

HOLIDAY VERSION

TURTLE OOZE

By George Gerbner


Oozing its way onto the video screens and holiday promotions is the record-breaking marketing sensation and glorification of the martial-arts, "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" and its sequel appropriately named "The Secret of the Ooze." With 133 acts of mayhem per hour, they are the most violent films ever marketed to children.

Nothing can prepare the unwary for the expertly choreographed brutality, wisecracking misanthropy, and rock-rap-rhythmic slashery crammed into one sick spectacle. Males fight, torture, gorge themselves on pizza (brand names prominently displayed), burn, crush, mutilate and kill.

One lone mini-miniskirted sex object (intrepid reporter bossed by boorish editors) is assaulted, scared, victimized, and rescued at least three times. Finally she, too, kills and earns an appreciative "You're a natural, Sis!" The only other major woman character is the victim of an old blood-feud played out on the streets of New York's Little Tokyo. She is seen only once, briefly, sprawled on the ground, brutally murdered. When asked why the Turtles are all male, "We have stayed away from a girl Turtle," said the director of Mirage Studios where the Turtles were spawned. "It would raise the issue of sex..."

Good, clean, macho fun is so important that Surge Licensing, Inc., manager of Turtle copyright worldwide, includes in every contract a prohibition of licensee behavior "detrimental to the Turtles reputation." To enhance that reputation, Surge announced its participation in Partnership for a Drug-Free America "to help reach into America's 130,000 schools with a message to help kids stay off drugs." (And possibly stay addicted to Turtles.) It may have been a bit embarrassing when Eric Millan-Colon and 29 of his cohorts in the Blue Thunder drug ring were arrested for having supplied heroin to New York and used the proceeds to buy the Argentinian rights to "Los Tortugas Ninjas," which replaced Batman, the previous global movie mania. (There is concern that the lust for pizza will replace tortillas or empanadas as the kids' new passion.) But I digress.

A survey of teachers of young children found that nine out of ten consider TMNT objectionable, dangerous, and inhibiting creativity. A marketing study of licensed cartoon characters found the Turtles by far the "LEAST favorite" (politely phrased) of both men and women. *Working*



Mother Magazine, more outspoken, selected the Turtles for its first (1990) Cartoon Hall of Shame.

Undaunted by the dismay of trapped parents, harried teachers and overworked psychiatrists, "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Secret of the Ooze" is another punchup and kick-in-the-teeth opus in which the martial artists, indecently named for giants of the Renaissance, pursue their rampage into pseudo-scientific mysticism and blind obedience to the leader in a cult of violence and vengeance.

(Britain, Germany and Sweden are among countries that require cuts or age limits or both.) The New Line Cinema Company that released the Turtles films (and such other low-budget high-exploiters as "House Party" and "Nightmare on Elm Street," with six sequels), announced that it has named a new president (formerly with *Playboy*) to lead them into television programming "with broad international appeal."

Promotion for "The Secret of the Ooze" has been oozing out of Burger King posters, toys, commercials, and ads in its *BK Kids Club* magazine. A 30-second spot for the magazine (in addition to other promotions) should not surprise those who think they escape commercials when they buy the video for \$22.95. Nor should it surprise anyone to find the Turtles show up in rival Pizza Hut and Nabisco Brands campaigns in time for the extended holiday selling season.

Pizza Hut pumped \$20 million into launching its campaign, despite the fact that more than 130 Ninja licenses already flood the country with over 1,000 TMNT products from movies and home videos to cartoons, comic books, supermarket give-aways (with coupons for TMNT "Pizza Crunchabungas"), video-games, and other spin-offs from T-shirts to yogurt, raking in over \$2 billion a year. Random House published more than two dozen Turtle titles, and juvenile book clubs help sell them to both boys and girls. TMNT "action figures," selling for \$3.99 each, helped boost the sales of mostly violent "action toys" 24 percent in 1990 while the sale of more creative "activity toys" declined 6 percent.

A gala Radio City Music Hall kick-off in New York, launched the Turtles on a 40-city rock concert tour where rhythmically gyrating teenage Turtle groupies, many in Turtle costumes, personally helped set the stage for the campaign. After the domestic blitz, the global conglomerate Pepsico, owner of Pizza Hut (and Fritos, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, Mountain Dew, and Slice, but I digress again), hurtled the pizza-gobbling Turtles onto the international marketing circuit where retail sales of Turtle paraphernalia reached a record \$1 billion already by mid-1991.

Not to be outdone, Nabisco Brands, part of another global conglomerate, (tobacco and food) offers four Turtles gelatin molds tastefully named "Royal Ooze." Oh yes, an unspecified "percentage of the profits" from the Turtles II video will be donated to Kids for Saving the Earth to remind us that, after all, the Turtles' mayhem is environmentally correct. Furthermore, New Line has signed an agreement with Troma, known in the trade as "the schlock-shock production company," to co-produce "Toxic Crusaders, a live-action series about a band of mutant ecological guerillas.

Saving the earth from the Mutants and their ilk may be a better idea. The environment most vital to our humanity is the cultural environment on which both physical survival and mental health depend. We need a Cultural Environment Movement to help liberate creative energies from the marketing strategies imposed on them, to build a constituency for freer media, and to develop ways of public participation in cultural policy-making. Wouldn't that be a more fitting gift for our children this holiday season?