

FOUCAULT IN TELETUBBYLAND: REREADING TELETUBBIES

Niyas S. M.¹

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, T. K. M. College of Arts and Science, Karicodu, Kollam, Kerala



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Teletubbies on the basis of Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, exploring how the show entrenches his concepts of power, control, and subjectivity. Far from being a simple children's programme, Teletubbies illustrates the pervasive nature of power as it shapes behaviours and identities within a controlled environment. Elements such as the Voice Trumpets, which disseminate commands and knowledge, and the omnipresent Noo-Noo, silently enforcing order, serve as metaphors for Foucauldian mechanisms of discipline and surveillance. By analysing these components, the paper foregrounds how Teletubbies falls in line with Foucault's theories on power's subtle operation and its role in creating docile subjects. This rereading repositions the show within broader cultural and philosophical discourses on power, knowledge, and control.

Keywords: Foucault, Teletubbies, Power, Knowledge, Subjectivity, Surveillance, Sexuality



1. INTRODUCTION

This paper approaches Teletubbies, a seemingly simple and innocuous children's television show, through Michel Foucault's theoretical framework. Foucault's concept of power as something that permeates all levels of society is vividly illustrated in the dynamics of Teletubbies. The characters exist in an institutionalized space where their behaviours and identities are shaped by the knowledge and commands they receive. The Voice Trumpets, which rise from the earth to offer information or commands, and the ever-present Noo-Noo, silently maintaining discipline and normalisation, serve as metaphors for how power operates subtly yet effectively in society. Hence, it is pivotal to focus critical attention on how these elements in Teletubbies amplify Foucault's ideas on the exercise of power through the control of knowledge and the creation of docile subjects.

The Voice Trumpets, which rise from the earth to offer information or commands to the Teletubbies, is a metaphor for the way power is exercised via the spread of knowledge. These trumpets represent an invisible force that controls the Teletubbies' behaviours and conduct, similar to how social institutions utilize information to control people. In Foucauldian terms, the Teletubbies are "subjects" of power, whose identities and actions are shaped by the knowledge and rules imposed on them. Their lack of autonomy and the way they conform to the instructions they receive exemplify how power operates through knowledge to produce docile, compliant subjects. Thus, the Teletubbies' world, with its controlled environment and constant flow of information, can be interpreted as a microcosm of how power structures seek to shape individuals in society.

In Season 1, Episode 1, we see power/knowledge is exemplified through the show's approach to education and authority. The Teletubbies-Tinky Winky, Dipsy, Laa-Laa, and Po, engage in everyday activities like playing with their favorite toys and watching a video. Here, Foucault's concept of power/knowledge is evident in how the show uses structured repetition to impart knowledge and establish norms. The repetitive activities help reinforce basic concepts such as play and social interaction, while the authority of the show dictates what is considered appropriate and desirable for young children. The episode's activities are simple and repetitive, designed to reinforce basic concepts such as play, social interaction, and routine. Through this structured presentation, the show establishes standards for behaviour and learning in early childhood, demonstrating how power structures influence what is considered legitimate knowledge.

The presentation of activities in the television programme portrays the toys and video-watching that the Teletubbies engage in as normal and enjoyable. These activities are presented in a way that makes them seem worthwhile and suitable for young children. An air of authority permeates the straightforward, repetitious information. By regularly presenting these activities, the show silently upholds cleanliness and order in the Teletubbyland setting, establishing norms of behaviour without overt coercion.

The Noo-Noo, a vacuum cleaner that silently maintains cleanliness and order in Teletubbyland, symbolizes covert strength and authority. The Teletubbies accept the Noo-Noo's actions without discussion. They simply accept its function. This illustrates how power is exercised subtly, through everyday activities that promote obedience and control without resorting to physical force. In one of his lectures titled "The Birth of Biopolitics," Foucault says that "The institution is a mechanism of control; it is a way of ensuring the continued regulation of the people" (qtd. in Taylor 58). The Noo-Noo's control over the environment is akin to Foucault's idea of how institutions uphold social norms through disciplinary power.

In the "Tubby Custard Mess" episode (Season 1, Episode 5), where the Teletubbies make a mess with their Tubby Custard machine and Noo-Noo cleans it up, we see a depiction of the consequences of not following rules or maintaining order. The Noo-Noo's intervention restores order, reinforcing the idea that power is necessary to maintain structure and discipline. This episode shows how power is often involved in correcting behaviour and re-establishing control, with the Noo-Noo acting as an enforcer of social norms.

In the "Wake Up Teletubbies!" episode, the Voice Trumpets instruct the Teletubbies to wake up, setting off a series of activities for the day. This episode demonstrates how the Teletubbies' daily routines are dictated by external commands, symbolizing how knowledge and power shape daily life. The Teletubbies do not wake up on their own. Instead, they are told to wake up, exemplifying how power operates by controlling the basic rhythms of life. The Voice Trumpets' role as the source of commands reflects the top-down dissemination of knowledge, where the Teletubbies' actions are guided by an authority that determines their behaviour. In "The Birth of Biopolitics," Foucault states, "This regulation of behaviour is intrinsic to the functioning of modern societies, where control is exercised through a multitude of subtle and pervasive mechanisms" (qtd. in Taylor 61).

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault states, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (102). This highlights his view that power is not localized or centralized but is dispersed throughout all levels of society. It operates through various institutions, relationships, and practices. The Teletubbies world, with its omnipresent Voice Trumpets and silent yet powerful Noo-Noo, serves as an illustrative example of how power structures create and maintain authority by managing the flow of information and controlling behaviour.

Gender neutrality is purposefully incorporated into the design of the Teletubbies themselves. They do not display any characteristics or actions that are often connected with a specific gender. For example, they do not exhibit any habits, haircuts, or attire that would identify them as male or female. By avoiding traditional gender markers, the show presents the Teletubbies as universal characters that do not conform to conventional gender roles. This design choice allows children to engage with the characters without preconceived notions about gender.

Moreover, there is no gender difference in the play, dancing, and exploring that the Teletubbies do. By participating in these activities on an equal basis, all Teletubbies support the notion that certain hobbies and behaviours are not innately gendered. This approach challenges the stereotype that certain activities are suitable only for specific genders, thereby fostering a more inclusive and gender-neutral view of childhood play and learning.

Additionally, the Teletubbies do not have roles or responsibilities pertaining to traditional gender expectations. They all share similar tasks and experiences in their daily lives, such as enjoying Tubby Custard or watching the "Magic Windmill." The absence of gendered roles reinforces the idea that all individuals, regardless of gender, can perform the

same activities and share similar experiences. This promotes equality and removes gender-based hierarchies. In a broader context, traditional gender roles are a manifestation of power relations that define and regulate behaviour based on gender. Gender neutrality can be seen as a response or resistance to these power structures, aiming to dismantle rigid gender norms with “productive and subjected body” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 123), and promote more fluid and equitable expressions of identity.

This approach is particularly evident in Episode 5, “Painting Easter Eggs,” which is presented in a completely gender-neutral manner. All Teletubbies, regardless of their perceived gender, participate equally, and are shown to enjoy the activity without any bias. The video segment showing children painting eggs also highlights gender neutrality by featuring both boys and girls engaged in the same activity, reinforcing the idea that creativity and fun are for everyone, regardless of gender.

“Tummy Tales” begins with the Teletubbies emerging from their home in the Tubbytronic Superdome, greeted by the familiar “Eh-oh!” and the vibrant, sunny landscape of Teletubbyland. Tinky Winky, Dipsy, Laa-Laa, and Po are all engaged in different games, reflecting their individual interests. Tinky Winky plays with his bag, Dipsy dances with his hat, Laa-Laa enjoys bouncing her ball, and Po rides her scooter. In this episode’s Tummy Tale, children are shown playing with their pets. The video depicts joyful interactions between children and their animals, presenting themes of friendship and care. The Teletubbies mimic these actions, playing with their own toys and engaging in activities that reflect the Tummy Tale’s content. This segment emphasizes the learning theme of the episode. The episode concludes with the Teletubbies saying goodbye to the viewers, heading back to their home, and ending with the traditional “Time for Teletubbies to go” song.

Disciplinary power, as defined by Foucault, refers to the manner in which society controls behaviour, often subtly. The children in the “Tummy Tales” segments provide an example of acceptable behaviour for viewers, making these segments a type of soft disciplinary power. The show encourages young viewers to internalize these behaviours as desirable by showcasing children playing cooperatively, sharing, or learning new abilities. One could argue that the young audience is being disciplined into embracing specific social behaviours by having these rules repeatedly reinforced in different episodes.

A fundamental element of Foucault’s more comprehensive study of power, particularly as it pertains to contemporary societies, is his concept of disciplinary power. Disciplinary power is more subtle and widespread than traditional forms of power, which are typically exercised by a sovereign authority (such as a monarch or government) and function by normalising behaviour. The episode emphasises play and social interaction, mirroring the joyful and educational content shown in the Tummy Tale. It helps children understand and appreciate the value of playing with friends and caring for pets. The structured routine of watching the Tummy Tale, reflecting on it, and then engaging in related activities help augment learning through repetition and mimicry.

Foucault’s concept of normalisation involves the process through which societal norms and standards are established and enforced. In the context of children, normalisation relates to how certain behaviours and attitudes are deemed appropriate or inappropriate. As Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, “The normalisation of individuals is the operation of power that renders them compliant and effective. It involves the imposition of norms and standards that regulate behaviour and ensure conformity” (17). This underscores how normalisation works through the imposition of norms and standards that regulate individual behaviour, lining up it with societal expectations.

The language in the show is simple and focuses on the feelings and behaviours of the characters rather than assigning any gender-specific roles or characteristics to these experiences. In the 14th episode of Season 1, the Teletubbies watch a film of children engaging in various activities and subsequently imitate their actions. The language and interactions remain gender-neutral, accentuating the activities themselves over any gender-related details. Foucault has asserted that power relations are inherently marked by resistance. Resistance frequently emerges in areas where power is most strictly imposed. In terms of gender, opposing established gender classifications or promoting gender neutrality are ways in which people can rebel against societal standards.

Establishing gender-neutral spaces or communities is a challenge to the disciplinary systems that uphold gender norms. This resistance aims to topple and reinterpret conventional gender norms and expectations. The gender-neutral presentation of the show provides a space for examining and normalising non-gendered behaviours, even while it might also be seen as a tactic to uphold a specific type of social order, one in which traditional gender distinctions are minimised. This normalisation of neutrality can be viewed as a power tactic intended to impose new gender norms and expectations.

Furthermore, childhood in Teletubbies is not a mere developmental stage but a discursive construct shaped by societal norms and power structures. What is important is how childhood is used as a category to regulate and control individuals through institutions like education and family, as well as good manners and instructions. Hence, examining how these power dynamics influence the process of becoming a subject is crucial. "The norm is not a fixed or given point of reference; it is a flexible and dynamic construct that is continuously defined and redefined through power relations" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 76).

In Teletubbyland, each day begins with the sun baby rising, marking time and suggesting a form of surveillance over the land. This leads to the notion of power as a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others but instead influences actions indirectly. The sun baby symbolises an empowered figure of childhood, yet it lacks direct agency over events. It also parallels the child viewer's lack of control over the programme. This reflects how power operates through structures and symbols, shaping perceptions and experiences without direct intervention.

In "Time For Tubby Bye-Bye," Season 1, Episode 6, the imagery of space travel and lunar landscapes is prominently featured. This episode incorporates space-themed elements as part of its storytelling, presenting space travel as a whimsical and imaginative adventure. The episode includes a rocket ship that transports a group of children to the moon. Within the Tummy Tale segment, the animation or live-action scenes portray space travel in a playful and imaginative manner. The use of vibrant and far-fetched imagery, including the rocket ship, colourful lunar landscapes, and playful aliens or moon characters, is designed to capture the imagination of young viewers.

Moreover, the depiction of the moon is capricious, characterised by exaggerated features and bright colours, making it both appealing and accessible to preschool-aged children. The narrative emphasises the fun and exciting aspects of space travel, which encourages curiosity and wonder about the universe. The fanciful representation of the moon, with its vibrant hues and exaggerated elements, is intended to be appealing and entertaining for young audiences. By giving prominence to the enjoyable and thrilling aspects of space exploration, the episode fosters an interest in the cosmos through playful and creative storytelling.

Besides, the episode uses space travel as a backdrop for imaginative play, allowing children to explore the concept of space in an engaging and enjoyable manner. Although the space-themed elements are not scientifically accurate, they introduce young viewers to the idea of space exploration through a whimsical and inventive narrative. The bright colours, imaginative designs, and cheerful music contribute to the episode's appeal and ensure that it remains entertaining for its audience.

More to the point, the concept of the representation of space in "Time For Tubby Bye-Bye," is linked to Foucauldian "heterotopia." Heterotopia is "other" spaces that are set apart from the everyday world, offering a place where different norms, rules, or realities exist. At the same time, these spaces are connected to physical places, challenging, representing, and transforming other spaces. According to Foucault, heterotopias often embody the conflicts, standards, and ideals of society and function as areas where customs are suspended or unconventional behaviours are accepted. In this context, the imaginative depiction of space travel in "Time For Tubby Bye-Bye" is a heterotopia that offers a playful and wonderful representation of space. This portrayal not only provides a departure from everyday reality but also refracts and engages with societal ideals of exploration and adventure.

In Episode 4 of Season 1, the Teletubbies interact with the Tubby Phone, which rings and triggers various actions. The signals from the phone provide a structural framework for their games and function as an external influence. This external "observer," which shapes the Teletubbies' responses to the phone's rings and prompts, can be compared to the concept of "panopticon." Foucault's model of the panopticon refers to a form of surveillance where an architectural structure, such as a watchtower, enables continuous observation of individuals, thus influencing their behaviour. In Teletubbies, the magic screen acts as a central point of influence, akin to the panopticon's watchtower, and provides content that directs the Teletubbies' behaviour and interactions. This structure epitomises how potential observation leads to self-regulation in which, as Foucault states, "he inscribes in himself the power relation; he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (*Discipline and Punish* 203).

In Episode 3, "The Magic House" exemplifies a controlled space designed to capture and direct the Teletubbies' attention. The repetitive nature of their visits to the magic house indicates Foucault's idea that space is used to regulate behaviour, reminiscent of the panopticon's effect on prisoners. The idyllic yet enclosed setting of Teletubbyland reminds a controlled and isolated society. The Teletubbies' self-contained world, with its technologically driven Tubbytronic Superdome, denotes a regulated environment where individuality and dissent are suppressed. This isolation hints at the

practices of dystopian regimes that restrict access to information and external influences, explicating how such control mechanisms shape behaviour and perception.

Similarly, the Noo-Noo, the vacuum cleaner character, creates disruptions by making messes, which interferes with the Teletubbies' activities and the orderly state of their home. The Noo-Noo's behaviour represents a form of disorder within the educational environment, humorously illustrating how unexpected disruptions make an impact on daily routines and learning processes. Tinky Winky's attempts to seek attention is in reality a manifestation of emotional or social disorder, reflecting feelings of exclusion or the need for affirmation, which disrupt normal social interactions. This aspect of the episode addresses themes of emotional regulation and social skills, while the malfunction of the Tubby Custard Machine is seen as a disorder affecting the Teletubbies' environment, symbolising how technical issues disrupt routine activities.

The show's use of nonsensical language, such as "TubblyWubbly" and repetitive phrases, could be seen as a subtle form of conditioning or encoding messages for young viewers. While there is no evidence to support claims of subliminal messaging, the repetitive and simple nature of the language is a strategy to imprint certain ideas or behaviours. The Shannon-Weaver model of communication frames the show as a linear process where the creators encode educational content, transmitted through the show and decoded by the audience. Similarly, speech act theory suggests that phrases like "Time for Tubby Custard" function as performative communication, bringing to the fore routine behaviours and responses.

The effect of Teletubbies on its young audience is significant, as it lays a foundation for children to comprehend and engage with their environment through its consistent pedagogical approach. The programme shapes children's views and expectations regarding manners and learning, effectively influencing their understanding of essential concepts and social interactions. The simplicity inherent in Teletubbies renders its content accessible and impactful for young minds for different developmental stages and cognitive abilities. As Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, "discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (56). Therefore, Teletubbies functions as a disciplinary mechanism, molding young viewers' cognitive frameworks and social conduct through its methodical structure.

This aspect is further elaborated in Season 1, Episode 1 of Teletubbies. In this episode, the Teletubbies—Tinky Winky, Dipsy, Laa-Laa, and Po engage in quotidian activities such as playing with their favourite toys and watching a video. The episode's activities are deliberately simple and recurring, designed to underline basic concepts such as play, social interaction, and routine. This methodological repetition is in line with Foucault's notion of Power/Knowledge, where the manner in which information is presented and repeated shapes what is considered to be knowledge.

According to Foucault, power structures significantly influence what is recognized as legitimate knowledge. This is manifest in Teletubbies through the show's creators, who exercise authority by dictating the content and presentation of educational material. The cyclic nature of the activities such as playing with toys and watching videos, serves as a crucial element of the show's instructional strategy. By consistently enforcing basic notions through these activities, the programme emphasizes the importance of play, social contact, and routine as integral components of daily life.

Further, the presentation of these activities within the episode is framed to portray them as normal and enjoyable. This portrayal bolsters the legitimacy and suitability of these activities for young children. The straightforward nature of the content infuses an authoritative dimension into the programme, as it defines what is crucial for early childhood education. This exercise of power in Teletubbies refers to Foucault's argument that power structures initiate codes and mold knowledge by manipulating perceptions of what is apposite to learn and experience. Consequently, Teletubbies guides children's behaviour by modeling proper ways to engage with their environment and interact with others. The emphasis on play and social interaction within the show has a direct impact on how children learn to connect with their surroundings.

The Foucauldian reading of Teletubbies uncovers the convoluted ways in which the programme subtly accentuates societal norms and disciplinary practices, casting the cognitive and social frameworks of its young audience. By containing structures of power within its contours, the show operates as a vehicle for the early transmission of cultural expectations.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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