“THE GOOD THING”:
MISTER ROGER’S NEIGHBORHOOD

Paul Zelevansky

Abstract: This article considers aspects of the methodology behind the PBS children’s show Mister Roger’s Neighborhood. Too easily sentimentalized—and sometimes satirized—for his exploration of feelings and empathy, Fred Rogers in fact carefully structured each show around an investigation of semiotic, phenomenological, and epistemological concerns: the interpretation of images, words, things, events, and kinesthetic sensation that allows children (and adults) to locate themselves in their everyday experience. Mister Rogers explored both the tools and the considerations that facilitate our ability to negotiate relationships, navigate in space, assimilate desires and fears, and ultimately manifest thoughts, projects, and ideals in concrete form. The periodic insertion of graphic clip art in this essay is meant to enact examples of the kind of reflexive thinking that Mister Roger’s Neighborhood proposes and presents.

KEY WORDS: children’s television; epistemology; semiotics; visual language; visual culture.

Because self-knowledge is a process occurring in time, the self can never be known directly. Instead self-knowledge is inferential and mediate—mediated by the signs that comprise language and thought.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 3

At the beginning of every installment of Mister Roger’s Neighborhood, Fred Rogers comes through his front door, opens the closet, hangs up his jacket, puts on one of his zippered cardigans, and changes his shoes for a pair of sneakers as he sings, “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood.” While every day is welcoming, cheerful, and comforting in Mister Roger’s Neighborhood, it is easy to see how his high-pitched voice, long neck, slouching affect, and undiminished enthusiasm and wonder at everyday things could be both parodied as perverse (think of Eddie Murphy’s ghetto send up on Saturday Night Live) or reduced to benign eccentricity and unthreatening sweetness. A reflective, gentle man comfortable talking with

Paul Zelevansky, Ed.D., member College Art Association, lecturer at Art Center College of Design, Los Angeles.

Address correspondence to Paul Zelevansky, Ed.D., 1455 Claridge Drive, Beverly Hills, CA 90210; e-mail: pzelevansky@earthlink.net.

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small children, Mister Rogers is certainly (in the bullying rhetoric of con-
temporary politics and war) a “soft” target—trusting, nonjudgmental, as in
soft on crime, soft on the death penalty, lacking a suitable hard-on for a
fight. But, all these characterizations make it too easy to ignore the radical
nature of his pedagogy and strategic use of the television form.

When Mister Rogers looks into the camera and appeals to his viewing
audience for their attention, he is trying to establish intimacy with eye con-
tact and language that speaks in terms of a personal you—won’t you be
my neighbor?—not a social us. This is not the kind of we-are-the-world,
multicultural sentiment that children’s shows like Sesame Street promote.
The rituals that open the show reestablish the basis on which this intimacy
depends: He and his viewers are together again to renew their relationship,
to continue the conversation. Simulated or not, this conversation relies on
constancy and trust: Mister Rogers will be back the next day to again
change clothes, sing the “Neighborhood” song, and in the words of the
closing song, “have more ideas” to share. Mister Rogers is an engaged
teacher: a parental figure, not an adult playmate.

A system of correspondence is established between our spatial situation and
that of others, and each one comes to symbolize all the others. This insertion of
our factual situation as a particular case within the system of other possible situa-
tions begins as soon as we designate a point in space with our finger. For this
pointing gesture . . . supposes that we are already installed in a virtual space—at
the end of the line prolonging our finger in a centrifugal and cultural space.

Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 7