

# Popular Culture and the Child Psychiatrist



*In my clinical practice, and later in my teaching, references to movies, television, and music served as an excellent guide to understanding the world.*

## ■ Michael Brody, M.D.

My interest in pop culture began with the sounds of hoof beats and bullets emanating from the gigantic RCA radio in our “living room.” But as much as I tried as a child to imagine The Lone Ranger riding his great horse Silver in the mountains and deserts of the West, the pictures in my mind were of him on my street next to the deli and newsstand. There were limits to my imagination as well with the flat, one-dimensional drawings in the *Golden Age* comics that I consumed.

My real connection to popular culture happened while sitting in the palace-like movie theatres of yesteryear. In these remarkable spaces, I was often by myself, but never without my tasty Peanut Chews. As I stared at the screen in wonderment, I was seeking not only entertainment but also useful information. I started these journeys at a young age when my grandmother would take me to see John Garfield, Joan Crawford, and Bette Davis. Most of these films were way over my head, with themes of adultery, murder, and betrayal. This Film Noir was made darker and even more incomprehensible to my six-year-old psyche by the constant commentary of my Nana. *“In real life the blonde up there on the screen just had an affair with Errol Flynn; that’s the actress that really murdered her sister-in-law; he*

*doesn’t know that’s not his child.”* Affairs, rejection, paternity—what was she talking about? While not really understanding all the “adult” stuff, I did learn from the movies that there was an alternate universe. The actors were beautiful and they did not scream when they spoke. They went to night clubs and concerts and when they smoked it did not cause me to cough.

As a young adult, still a movie fan, I learned about romance, work, and evil from *Giant*, *The Graduate*, and *Where the Boys Are*. Even my choice of a career in child and adolescent psychiatry was influenced by *The Bad Seed*, *Three Faces of Eve*, and *David and Lisa*.

In my clinical practice, and later in my teaching, references to movies, television, and music served as an excellent guide to understanding the world. *“Love means never having to say you’re sorry,”* from the film *Love Story*, underscored a number of relationship problems, while *Batman* better illustrated psychic trauma than trying to decipher CAT-scan studies of the brain. Allusions to popular culture clarifies and instructs. I have used *Gossip Girls* and *Beverly Hills 90210* to discuss adolescence with high schoolers and *E.T.* and *Nemo* to describe separation fears to nursery-school teachers. I have even used Cookie Monster to demonstrate Freud’s concept of the oral stage of development. Superheroes and

Barbie serve as excellent ice-breakers with young patients.

Since popular culture was so important to me and today’s child spends upwards of four to five hours a day looking at screens, I became an advocate through AACAP for a sensitive children’s media. In the process, I promoted the passage of federal legislation like the COPPA (The Children’s On-line Privacy and Protection Act) and The Children’s Educational Television Act.

The influence of the media does not apply just to children, but for all of us, as we are what we read, listen to, and watch. Popular culture through a 24/7 media pervades our lives with millions of electronic images and accompanying sound. It not only defines and disseminates the norms of behavior (think fashion, humor, and dance) but also delineates the very boundaries of both culture and society. What our young patients watch and how they watch (surf, text) reveals a great deal about them. In fact, what we all enjoy as entertainment says something about our psychology and what we value. ■

*Dr. Brody is chair of the AACAP Media Committee. He is the author of Messages: Self Help through Popular Culture.*

## **Did you know...**

Honolulu is the largest city in the world — at least it has the longest borders. According to the state constitution any island (or islet) not named as belonging to a county belongs to Honolulu. This makes all islands within the Hawaiian Archipelago, that stretch to Midway Island (1,500 miles northwest of Hawai’i) part of Honolulu. Honolulu is about 1,500 miles long or more distance than halfway across the 48 contiguous states.