

## Envisioning Children: On Food, Fat and Freedom

by Charlene Elliott

Let's begin with two events. The first is the 16th Annual *Kid Power!* conference, held in June 2009 at the Disney Yacht Club in Orlando, Florida. *Kid Power!* is promoted as "the longest running kids marketing event," and promises to reveal the latest insights on how to best market to children and "the whole family." Industry-focused and sponsored, the conference's singular thematic is that marketing directly to children represents, not exploitation, but empowerment—hence the title *Kid Power!* The topic of food marketing to children occupied a substantial place in this conference: it is a multi-billion dollar industry after all (FTC), and also a hot button issue for corporate players concerned about the possibility of regulation because of childhood obesity epidemic. As the Vice President of Sara Lee (the maker of frozen cakes and pastries) explained to me, he attended the *Kid Power!* conference to get ideas for marketing Sara Lee products to children, yet equally wanted to avoid any backlash from the consumer and/or regulatory front.<sup>1</sup> Given the dialogue characterizing this particular event, however, it seemed he need not worry. Visions of the "empowered child consumer" trumped all discussion; even the representative of the single advocacy group present, Action for Healthy Kids, argued that the regulation of food marketing to children, at any age, violates of their freedom of choice.

The second event is Canada's CDPAC Policy Consensus conference—also on food marketing to children—held in March 2008. This conference maintained, conversely, that "access to our children is a privilege not a right, and as such should be subject to stringent regulation" (CDPAC 2008). CDPAC's policy consensus statement called for the Government of Canada to establish and enforce "a regulatory regime that ends all marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children within two years" (CDPAC 2008).

These two events, however inadvertently, offer an entry point for considering the malleability of images of the child—how these images are employed (conceptually and literally) and how children are envisioned in current debates over food. On one side stands *Kid Power!*'s empowered consumer; on the other, CDPAC's vulnerable target. Observing the tension between these competing visions is nothing new, and certainly commonplace in the academic literature on childhood. (Notions of childhood agency are embraced by cultural studies scholars while the vulnerable child thesis is picked up by political economists, cognitive development theorists and media effects researchers.) And yet, when considering *policies around food*, these rather pat visions of the empowered child or the vulnerable child become troubled.

The idea of food and policy invites us to envision not merely our current dietary

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<sup>1</sup> This is a fair comment since the promotional materials indicated that the KidPower! Conference—recognizing the "backlash against product initiatives"—would suggest "the best ways of positively engaging...the whole family & the 'whole child'" (<http://www.kidpowerx.com/requestabrochure.php>).

habits, but also how eating behavior contributes to a future bodily state—whether healthy, unhealthy or obese. Robert Cover argues that law is the “projection of an imagined future upon reality,” (Cover 203) and this article suggests that when it comes to the policy debate over food marketing, children’s “imagined futures” become transposed. In policy debates, the imagined future of the “empowered consumer” child—one with pure freedom of choice—is framed as that of an obese, and consequently socially disempowered, adult. Empowerment, in this case, leads to a vision of diseased bodies and social stigma. Conversely, the imagined future of the “protected child” (for opponents of regulation) lack freedom. In this frame, protection is envisioned as stifling and a violation of basic human rights. In each scenario, the visions—and voices—of children are heard in strikingly different ways.

Several routes could be taken to reveal how conceptual and literal images of the child figure in the empowered consumer/vulnerable target schism when it comes to food marketing. This article focuses specifically on the concepts of *freedom and food* and *vulnerability to food*. It examines concepts of children and their “imagined futures” creatively, using a set of cultural images and vignettes, and reveals the themes of empowerment and vulnerability threaded throughout. In particular, the article examines a recent advertising campaign and a popular children’s film to illustrate the interplay between childhood, freedom and vulnerability when it comes to food.

### **Vision 1: Freedom and Food**

Concepts of *freedom and food* and *vulnerability to food* will be illuminated by a set of cultural images, which give voice to these competing visions. While these images do not directly picture children, the notion of the child figures prominently. Illustrating the *freedom and food* category is the YOU ARE TOO STUPID campaign, funded by the Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF). CCF is a “consumer rights” group. It frames itself as a “nonprofit organization devoted to promoting personal responsibility and protecting consumer choices” (CCF); although with funding from over 100 companies, it is widely recognized as a front for the food industry. YOU ARE TOO STUPID, as a campaign, presents CCF’s “response” to various legal interventions related to food consumption. Its series of advertisements, both televised and in print, all follow the same format—boldly proclaiming that the government believes Americans are “too stupid” to make their own food and beverage choices. Figures 1 and 2 provide examples of two recent ads:

**YOU ARE TOO STUPID**

...to make good personal decisions about foods and beverages.

The New York Department of ~~Health~~ Hype has used your tax dollars to launch an advertising campaign to demonize soda.

Food cops and politicians are attacking food and soda choices they don't like. Have they gone too far?

*It's your food. It's your drink. It's your freedom.*  
Find out more about attacks on your favorite foods and drinks at:

**ConsumerFreedom.com**

Fig. 1

**YOU ARE TOO STUPID**

...to make your own food choices. At least according to the food police and government bureaucrats who have proposed "fat taxes" on foods they don't want you to eat. Now the trial lawyers are threatening class-action lawsuits against restaurants for serving America's favorite foods and drinks.

We think they're going too far.

*It's your food. It's your drink. It's your freedom.*  
Find out more about attacks on your favorite foods and drinks at:

**ConsumerFreedom.com**

Fig. 2

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As the text of Figure 1 affirms:

YOU ARE TOO STUPID... to make good personal decisions about foods and beverages. Now the department of 'Hype' has used your tax dollars to launch an advertising campaign to demonize soda.

Food cops and politicians are attacking food and soda choices they don't like. Have they gone too far?

*It's your food. It's your drink. It's your freedom.*

This advertisement (Figure 1) occupied a full page in the *New York Times* on October 1, 2009, as part of a \$1 million campaign against the New York City Health Department's "crusade against sugary soft drinks" (Bennett and Seifman 2009, 12). The "crusade" in question was a \$300,000 public awareness campaign against sodas launched at the end of August 2009 ("Center for Consumer" 66). Among other things, the awareness campaign specifically counsels people against buying sodas, sports drinks, energy drinks, fruit flavored drinks and punch for their children. The second YOU ARE TOO STUPID advertisement (see Figure 2) also yokes "freedom" to food and drinks, affirming:

YOU ARE TOO STUPID... to make your own food choices. At least, according to food police and government bureaucrats who have proposed “fat taxes” on foods they don’t want you to eat. Now the trial lawyers are threatening class-action lawsuits against restaurants for serving America’s favorite food and drinks.

We think they are going too far.

*It’s your food. It’s your drink. It’s your freedom.*

This advertisement reacted to a recent proposal made by both the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the lobby group Centre for the Science in the Public Interest to create a nation-wide soda pop tax—7 cents per 12 oz can—in the United States. The proposed tax would generate more than \$10 billion a year in a move that IOM argues could “benefit children’s health and the nation’s wealth” (Stones).

What is notable about the Health Department’s public awareness campaign and IOM’s soda tax proposal is its conspicuous and pointed reference to children and children’s health, even though the regulatory moves embrace far more than that. What is notable about the YOU ARE TOO STUPID campaign’s rebuttal, in contrast, is that consumer freedom is depicted in the advertisements as the “right” to donuts, cookies, soda pop and ice cream. *You are too stupid to make your own food choices*, one ad begins, but the choices presented within the pitch are extraordinarily limited: the advertisement contains no fruits, vegetables, low fat dairy or lean protein—because freedom, as represented, is about burgers, soda and donuts. For CCF, consumer freedom appears to mean choosing solely between things that people know are bad for them. The final word from the Center for Consumer Freedom always remains: *It’s your food. It’s your drink. It’s your freedom.*

Exactly the same ethos is promoted by conservative activist Ezra Levant in his 2005 book *The War on Fun*, which similarly pits the freedom of individual choice and libertarianism against the “nanny state” and a public policy created by “do gooders” and proponents of “junk science” (Levant). Levant does not directly tell readers what the War on Fun is—but its thematic chapters reveal that the War on Fun is comprised of a series of critical mini battles that devastate consumer freedom to choose. These include: The War on Smoking; the War on SUVs; the War on Fast Food and the War on Food in general—which, for Levant, is evidenced by the legal requirement for calorie labeling on fast food menus and restaurant menus in some US States. Fun, apparently, is about smoking, big cars, fast food, and high calorie restaurant meals; *The War on Fun* is waged by a government intent on meddling in such matters. According to Levant, this intervention constitutes “forced infantilization of the consumer public” (14) and is unspeakably offensive.

Levant’s point about forced infantilization—which is also what the CCF ads pivot on—is worth scrutiny, because the concept of infantilization is also used by critical

theorist Benjamin Barber to describe the flip side of the coin. For Barber, infantilization is not a sign or process of government intervention, but the upshot of a culture driven entirely by consumption. The infantalist ethos, Barber argues, best describes American capitalism in its late consumerist phase, because all of the great values and responsibilities—public, civic and moral—have given way to the notion that immediate, self-gratification found through consumption is all that matters. The Protestant work ethic, which viewed work as a calling and framed personal responsibility as a moral obligation, has by supplanted, Barber argues, by the new “ethos of infantilization.” Participants in this phenomenon are not citizens but *kidults* or *adultescents*—phrases that Barber uses to refer to enduring childishness, an ethos that allows 35 year-old men to feel that buying X-boxes and playing video games are perfectly respectable acts. An infantalist ethos is useful to global capitalism because “adult regression”—fostering grown-ups with “the tastes and habits of children” (7)—guarantees there will be a thriving market for the endless supply of useless trinkets/entertainment products produced for consumption. As Barber notes: “Inducing [adults] to remain childish and impetuous in their taste helps ensure that they will buy the global market goods designed for indolent and prosperous youth” (11).

The point I would like to make here is twofold. First of all, the notion of *kidults* and *adultescents* provides a quite different perspective than what is found in some of the literature on childhood, which suggests that childhood is “special” although constantly under threat by pressures that speed it up. Postman, for example, wrote about the “disappearance of childhood” (1982), Elkind has three editions (as well as a 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition), of the *Hurried Child: Growing up too fast too soon* (1981, 1998, 2001, 2007)<sup>2</sup> and David Buckingham (2000) has critically examined challenges to the conceptual opposition between adulthood and childhood. But Benjamin Barber takes a different stance: it is not that *childhood* is disappearing per se, because of being “hurried” through the developmental years or because technology gives innocent children access to adult “secrets.” The problem is that *adulthood is disappearing*—it is being pushed into childhood, because a childlike ethos is much more profitable to the marketplace.<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, I return to the Center for Consumer Freedom advertisement and Ezra Levant, because their arguments for consumer “freedom” are, in fact, arguments for infantilization and not railing against it. I assert this, because it should be children who demand ice cream, pop and junk food, while adults intervene—because adults know that immediate gratification is not the ticket to long-term health. As Barber opines, “[c]hoice without consequences is of course a synonym for disempowerment” (31). Indeed, the idea of positioning junk and fast food as markers of “freedom” is a significant sign of infantilization: these foodstuffs symbolize indiscriminate taste and easy

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Elkind’s *Hurried Child* opens with the dire warning that “the concept of childhood... is threatened with extinction in the society we have created” (3)—an argument not unlike other popular texts that warn of the perils of hyper-parenting or micro-managing to children (see Honoré).

<sup>3</sup> Although it is not his main focus, Postman (1982) also makes this observation. But he credits technology (specifically television), and not capitalism for the transformation. “If one looks closely at the content of TV,” he argues, one can find a fairly precise documentation not only of the rise of the “adulltified” child but also of the rise of the “childified” adult (126).

palatability, which (historically) children were supposed to “grow out of” as they matured into adulthood.

Charles Barnett has argued that the practice of parents taking responsibility for their children’s food consumption can be understood as “ordinarily ethical consumption routines.”<sup>4</sup> Rachel Colls and Bethan Evans similarly recognize that “children and parents [have]... differentiated capacities to make choices about food” and to recognize healthy choices (Colls and Evans 617). What makes children *children* is that they are cognitively limited and resistant to proper choices; they are not necessarily incapable of making healthy choices, but could be considered irresponsible because they are typically unwilling “to eat the ‘right foods’” (625). In Colls and Evans’ perspective, the *ethics of consumption resides*, not simply within parental responsibility for healthy choices, but in a grid or network, which they term “an embodied geography of responsible relations” (617). In this geography adult actors (in the form of parents), institutions (like schools and government agencies) and environments (like supermarkets) combine to support and ensure the healthy food choices of children. This is a model of collective responsibility, interested in the relationships between different actors/bodies.

Both Barnett’s *ethics of consumption* and Colls and Evans *embodied geography of responsible relations* pivot on the reality of adult responsibility. It is a premise that Barber’s notion of *kidults* denies. And, despite strident calls to “freedom” and rejections of the nanny state, adult responsibility is equally (and ironically) denied by CCF and Levant. Levant’s critique of the *War on Fun*, for instance, explicitly frames any ethics of consumption as a killjoy. Levant considers the mandatory nutrition labeling on fast food, and deems it another example of the nanny state run amok. Certainly, knowing the nutritional composition of a big Mac might actually take the “fun” out of eating it. But as an adult, surely knowledge is a form of empowerment, not disempowerment—knowledge allows for an ethics of consumption, which cannot exist otherwise. As Barber reminds us, part of becoming an adult means that responsibility and sophisticated analysis must supersede childish preoccupations with fun, as well as simplistic explanations and juvenile interpretations.<sup>5</sup> Consider, again, CCF’s advertising campaign. What is more childlike than making the “right to cookies” equivalent to freedom?

CCF’s campaign brings us back to Robert Cover’s “imagined future.” CCF’s imagined future presents two possible worlds: one with minimal cookies, limited “freedom” and regulation, or maximum freedom, endless consumer choice, no regulation and perhaps obesity, high blood pressure, type-II diabetes and the range of other health ailments associated with overconsumption of low nutrient foods. The limited options displayed on the posters communicate choice without an ethics of consumption or embodied responsibility. CCF responds to proposed government policies and regulations—all of which prominently figure the image (and health) of the child to ensure consumer acceptance—by focusing attention on the individual’s freedom to choose. And yet this adult “right” is undermined by making the choice a juvenile one (the “freedom to

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<sup>4</sup> This argument is drawn from Colls and Evans (617).

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, too, adult concepts of fun require slightly more sophistication than ingesting a Big Mac.

cookies”). The child explicitly referenced in the Health Department’s campaigns against fast food, junk food and soda becomes implicit in CCF’s childlike demands for gratification (the “right” to treats). Indeed, images of child are present in both campaigns, one literally and the other, by promoting a childlike ethos.

In drawing this particular argument to a close, it would be remiss not to observe what CCF overlooks in its campaign against regulation—namely, numerous regulatory policies (such as the US farm bill, the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, and the agricultural subsidy programs mandated by the farm bills) which make sugary sodas and other low-nutrient foods so ubiquitous and inexpensive to begin with. CCF isn’t against regulation per se, just regulation at the consumer level.

### **Vision 2: Vulnerability to Food (or the Heavy Price of Freedom)**

The concept of *freedom and food*, I have argued, can be productively illustrated using the CCF YOU ARE TOO STUPID campaign. *Vulnerability to food*, the conceptual flip side of the coin, will be addressed using the 2008 film WALL-E. Like CCF’s campaign, WALL-E evokes much about children and childhood even when not directly representing it. Spectacularly successful, the film has grossed over \$550 million in box office sales (Lowry), and has won numerous awards, including the 2008 Golden Globe Award for Best Animated Feature Film and the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2008. WALL-E provides a filmic and futuristic representation of what happens when Barber’s infantalist ethos and CCF’s “freedom” to consume regardless of the consequences is allowed to triumph. Interestingly, this is a children’s computer-animated film—and so stands as a poignant warning to both children (and adults) against the problem of kidults.

In this futuristic tale, produced by Pixar Animation Studios, excessive consumer demand for trinkets and material goods has overwhelmed the planet, leaving it completely buried in garbage. Instead of taking responsibility for planet (much less foreseeing the logical endpoint of this excessive consumption), humanity has abandoned earth for space. Drifting through the cosmos on a luxury “BnL starliner,” humans carry on with their established consumption habits while they wait for a team of trash compactor robots (named WALL-E) to clean up earth’s mess. Viewers meet up with them some 700 years later.

Neither space nor consumerism has been kind to humans (although the film’s characters are unaware of this fact). Having no physical need to move their bodies, individuals have ceased to do so: fully automated, personal “hover” chairs zip people through the luxury ship; each chair is equipped with a screen for ordering food, “virtually” talking to others and engaging in “virtual” physical activities. Buy n Large (BnL), the mega-corporation running the starliner, sets the tone for all its inhabitants: digital signs of BUY! SHOP! LIVE! *are* the landscape and ship loudspeakers announce “Buy n Large... everything you need to be happy.” Even education is handled by BnL, where “All Day Care” centers, governed by robots, teach toddlers that “B is for Buy n Large, your very best friend.” Futuristic adults, bent solely on instant gratification, have even abdicated the responsibility of raising their own children.

Children, however, are not the focus of the film--robots are. People, when depicted, are almost all adults, obese through a lifetime of sitting and excessive consumption.

In stark contrast to CCF's ads, where the "right" to junk food is the sign of freedom, consumption in Wall-E is both limiting and a great homogenizer. Obese adults rely on hover-chairs to move and reduce life to endless distraction; personal style is transformed into identical unitards (presumably the only fit for such corpulent bodies), and "choice" becomes the selection—by the press of a button—of changing a red unitard to blue. All of this echoes Adorno's critique that the "culture industry" is really about an eternal sameness, and only the most superficial of differences (Adorno). Yet Pixar's film represents more than Adorno's eternal sameness; WALL-E's adults strongly evoke the figure of the child by their puerile activities, attitudes and interests. Barber indicates that a key indicator of the infantilist ethos is "the nurturing of a culture of impetuous consumption" (Barber, 81), which is precisely what drives humanity onto the BnL starliner in the first place. Such impetuous consumption stands in opposition to an "adult world" characterized by self-restraint, a respect for delayed gratification and, significantly, moral autonomy—defined as "the use of freedom to choose the purposeful and the good" (Barber, 85). Instead of exercising moral autonomy, adults in WALL-E have squandered their freedom to indulge in (childlike) consumerist whims.

For the purposes of this analysis, a key element of WALL-E is its representation of food. Even though the representation of food, as well as that of the body, forms a minor element in the film, its message is compelling. In WALL-E all sustenance comes in "biggie" plastic takeout cups with straws. Cupcakes in a cup, pizza in a cup, donuts in a cup—all of the junk foodstuffs that are championed in CCF advertisements for "freedom" have been pureed for even easier consumption. This pabulum, ingested through a straw, signals the great infantilization of adults (just as it is infant like to be unable stand up at will). To reiterate, these processed foods, *precisely the same edibles CCF currently defends as signs of "freedom,"* have led to unfreedom. Cover's "imagined future" of those left to indulge, unchecked, is bleak indeed.

WALL-E's cautionary tale warns about the consequences of both unbridled consumption and the abdication of stewardship. Interestingly, it is the discovery of an unprocessed item—a plant—that ultimately offers the promise of freedom. It is a plant, not a product, that actually saves the separate world of children by forcing adults to stop acting the child. The turning point in WALL-E's narrative occurs when the adulescents in the film, particularly the ship's captain, realize that a plant seedling rescued from earth requires nurturing. Although a conventional metaphor, the notion of nurturing a plant through its stages of growth and fruition does not merely represent the call for humanity to return to earth and resume stewardship of the planet. It is equally a call for the return to normalcy—that is, a call to return the proper delineations between adulthood and childhood.

Recognizing the value of the *unprocessed*, the real and not the artificial, works to pull infantilized adults back onto the set of adulthood; it forces them to recognize their responsibility to a world beyond their immediate, personal (and puerile) tastes. It is only



through effort and labour (i.e., recognizing the need to care for plant life/nature and, by extension the planet) and through valuing the unprocessed, that the health of humanity is restored. This stands in stark contrast to YOU ARE TOO STUPID campaign—which does not in fact insist that the consumer be responsible, but rather, promotes the dismissal of responsibility under the rubric of choice and the resistance to regulation.

### **Envisioning children**

Starting with *Kid Power!*'s call to child (consumer) “empowerment” and CDPAC’s insistence on children’s vulnerability when it comes to food, this paper has suggested that the empowerment/vulnerability dichotomy is far more complex than presented. Food policy invites us to consider how eating behavior contributes to a future bodily state, and Cover’s argument that law “is the projection of an imagined future upon reality” (Cover 203) encourages a critical reexamination of what the imagined futures of our children might be. I have suggested that children’s “imagined futures” become transposed when it comes to policy and food marketing: the imagined future of an “empowered child” with pure freedom of choice is envisioned as that of an obese, and consequently socially disempowered, adult. Conversely, the imagined future of the “protected child” (for opponents of regulation) is one without freedom. Rather than literally scrutinize food and policy debates, I have examined how images of *food and freedom* and *vulnerability to food* play out in two contemporary cultural artifacts, how the figure of the child is mobilized throughout. While images of the child might be literally evoked to bolster calls for “protection” against junk food marketing (thus supporting the vulnerable child thesis), the champions of “empowerment”—advocates of pure freedom of choice when it comes to food—in fact conjure up infantilist images, even as they rail against the “nanny state.” It is not simply the merging of the taste of children and adults that prove problematic (although this is well worth considering); it is also that the symbols of indiscriminate taste (such junk food and fast food) are infused with such political power (i.e., freedom). There is a clear adulescence in putting too much stock in the wrong things.<sup>6</sup>

James McNeal, perhaps the best known advocate for marketing to children, argues that “[c]hildren begin their consumer journey in infancy and certainly deserve consideration as consumers at that time” (McNeal 38); and yet the futuristic vision presented in WALL-E suggests that a consideration of humans purely as consumers is the route to ensuring they stay *like* children. The demand for highly palatable foods (cupcakes in a cup, pizza in a cup) is unmistakably juvenile; that such “sustenance” is sucked through a straw further evokes Freud’s notion of oral fixation and of the indulged child who resists growing up. In short, WALL-E illustrates Barber’s concept of infantilization, depicting what happens when “freedom” is conflated with the “right” to consume junk and fast food (as per CCF and Levant). The phenomenon of *kidults* or *adulescents*, which Barber paints as the upshot of indulging childlike tastes, reveals what happens when the virtues of deferred—or denied—gratification are overlooked. The result is a childlike ethos, an image of the child continually conjured up even when children are not physically present.

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, policies seeking to restrict the marketing of poorly nutritious foods to children explicitly seek to protect children from the very foods that CCF make synonymous with freedom.

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