

Trick or treat? Halloween lore, passive consumerism, and the candy industry.

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Trick or Treat? Halloween Lore, Passive Consumerism, and the Candy Industry

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Let him [a child] choose his foods, not for what he likes as such, but for what goes with something else, in taste and in texture and in general gastronomic excitement. It is not wicked sensuality, as Walter Scott's father would have thought, for a little boy to prefer buttered toast with spinach for supper and a cinnamon bun with milk for lunch. It is the beginning of a sensitive and thoughtful system of deliberate choice, which as he grows will grow too, so that increasingly he will be able to choose for himself and to weigh values.

—M. F. K. Fisher, *How to Cook a Wolf*

Sweetness has always been used as a way of making both the physical and ideological palatable—a process that seems especially relevant in child rearing and commercial child culture. In this essay I investigate representations of children's initiations into consumer society at the subtle level of appetite, especially through tempting sweets. To my mind a most interesting background for exploring this issue can be found in the commercialization, urban legends, childlore,¹ and rituals surrounding Halloween, a holiday that ranks second (after Easter) in the United States for candy consumption (Pottker 204) and no doubt as such plays an important role in socializing young children as future consumers. I am interested in showing how this early socialization operates within the body, ideologically initiating children into consumer culture through the development of taste. Trick-or-treating, in particular, is the only major American holiday ritual that is communally enacted for and *by* children,² and as such it would seemingly allow us to factor out parental influence in a study on the commercialization of childhood. Yet, throughout the history of this child ritual, parental control and corporate control share many **[End Page 82]** motives and methods. While some children's and family entertainments celebrate the empowering potential of Halloween rituals, commercial and protectionist practices pacify the

young (preparing them to become unquestioning consumers), and frequently Halloween stories reflect this reality, helping to co-opt the audience in the process.

Protectionist Sentiment and Child Choice

Consumer choice has become a greyer child-rights issue than initial sentiments and political passions often recognize. It is an area of debate in which it is unexpectedly difficult to distinguish the rhetoric of a self-determination vanguard from protectionists or exploiters—perhaps, because consumer rights as such are systemically justified within falsely totalizing capitalist ideologies. From the nineteenth century onward, choice has increasingly been defined (especially for middle-class children) in terms of an idle consumerism that has pacified and robbed the young of reciprocity in family and public power, ultimately tricking them out of power with treats.

Halloween, as a holiday of pranks and scares, often heightens protectionist impulses. A sentimental, protectionist approach to child rights can be seen as a direct result of capitalist development, commodifying offspring within social systems protecting increasingly privatized, patriarchal property,³ typified in the bourgeois family episteme. Rebekka Habermas explains the emergence of a bourgeois notion of "selfless parenting" that emerged in early nineteenth-century Germany with the affluence necessary to afford a protected childhood for one's offspring. A protectionist attitude emerged among the middle class toward youth, who were no longer working as they had been within a "reciprocal" family model (financially contributing and thus interdependently empowered). What results, Habermas explains, is a "selfless" ethic of parenting that ideologically disguises any self-serving motivations for childbearing and rearing:

no matter how hard [parents] tried to have the reciprocity of parent-child relations superseded by giving a one-sided emphasis to parental love, and no matter how unequivocally they saw

themselves as devoted benefactors concerned only with the child's own welfare or, . . . as committed champions of children's rights, the rhetoric of disinterestedness in actual fact helped them to bring about some changes in...



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