

Clive Staples Lewis  
9/13/2002  
Showcase #1  
English 5-6  
Mr. Coia

### **Play-Dough Minds: Plato vs. Popular Teen Culture**

A girl slinks her way between two overstuffed racks filled with this week's "Hot Specials" as she makes her way to the cash register to pay for her recently-acquired armful of goods. The music blasts down from a myriad of speakers neatly bolted on the ceiling, covering all remnants of human voices spoken in the store. The heavy electronica rhythms seem to hypnotize the young shoppers who robotically examine the clothing for style and size. Glossy and menacing, a poster of a teenager model eerily stares down at her subjects, as if pleased with their flurry of activity, almost as if these shoppers were predestined to be here making their purchases. One young man tells his half-listening girlfriend that the model in the poster appears to have a crooked smile across her lips.

This scene is probably not much different than many stores in malls across America. Teenagers, as they always have, are out shopping for back-to-school clothes. They are looking for the perfect ensemble to complement their figures, statures, personalities, and attitudes. However, unlike teenagers from years ago, this crop seems to be a more captive audience of customers. Advertisers have seized an opportunity by molding unsuspecting children - yes, children - into a powerful army of consumers. These consumers learn their mantras from what is displayed as "cool" in movies, television, and music.

In his *Republic*, Plato had a higher opinion of children and a higher purpose for childhood. Contrary to producers, advertisers, and performers, Plato saw boys and girls as "young and tender thing[s]," and believed that this part of life is the "most important part." Childhood, according to Plato, is not important because it presents a lucrative demographic; rather, it is vital because it is the formation of the character of a future man or woman in society. It is important because Plato implies that who we are when we are forty begins when we are four. This is the time in which character is planted and watered. Plato commented that childhood is "a time when character is being formed and the desired impression is more readily taken." What, then, is the "desired impression" in these times? For advertising conglomerates, it is to sing an annoying jingle, stamp an impressive logo, or a showcase a tanned body for the sole and unscrupulous purpose of selling products. The desired impression occurring on Madison Avenue is fueled by product placement and the bottom line. Plato, however, seems to desire a more virtuous impression for these young minds.

While advertisers may wholeheartedly agree with Plato when he offers that "[a]nything received into the mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable," they have a different motive. The perpetuators of popular culture are banking on that unchangeability; they want the minds to be forever changed, especially when shopping. Plato, however, sees this "permanent ink of the mind" as something to be cared for and nurtured, not exploited. He believes there is no "nobler training" higher than nourishing a child's character.