

# Happiness in a Box. The Magic of Packaging at McDonald's

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the magic of Happy Meal boxes in a Swedish context. That packaging dissociates commodities from production process and standardisation is often claimed. The paper suggests that the understanding of the Happy Meal box and its relation to the child might be enlarged by the help of Latour-inspired French sociologist Madeleine Akrich (1994). According to her, a package (or any object) can be understood as a "script" or a "scenario" of the company's vision of the child and of the world. Not, however, a script in terms of an idea to be interpreted by the receiver, but in terms of a design or blueprint inscribed on the object. The package is designed to be handled by a child with certain preferences and competencies that is part of a cultural and social context of a certain kind. Which child subjectivities that are actually produced, is not at all presupposed, but produced in the meeting between the package and the child. It depends on the potentials and qualities of both parts that are realised and linked together at the meeting. Using this theoretical framework, Swedish Happy Meal boxes from 1979 till today and the toys included are analysed. The focus is on inscribed child subjectivities. The results show that the child inscribed in the late 70s boxes is a radiant but obedient child. The overall representation referred to was a Rousseauian, playing, natural child, even though with hedonistic overtones: that play demands playthings. In the 1990's there is a new inscription on the boxes and toys of a media wise child, familiar with the commercial world. This is a rather choosy child, not easily satisfied, a demanding child, that adults must make an effort to please. The level of what accounts for as an experience is all the time raised; bigger toys, in several parts, that can be handled in ever more refined ways. This inscribed child is more equal to adults, no longer living in the protective cocoon of the home, but in the same, commercialised, medialised society as their parents. A child with the right to consume experiences, the right to consume his or her subjectivity. Part of the explanation can be the ambivalence among adults to the combination of children and consumption, argued by historian Gary Cross (2002). Western parents consider children as creatures to be protected from commercialism and, at the same time, as recipients of consumer spending. Children serve as guarantors of innocence, naivety, simplicity, and the sanctities of private life and as valves of adult desire to consume. Merchandisers quickly learn to exploit the youthful desire, provoking anger among adults/parents, wanting to maintain children's "wondrous innocence", Cross maintains. Maybe it is this anger, or at least hesitation among many Swedish parents, that is the reason for the recent development. Maybe the child script produced by McDonald's during the late 90s has given birth to a child that is regarded as too fastidious, too spoilt and too competent to agree with a Swedish audience, a child regarded as having too many traits of the "cool child", that Cross argues have followed the child characterised by "wondrous innocence", a child script that needs to be supplemented by a design of a child defined as learning, growing, put in place in relations to adults by the help of pedagogical games and activities. A first example is "Learn for life", in cooperation with the non-profit association "Movement for reading", resulting in a Happy Meal with children's books, small booklets with covers, that were distributed in 1 \_ million copies at all the McDonald's restaurants in Sweden during the spring of 2001. In 2002 the campaign was followed by "Play & Learn CD-ROM". During three weeks time six

pedagogic CD-ROM discs were included in the Happy Meal, with titles like "Maths", "Pre-school", "First Grade" and "English". Also CD-ROM Happy Meal was an immediate success and was later during the fall of 2002 followed by "Clever and fun Happy Meal", consisting of six different activity books, learning children "useful facts", like how to make a kite and how to equip your bike in a fun way. McDonald's chooses to prolong new, supplementing values already via the packages. At the bags with the pedagogical CD-ROM games, the words "Play & Learn" are repeated in large letters and the paper is filled with drawings seemingly made by children, all in order to elucidate and prolong the value of the disc. Another kind of child subjectivity is inscribed; another type of action is presupposed. The urge to learn is emphasizes, as well as values like curiosity, fantasy, and creativity. The fanciful, creative child in the new knowledge society. But it is equally important that aspects of learning do not become too prominent. Most important is experience value and it is the "experience part" that is the most important to go in for in the years ahead, the marketing manager argues. Pedagogical values and Swedish morality of moderation is absent. "A birthday party at McDonald's is a way for you as a parent to make your child the centre of attraction, without reservation.... The fact is that the restaurants arranging the parties are built just to make children have fun and feel at home!" the homepage is blazoning. Obviously the child in the experience economy should develop his or her creativity and fantasy with the help of the artefacts of consumer culture. It is all about consuming qualities and subjectivities.

## References

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