “a role model for parents themselves: caring, responsive, up on the latest child development research, and committed to doing whatever it takes to optimize their child’s eventual success and happiness” (Zigler et al. 207).

No visual image of a parent can embrace all of these intangible qualities without linking them to the external likeness of the person chosen to represent their physical embodiment. Every ‘mother’ figure that appears in Baby Wordsworth is young (but not too young), slim, and
attractive, with shiny, well-coiffed hair, nice clothing and jewelry, and the predictable wedding band. These married women live in large, expensive, clutterless houses and have birthed happy, attractive, well-behaved children. Ellen Seiter has explored how attitudes about television viewing may be “shaped by class background, educational aspirations, and mothers’ own struggles with the combined load of housework, child care, and very often, paid work outside the home” (“Mothers” 137). Realistic considerations like these are notably absent from the Baby Einstein video series. The mothers in the footage are relaxed, happy and seem to always make the right parenting choices, as illustrated in one of the kitchen scenes. The scene is filmed from the back of a refrigerator as an Asian mother and her daughter open the door. The refrigerator contains a pitcher of juice, a carton of milk, a bowl of strawberries, a bowl of cut-up fresh fruit, and a large, conspicuous slice of chocolate cake. The child points to the cake hopefully as the mother, with a beatific smile, slides the cake aside and reaches for the bowl of prepared fruit. The child seems amenable to the mother’s decision and no tantrum results.

**Geniuses and Their Namesakes**

As discussed in Chapter One, Albert Einstein is the ‘umbrella’ genius for whom the company is named, but nearly all of the individual videos in the Baby Einstein series are named for famed musicians, artists, and scientists. The Baby Einstein ‘family’ of characters consists of cartoon and puppet animals with names that reference ‘geniuses’ from relevant fields, such as *Baby Beethoven* for classical music, *Baby Van Gogh* for art, and *Baby Galileo* for astronomy.

Not only is ‘genius’ metaphorically ascribed to all the artists, composers, and (in the case of *Baby Noah*) ark-builders referenced by the series, a closer look at the genius namesakes of these videos reveals a disturbing underlying discriminatory ideology. All real-life genius names
invoked belong to white, male, Western thinkers and artists. They are the geniuses Western histories have chosen to remember, idealize, and idolize. If we have trouble thinking of alternatives representing gender and ethnic minorities, it is because they have been collectively ignored by our culture. The use of these ‘clichéd’ geniuses codes the term ‘genius’ itself as white, male, and Western. Discrimination aside, the geniuses’ video namesakes reduce brilliant careers to empty referents. Baby Einstein Company evokes a specific individual’s name while discounting everything but a (sometimes broadly interpreted) field of study. Baby Einstein Company discards the geniuses themselves and capitalizes on the household name.

One notable exception is *Baby Beethoven: Symphony of Fun*. While the other videos ‘expose’ children to the sounds of classical music with the intent that they should be improved just by hearing it, the format of *Baby Beethoven* makes learning about the composer and his work possible. The video begins with a screen that states: “Ludwig von Beethoven premiered nine great symphonies during the years 1800-1823. Highlights from five symphonies plus several incidental pieces are presented here.” Whether parents will be present during every video to read and explain the text to their child is uncertain, but a child who has learned numbers may at least associate the intro screen, which shows the symphony number, with the music that follows. This is not to say that a toddler *should* be made to identify Beethoven’s symphonies, only that this kind of learning is possible because the information is offered. In the other videos, classical compositions serve only as background music—music that could be replaced with anything else that sounded pleasant. In *Baby Beethoven*, the work of Beethoven is highlighted in a way that connects the composition with the composer, a real person who wrote music between 1800 and 1823.
In other videos, not so much as a portrait or a brief biographical statement about the real-life genius behind the name appears, although one piece of music in Baby Bach is identified by name. The only reference to Bach’s own name in that video is a repetitive theme of chickens saying, ‘bawk bawk’ and an inaudible joke told by Aigner-Clark’s daughter that also relates to the chicken sound, ‘bawk.’

Videos whose host characters are not based on pre-20th century European geniuses come from folk or religious sources. Baby MacDonald is a namesake of the farmer in the “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” children’s song. Although this song’s lineage can be traced back to the early 1700’s, the use of a fictional farmer from “perhaps the most famous of American farms” (Berry 20) seems to indicate that agricultural knowledge and skills are not valuable enough for a real person to be venerated as genius. The blue collar work of farm life has no place among classical musicians, painters, and scientists. This bias did not originate with Baby Einstein Company, in fact, anyone might be hard-pressed to name an agricultural genius. In a culture that devalues manual labor and working class citizens, it is no surprise that Baby Einstein Company had to rely on a fictitious namesake for its farming-themed video.

Two frequently commodified, yet faith-based figures, Santa (evolved from the Catholic saint, Nicholas) and Noah, appear in the series. By contextualizing these recognizable figures from Christianity as geniuses, the videos subtly reinforce Christian normativity in American life. Important figures from other world religions are predictably absent. Baby Santa’s Music Box (2000, 2001, 2004) is a strange amalgamation of holiday themes and symbols and a near departure from the humanities emphasis of the other videos. In one scene, two toy snowmen dance to the traditional Hanukkah dreidel song; later an origami mobile spins to “O-Shugatsu,” a Japanese new year melody. Instrumental renditions of religious (“Silent Night,” “Joy to the
World,” “Hallelujah Chorus”) and secular (“Deck the Halls,” “Sleigh Ride,” “Jingle Bells”) carols are paired with vignettes of puppets decorating trees, icing cookies, and interacting with ribbons and trims. In a recurring vignette, a happy reindeer bursts out of a gift box and dances joyfully, only to be resealed by a red-sleeved, fur-cuffed, white-gloved ‘Santa hand.’ Repetition of the happy reindeer’s celebration and freedom being halted by the large, insistent Santa hand occurs seven times in roughly thirty minutes. The assumed meaning is that the reindeer must wait for Christmas (since he does pop out of the box unchallenged during the end credits), but the image is very odd and almost disturbing in its depiction of a dominant male subduing an innocent, childlike puppet. Mostly, this video is an ode to glitz and consumption: numerous close shots of glistening holiday ornaments and baubles are coupled with footage of happy children, winter animals in nature, and snow scenes.

While Santa is a highly commodified figure with tenuous religious implications for most, Noah maintains strong ties to his biblical origins and is frequently summoned as a ‘theme’ for children’s toys, nursery décor, and books. Animals, one of those generic categories of child-appropriate topics, figure heavily in the story of Noah, creating ample opportunity for products that educate about wildlife as well as ideology. Not only does Noah’s name appear on the DVD, actual depictions of the story of the Ark abound. Baby Noah is structured in segments that highlight animals that live in different areas of the globe, namely, the savannah, the rainforest and tropics, the ocean, the outback, and the polar regions. At the start of the video, several puppets are shown traveling in an illustrated ark-like boat during a rainstorm. Eventually the gray clouds clear, revealing a blue sky. Each segment is introduced by this same scene of puppets traveling in the ark as it arrives at an illustrated shore with appropriate attributes (e.g.
jungle foliage, ice). A pair of appropriate animal puppets debark and five animals are introduced in illustrated form, followed by stock footage and toy representations of each.

Interspersed throughout the video are artists’ renderings of the story of Noah and the Ark. These illustrations, several in a style that could be straight from an illustrated Bible, portray different scenes from the story—all with an aged, patriarchal white Noah and the usual animals—giraffes, zebras, lions, and elephants. Ark toys also appear throughout—an ark shape sorter, plush hand puppet, and wooden block set. Unlike the videos referenced above that give no credence to the life or ‘story’ of the genius (Baby Mozart, Baby Van Gogh, etc.), Baby Noah consistently refers, through vignettes and visuals, to the biblical story of Noah and the Ark and loosely follows the story’s plotline in a linear narrative format that most of the other videos lack.

Having discovered the sky with Baby Galileo and parts of the body with Baby da Vinci, one would expect a zoologist or scientist as the title character in a video about world animals. Baby Darwin seems like an appropriate secular alternative, except that Darwin’s career directly opposes normative American religious ideologies and (especially in light of recent debates concerning evolution, creationism, and intelligent design in school curricula) would be unpalatable to middle class, Christian Americans.

Consumers in Training

Setting aside the ideological content of the videos, a larger concern may be whether videos like these train children for a lifetime of engagement with computer monitors and television screens. Returning to Baby Wordsworth, the ‘playroom’ segment of the house features five vocabulary words. While ‘blocks,’ ‘puzzle,’ and ‘book’ come as no surprise, the first two playroom words, ‘telephone’ and ‘computer,’ seem startling. Admittedly, technology has become an inevitable
part of 21st century life, but has it really infiltrated the toddler set? One is left wondering if *Baby Wordsworth* is merely reflecting the reality of toddlers’ needs for phones and computers, or if it seeks to generate that desire or need. Perhaps the representation of a technologically equipped playroom also signals parents to upgrade the playspaces in their homes. Footage in this section shows a grandmother holding a toddler on her lap; this child tentatively taps on laptop keys while another child watches. A father is shown working at a computer, typing with one hand while holding an infant with the other. The infant stares wide-eyed at the screen, which shines brightly on his blank face. A mother sits at a desk, talking on the phone as her daughter, in foreground with toys, mimics her on a toy phone. True, none of the clips show children unsupervised at computers, in fact, one could argue that many playrooms serve a dual purpose as the parents’ home office, and at least the father is holding his son while he works or at least the mother is in the same room as her daughter while she chats on the phone, but the ubiquity and normativity of technology in the home is affirmed by this segment.

The very act of looking to a video for stimulation or education is also an issue. Not only could less substantive programs replace the Baby Einstein series as the child matures, but the habit of seeking enrichment and entertainment from the TV could be established. A young generation of viewers is thus groomed for appreciation of fast edits of exhilarating footage *à la* television commercials and MTV music videos and learns that they can stay indoors to discover the sky, water, and seasons, or to spend a day on the farm. Critics of television viewing for children suggest that a host of consequences—negative impact on cognitive function, creativity, socialization, and physical health, to name a few—could result from the practice of watching TV, regardless of the content: “the question of whether the stuff they learn from programs is harmful or helpful pales in importance when compared to questions about the experience itself...
and the time devoted to it, whether *that* is helpful or harmful” (Winn 4-5). Every Baby Einstein DVD offers a ‘Repeat Play’ option. As the voiceover in an “About Baby Einstein” spot asserts: “With our growing line of videos, Baby Einstein can be there *all day long* […] from playtime, to bath time, to travel time, to nap time, Baby Einstein can enrich *every* part of your baby’s life” (emphasis added). Even if Baby Einstein videos *are* beneficial to children, does the benefit increase or decrease after numerous ‘repeat plays’ in a row? Julie Aigner-Clark is quoted in *People* magazine, saying, “We tell parents to talk to their baby about the tape, not to use it as a babysitter” (“Bringing”) but a writer for *Business Week Online* comments on more pragmatic realities of children’s videos: “who cares if researchers dispute the notion that such exposure enhances a baby’s mind? It could keep him quiet long enough for me to take a much-needed shower” (Brady).
CONCLUSIONS

Baby Einstein and Notions of American Childhood

As with any popular culture phenomenon, understanding cannot materialize from the text alone. To fully appreciate the cultural significance of Baby Einstein Company, one must consider the society in which the texts were produced and consumed and multiple ancillary influences—including media and myth—through which the ‘idea’ of the texts is transmuted before reaching the consumer. ‘Smart baby’ products are a relatively recent phenomenon, but consumer goods have always reflected American attitudes toward childhood. In the 1930’s, for example, toys exhibited pronounced and deliberate gender coding, with boys’ playthings stressing technology, teamwork, innovation, and competition, and girls’ toys emphasizing charm, attractiveness, domesticity and maternal desire (Cross 50-52). Parents could feel confident that the toys they bought would train their youngsters for successful, gender-appropriate adult roles devised to uphold the structure of their ideal society, one in which men would work outside the home and provide for their families financially (many of the boys’ toys were engineering and science related) and women would attract a ‘good’ husband, bear children, and perform the unpaid labor of nurturing the family. Toys of the period reveal these expectations: though tools of make-believe, they represented parents’ hopes for their children’s adult realities.

Baby Einstein videos are designed to be viewed by young children, but, like the gendered toys of the 1930’s, they are marketed to and purchased by adults. As Stephen Kline notes, “what might be taken for children’s culture has always been primarily a matter of culture produced for and urged upon children” (emphasis added, 95). The children for whom Baby Einstein texts are produced—potentially as young as a few days or weeks—are inexperienced, unsophisticated

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4 Career oriented toys for girls, other than nursing role-play paraphernalia, were non-existent (Cross 72).
consumers of cultural products. They do not choose what they will watch (in the case of birth through at least six months) and their viewing is regulated by parental controls. The success of any children’s video depends on what adults (parents, guardians, or gift-givers) deem necessary or beneficial to a beloved child’s development and happiness. “Childhood is effectively an account of adult views of what children are and what they should be” (Holland xi, author’s emphasis) and as such, the child is permitted little, if any agency. Karen Calvert explains it this way:

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 of their dealings with, fears for, and expectations of their children. (qtd. in Jenkins 15)

This ‘working definition of childhood’ may be grounded in personal experience but revised as a result of media influence. The media, always anxious to supply dramatic representations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parents, advice, and research, shapes and modifies cultural attitudes about childhood and parenting. An interesting example relevant to the Baby Einstein phenomenon shows how stories in the popular press distort what is on offer. A March 2000 article in Billboard magazine states: “The children’s video market is awash with ‘smart baby’ videos that say it’s never too early to learn, and the latest crop tried to convince parents that even though their babies can’t talk, they can still learn a foreign language.” Beneath the sarcasm is a sentiment that overlooks the purpose of the first Baby Einstein video—to familiarize babies with sounds from other languages while they are pre-verbal and still able to create those sounds. The video does not purport to teach foreign language in a systematic way. Similarly, a 2006 article
As any good Supermom will tell you, Baby Einstein is the choice of parents who want their daughter to speak Swahili by 7th grade and go to Harvard” (Bronson and Merryman). Statements of this kind distort the reality of the product, a misrepresentation indicative of the media frenzy that surrounds so-called ‘smart baby’ products and perpetuates emerging cultural myths of American middle class childhood and parenting.

If the media is to be believed, the current definition of childhood for the contemporary American middle class relies heavily on full schedules, stimulation and school success—leading to maturity and independence by age eighteen, when the ‘adult’ child enters a prestigious university. The consequences of these ideals are explored in several books published over the last five years, including *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* (Rosenfeld and Wise) and *Reclaiming Childhood: Letting Children Be Children in Our Achievement-Oriented Society* (Crain). An earlier text, David Elkind’s *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, due for release next year in a twenty-fifth anniversary edition, explores the consequences of a culture intent on producing ‘Superkids’ (Elkind’s term) who have been forced to mature before they’re ready. The pressure to achieve, to gain admittance to the best preschools, schools, and universities, as these books attest, is exacerbated by influences outside the family, namely, the news media and parenting advice texts.

A recent article in *Time* magazine suggests that such dilemmas do not impact the middle class as we have been led to believe, that “the media needs a reality check. […] This new paranoia that we’re all smothering our kids is a myth.” This article purports that these issues affect *some* parents, most of them affluent, and that concern about them spreads to the mainstream via exaggerated media reports of parents:
[...] crazily obsessed with giving their children a head start. By middle school the kids are world-weary and anxiety-ridden. These domineering parents are the subject of books such as Alissa Quart's *Hothouse Kids*, Alexandra Robbins' *The Overachievers* and Madeline Levine's *The Price of Privilege*. Or last year's media sensation, Judith Warner's *Perfect Madness*, about mothers on the brink of insanity as they seek to create perfect childhoods for their tots. The affluence of these parents is never copped to; yet once these fears enter into the media bubble, they get supercharged into widespread panic by the multiplying coverage. [...] As this constant misrepresentation trickles down to the lower classes, it causes unintended consequences. It teaches the paranoia to people who don't have the problem. Parents who didn't even know college placement specialists existed are suddenly panicked that they should sell their Chevy to hire one. (Bronson and Merryman)

It is difficult to determine which popular press articles are to be believed. The authors of the *Time* article claim that “the true American family” is being ignored as the media focuses on wealthy households, but they base their argument solely on 2005 sales figures indicating that Mattel’s Barbie brand (what the “true American family” buys, according to the authors) produced sales fifteen times higher than the Baby Einstein brand. Again, Baby Einstein is portrayed as elite culture for the affluent, something it certainly is not. Other problems with the logic of the *Time* article aside, it is problematic to assert that any one definition of childhood could prevail in such a diverse nation.

Such publicity is fortuitous for the companies that seemingly respond to these pressures parents presumably face. Increased demand for Baby Einstein products can be interpreted as
evidence of a society obsessed with making babies smarter from the moment of birth (or before).

A writer for *Business Week Online*, commenting in 2003 on Disney’s plans to extend Baby Einstein product lines’ reach from the U.S., Canada, Israel, Spain, Japan, and New Zealand to include China, Chile, Mexico, and France, remarks, “Some might wonder whether parents in other parts of the world will be as taken with the whole improve-your-baby aura that permeates the Baby Einstein line” (Brady).

If the need to ‘improve’ babies is as distinctly American as this article suggests, it may be linked to the notion that in American culture, success and identity are inextricably bound up in practices of consumption—we are what we own. Through the purchase of enrichment texts like the Baby Einstein video series, consumers can consider their children stimulated, enriched, and equipped with tools for successful early development that will lead to success in adult life. Stephen Kline, in a semiotic examination of post-WWII advertisements featuring children, notes the significant ubiquity of certain items:

[…] most of [the advertisements] convey the sense that the common tools of childhood—the ball, the doll, the bicycle—are essential to good parenting. The moral force of the presentation of these objects is that parents who cannot provide them are in some ways inadequate. (107)

In 2006, Baby Einstein is a household name among parents and non-parents alike and new videos, CDs, licensed character products and spin-off texts continue to be released. Perhaps the Baby Einstein brand has become ‘essential to good parenting’ in the minds of consumers, a fixture in the birth through three years playroom, and, like the earliest educational playthings, has become an “emblem of a cult of ‘good parenting’ in an educated sector of the American middle class” (Cross 143).
My initial displeasure at the idea of Baby Einstein Company stemmed from the ‘improve-your-baby aura’ mentioned in the previous section and my personal opposition to pressuring, rather than inspiring, children. Imagine my surprise when close examination revealed a series of texts scarcely dissimilar to other children’s video fare. No heavy pedagogical component exists in these videos. The texts themselves, despite some subtle ideological infiltration (discussed in Chapter Three), are little more than musical puppet shows coupled with stock footage and an occasional flash of fine art. They certainly don’t give the impression of a potential to make babies smarter, although I wouldn’t doubt their ability to hypnotize infants for an hour or two.

It would be easy to dismiss Baby Einstein videos with an elitist shrug, categorizing them as trivial, commercial, and banal, but I can’t quite bring myself to do so. While I don’t profess to like these texts any more than when I started this project, I now understand their greater significance. The import of Baby Einstein Company in twenty-first century American culture lies not within mesmerizing scenes of spinning tops and churning seascapes. It’s not in the lilting refrain of a re-orchestrated Mozart sonata. The ‘notion’ of Baby Einstein is much more powerful than the products themselves could ever be. The significance of the phenomenon exists in media tendencies, parental anxieties, and social trends propagated and influenced by the brand.

Enrichment videos in the Baby Einstein series forestall negative feelings of guilt by offering the joy of discovery and exposure to elite cultural texts. Add to this the possibility of brain development and other positive outcomes, and Baby Einstein Company offers an attractive bundle of incentives. Parents who yearn for a bright future and desired outcomes for their offspring need only turn to the market for a passel of products promising to aid in the realization of those dreams. The opportunity to buy desired outcomes for one’s children is an enticing one, particularly in a protean world where the future is an uncertain affair and frequently “the
consumption of hope may outweigh a product’s ability to deliver” (de Mello and MacInnis 50). In the case of a Baby Einstein video, there may be negligible belief that the product will actually make a measurable difference, but the hope that it might help could be worth the $16.95.

Even if Baby Einstein videos can’t provide an avenue to ‘genius’ or guaranteed admission to the right university, they do offer a chance for parents stretched thin by employment, household, and social demands to tend to chores and other children, or even to relax. Consumer products—pre-packaged foods and home videos, for example—may not be ideal fixes according to ‘experts’ but, as Ellen Seiter notes, “snacks and toys and videos make children happy: no matter how fleeting the joy, it is an important goal for mothers in a culture in which childhood means happiness” (“Children’s” 306).

The Future of the Controversial 0-3 Video Market

Baby Einstein Company was an early, significant producer of enrichment videos that capitalized on the arts as a perceived avenue to genius. A Billboard magazine article acknowledges the first Baby Einstein video, Baby Einstein: Language Nursery (1997) as the vanguard for baby language videos. While Baby Einstein Company’s early videos were not the first educational or enrichment videos produced for children, the company impacted the age 0-3 market tremendously and the videos, to borrow a phrase from Alan Bryman’s discussion of Disney theme parks, “are emblematic of certain trends […] while simultaneously having been influential in their own right” (vii). The brand remains entrenched as a guilt-free (or reduced-guilt) video

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5 Notably, Babyscapes’ Baby’s Smart Start: Classical Music and Black, White, and Red Images (1996, the original packaging features a baby wearing a diaper and a red mortarboard graduation hat). A later video in this series, Celebration of Color (2001), does not directly allude to intelligence but retains the graduate regalia imagery on the packaging (“Kids”).
indulgence that, despite scientific data to the contrary, might just inspire an average child to become a prodigy.

Like all vanguards, Baby Einstein Company has inspired numerous imitators who have adopted similar humanities and/or ‘smart baby’ marketing approaches. Series such as Baby Genius, So Smart!, Baby Know-It-All, and HBO Presents: Classical Baby are a testament to the seemingly limitless profits to be culled from anxious middle class parents. The Baby Gourmet series goes so far as to suggest a future adult role of gastronomic accomplishment while merely introducing children to foods—foods they probably would have encountered eventually, without a video to enrich them.

Television and digital media formats are not going away and the debate about media’s ability to influence child development will continue as parents tackle the difficult dilemma of deciding what is ‘best’ for their children in matters of television viewing. Government entities, non-profit organizations, and popular magazines dedicated to child rearing frequently urge parents to manage or eliminate their children’s TV time. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), an esteemed authority on child development, advises, “Until more research is done about the effects of TV on very young children, the American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend television for children age 2 or younger” (“Television”). In the same document of television advice for parents, the AAP recommends that if children do watch, they should see only appropriate videos. The AAP provides a hyperlink to the Kids First! online listing of endorsed, educational selections. At this website, parents will be confronted by perplexing, conflicting advice: Kids First! lists video selections in age categories beginning with ages 0-2 years (“Kids”). Baby Einstein Company products for that age group are heavily represented—it is easy to interpret this as an endorsement of Baby Einstein videos by the American Academy of

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6 See Appendix B for a listing of selected titles.
Pediatrics. The example demonstrates that even trusted, ‘expert’ sources can offer contradictory advice to American parents trying to assess the latest controversial media texts for babies. The year 2006 brought two new controversial texts into this debate.

In April, makers of the educational public television cornerstone, *Sesame Street*, released *Sesame Beginnings*, their “innovative research-based DVD series for parents and young children that encourages learning through parent-child interactions” (“About”). The series, which one critic calls “a betrayal of children and families,” was developed in collaboration with Zero to Three, a respected children’s nonprofit agency. Each of the three articles about the *Sesame Beginnings* controversy cited here reference Baby Einstein Company as the forerunner in videos for children aged 0-2. The success of Baby Einstein has opened the door to additional controversial media texts, and, as some critics of the new series suggest, the makers of *Sesame Street* couldn’t resist the opportunity to exploit such a lucrative market (Oldenburg C1). An interviewee for ABC News asserts that the new series “will encourage babies' devotion to TV characters that have been licensed to promote hundreds of other products" (Crary). Zero to Three’s executive director claims that critics of the series have misunderstood its intentions and a Zero to Three board member and Yale University child development expert concurs, "These are the absolute antithesis of park-your-baby-in-front-of-the-TV kind of videos. [...] it's not a corporate campaign trying to draw kids into TV life" (Crary). Outspoken *Sesame Beginnings* critic and Harvard Medical School psychologist Susan Linn asks, "Why in the world would anyone suggest parents put their kids in front of the TV before kids even ask for it?" (Oldenburg C1).

Controversy also surrounds BabyFirstTV, the first commercial-free, 24-hour premium television network designed for babies 6 months to 3 years old. The channel debuted in May
2006 to heated opposition from child development professionals. Like Baby Einstein Company, BabyFirstTV stresses that its product is designed to bring parents and children together to watch, not to be used as a babysitter. Co-founder Sharon Rechter claims the network, a premium channel costing $9.99 per month, will "[instruct] the parents on how you ask the right questions" via subtitle-like messages that appear on the screen to encourage interaction, such as discussing the colors that appear in a particular scene ("Baby’s"). Pediatric psychologist Dr. Alan Hilfer, responds, "If parents need TV to encourage them to get together with their infants and toddlers, then we have something else we need to be talking about. That's scary!" ("Baby’s").

Baby Einstein Company continues to release new titles, although the use of white, male genius namesakes has waned in favor of more generic titles; the latest releases carry no namesake at all. The babies who have grown up with Baby Einstein Company can tune in to Little Einsteins, a cartoon on the Playhouse Disney channel. This program, replete with “exciting musical adventures set in the real world” ("Philosophy") is designed for preschoolers age 3-5. Early promotional materials for the series suggest that this exploration into the ‘real world’ includes instruction in gender and race stereotypes—something preschoolers about to enter the social world of school could probably do without.

Little Einsteins follows a familiar formula for children’s television, featuring a white male “at the center of the action. Children of color and girls of all races are dispersed to the sidelines as mascots, companions” (Seiter, “Children’s” 315). The Little Einsteins team includes Leo, the sole white male child, who directs the group’s activities: “This little conductor leads the team on all of their exciting missions.” Quincy, a black child depicted playing a saxophone, “keeps everyone in stitches with his slapstick humor.” June, a willowy girl of Asian descent, is “an elegant dancer who loves pretty things and exercises high vocabulary.” Finally, there’s little
Annie, a blonde, presumably younger child, who is identified in terms of the leader, Leo: “Leo’s little sister shines as a singer and loves to make up songs on the spot” (“Baby Einstein News”). Promos for the series show Leo in the driver’s seat of the team’s spaceship, June in the front passenger seat, and Quincy and Annie in the back. Stereotypical representations of gender and race such as these are problematic in children’s programming because “children, like adults, often look to those who seem similar to themselves. If we want girls to excel in math and science, they must see female characters who participate in these activities” (Calvert 188).

This thesis presents a text-based analysis of the Baby Einstein phenomenon and a discussion of likely explanations for its popularity and the consumer motivations that may exist in the millions of American homes stocked with Baby Einstein videos, books, toys, flash cards, hand puppets, and tie-in merchandise. A comprehensive ethnographic study is the only way to determine the true stimulus behind these purchases. Is it the parents’ own love of the humanities, as Julie Aigner-Clark voices in early interviews as her personal driving force? Is it the status that elite cultural texts still convey, even in a simplified, commercialized format? Is it anxiety about an uncertain future and an urge to prepare children in any manner possible for the right preschool and, ultimately, the right university? Or is it the lure of thirty minutes free to do laundry with minimal guilt? Ethnography is the only method that will answer these lingering questions.
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APPENDIX A. ALPHABETIZED LISTING OF BABY EINSTEIN VIDEO TITLES\(^7, 8\)

*Baby Bach: Musical Adventure* (1999)*


*Baby MacDonald: A Day on the Farm* (2004)

*Baby Monet: Discovering the Seasons* (2005)

*Baby Mozart: Music Festival* (1998)*


*Baby Santa’s Music Box* (2000)*

*Baby Shakespeare: World of Poetry* (2000)*

*Baby Van Gogh: World of Colors* (2000)*


*Baby’s First Moves* (2006)*

*Language Nursery* (1998)*

*Meet the Orchestra - First Instruments* (2006)

*Neighborhood Animals* (2001)


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\(^7\) Current titles followed by year of initial release. Titles of earlier videos released on VHS were modified slightly for later DVD release (e.g. addition of subtitle).

\(^8\) Titles marked with an asterisk were produced prior to Walt Disney Company’s acquisition.

\(^9\) Not yet released at the time of writing.
On the Go - Riding, Sailing and Soaring (2005)

World Animals (2001)
APPENDIX B. SELECTED LISTING OF OTHER HUMANITIES-BASED AND ‘SMART BABY’ VIDEO TITLES


*Baby Genius: The Four Seasons* (2001)

*Baby Gourmet: Fall/Winter Harvest* (2001)

*Baby Gourmet: Spring and Summer Celebrations* (2001)


*Baby Know-It-All Lil' Bloomer* (2001)

*Baby Know-It-All Smartypants* (2001)

*Babyscapes Baby's Smart Start: Images and Classical Music* (1996)

*Babyscapes Miracle of Mozart: Numbers and Shapes* (1998)


*Brainy Baby: Left Brain* (2000)

*Brainy Baby: Right Brain* (2000)


*So Smart!: First Words* (2002)

*So Smart!: Sights & Sounds* (1997)