



Photo: Bev Pearl

Violence, Masculinity, & Profit:

A LOOK AT
THE MASS-ENTERTAINMENT
MEDIA

Il y a, dit l'auteure, un lien direct entre la violence dans les médias et le capitalisme. Tout ce qui peut augmenter le pouvoir d'achat et par conséquent les profits, va être utilisé par les entreprises capitalistes. Il est évident que la violence, tout particulièrement quand elle est associée à la sexualité, vend des produits: les anxiétés qu'elle crée au sujet de l'identité sexuelle deviennent plus fortes, de sorte que l'on est amené à acheter pour oublier ses peurs et satisfaire ses "désirs". La violence dans les médias rend légitime la violence inhérente au système capitaliste hiérarchique. Cette violence détourne l'attention de la violence encore plus laide de la "vie réelle". Elle accroît également l'aliénation des uns envers les autres. Ainsi devons-nous développer une analyse de la violence anti-capitaliste aussi bien qu'anti-sexiste dans nos médias et dans notre société.

Shortly after I accepted the invitation to write an article on violence, women, and film, I began to choose my movie fare with those criteria in mind. After the fourth film, I was so depressed that I decided I would expand the scope of the article to include television, so that I could free some of my cinema time for relatively enjoyable productions. Although this measure helped my own frame of mind somewhat when I went to the movies, serious consumption of television violence left me feeling worse about the mass media than I had before, and that had already been very, very bad. It was clear, once again, that violence is the stock-in-trade of the mass-entertainment media, and I wondered what more I could say about violence against women than had already been said by so many eloquent feminists before me.

But on rethinking the situation, I realized that the analysis of violence against women done by feminist writers like Susan Brownmiller, Andrea Dworkin, and Susan Griffin, and the actions of feminists in North America and

Europe have focussed on the violence of patriarchy — the system of masculine power and privilege — against women. This work has been and remains essential. But what gets left out of the analysis and the public campaigns almost always is the violence inherent in capitalist industrial society — a special kind of violence which is often mistaken for the patriarchal violence it uses, but from which it is also distinct. The omission is a dangerous one for the Women's Movement, because it can lead to strategies which are partial at best, wrong at worst, and at their worst, to strategies which reinforce anti-feminist forces. For example, I believe that the YWCA's recent award to Mary Brown, the head of the Ontario Censor Board, is a dangerous reinforcement of the other side! In a roundabout way, I want to argue here why this is the case.

What came home to me is the role violence plays in the total message of diversion and enticement put out by the mass-entertainment media. What is happening in the movies, on TV, and in the magazines is a totality comprised of seduction and intimidation in a potent combination involving the complementary interaction of sexuality and violence as the two most important dynamic attributes behind commodity consumption. These work in tandem with processes of defusion and co-optation (for example, in productions like situation comedies, which banalize the painful contradictions of life) or anesthesia (for example, in productions like soap operas, which refract the emptiness of daily life by mirroring it in such ways as to make real escape impossible because false escape is so readily to hand).

When I watch television, I become acutely aware of the way that commercials form an integral part of the entire "text." All the products I see pictured in the "show," displayed for my more serious consideration in the eight- or ten-minute-interval breaks which punctuate it, allow me to feel that if I could only obtain

those products, my life could be like the life of the characters on the screen. Of course, I am an intellectual, so I fancy that I can turn my nose up at a lot of what goes by on television. But I am much less immune to the charms of the cinema. Spared the crass commercialism of television, I too often forget that what is pictured on the silver screen is nicely juxtaposed by my own imagination with what is pictured on billboards, in newspaper ads, and in magazines. Although it is interesting and valuable to examine and criticize this or that show or film or magazine article, when one thinks about larger issues such as violence, it is really essential to analyse not only the text of the specific entertainment production but also the text of the material which surrounds and intertwines with it.

With respect to violence against women, as so many others have pointed out, the signs and symbols are everywhere. In films and television shows, it comes in two forms: either through direct brutalization or as punishment to the woman who transgresses certain gender laws. For every scene of explicit violence against women in movies or television, however, there are many more ads where man stand in direct or symbolic control over women, whether brandishing a cigarette, a glass of whisky, a shaving lotion, a camera, or a car. The signs of women's subservience which run through cinema and advertising and television also run through magazine and video pornography, shading over into the real violence done to enslaved women, the ultimate extension of a system in which anything which sells, goes.

However, violence is not restricted to nor even primarily violence of men against women. It is also violence between men. Films and television shows about men's struggle for domination over each other outnumber those which deal directly with power relations between the sexes. For instance, violence is absolutely the *raison d'être* of the men-and-machines produc-

tions: mostly tall, white, beefy men using powerful machines — guns and cars — are the television favourites, while movie budgets allow for more exotic weapons and vehicles, e.g., *Blue Thunder* or *Star Wars*.

Although all these sorts of productions assume male domination over women, I think it's wrong to

to ward off the terrifying threat of inner collapse should the void within become tangible when the props of an artificial masculinity lie beyond reach.

But these characteristics are not unique to men because, alas, there are women in these fields both producing the material (from fashion to machines to pornography)

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reduce what goes on between the men only to that issue, even when explicit themes of competition over women are involved. Again, the continuity of the imagery between the paraphernalia of machismo in the "entertainment" productions and the commercial material which brackets them alerts one to other dynamics. The TV serial *Knightrider* is instructive in this regard. This show is the ultimate in TV machismo of the late capitalist variety. Not only the hero's muscle but now even his brains are extended into and embodied by his sleek, black, invincible, computerized car. Market research indicates that lots of people feel that all the car's qualities accrue to its owner, who drives this penis-on-wheels. For every episode of *Knightrider* there are millions of images of cars shot from below to enhance their phallic appearance.

There is nothing in these shows and advertisements of a beleaguered masculinity that seems natural to men. The advertisements for and about men work with the films and television shows of the commercial industries to create and manipulate strings of identification, desire, and anxiety in the male population. Hollywood and Madison Avenue exploit those feelings in the truest sense of that word, as a gold mine of dreams turned nightmares, a constant source of commodity consumption

and competing in the same terms and for the same goals as their male colleagues. These women have, as the saying goes, bought into the good life. Despite stated intentions to the contrary, much of the work that they do and the values that sustain it tie them to a capitalist dynamic which seeks to mobilize masculinist anxieties in order to sell commodities. And this dynamic undermines the goals of feminism. Many of the women who work in these industries as creative agents (as distinguished from women who work as secretaries or technicians) end up working directly against women as well in the material produced to exploit women's growing market potential. What, for example, are we to make of Virginia Slims, shamelessly partaking of phallic-magic to fuse onto a *cigarette* the sense of "achievement" for women over the course of the century? Since it has been well established that cigarettes are lethal, I wonder about the ethics of this operation. Or what about the huge lipstick that rears up in explicitly phallic form like a primitive godhead in any number of cosmetic advertisements? Like many of the muscle cars advertised, the lipstick is bright red. Like the skies against which the cars are captured, the skies beyond the lipstick are exhilaratingly blue. Like the ads for fast cars which punctuate the men's

magazines, the cosmetics frame and pace stories in the women's magazines for "today" — stories about careers, getting ahead, fast sex, and having and doing all the other things that men have done, and which have gotten us into this mess in the first place. While the male standard of behaviour is used as the one against which independent women must measure up, the gender hierarchy is also reinforced in the world of commercial entertainment and advertising through the larger patterns of assigning to men the artifacts and symbols of power over women and other men, and to women those of power only over other women, which can also function as those of winning the approval of men.

The problems with this kind of collusion are manifold. Certainly the denial of the long, economically insecure double-day of labour which most working women face is one of the most serious. This usually happens in the glamorization and celebration of women's "new independence." In historical terms, the problem with the new independent status is that like men's increasing refusal to take responsibility for children and women within the family context in postwar society, women's increasing isolation alone and/or with children is but the latest stage in the disintegration of bonds of social solidarity and mutual aid — atomization, in a word — precipitated, perpetuated, and concluded by capitalist industrialization. And the special quality of chaos in social relations and random violence on the streets is something unique to capitalism.

A capitalist industry — whether entertainment or arms — needs profits to survive, and this need creates a situation in which those kinds of themes, feelings, ideas, and actions which maximize the functioning of the profit system are the ones most likely to receive the attention — the "packaging," if you will, of the capitalist media themselves. Obviously there are differences as well as similarities between the kinds of productions that I have lumped together in this article. Because of the direct rela-

tion between commercials and major-network television, there is more direct control of television material than of film. Nevertheless, the majority of films made in Hollywood partake of and contribute to the use of violence.

First of all, violence, especially when added to sexuality, produces a heady concoction which connects with socialized anxieties about masculinity and femininity in such a way as to impel people to buy the commodities which will assuage their fears and meet their artificially created desires. Anything which will enlarge buying potential will eventually be employed by capitalist enterprises, independently of any moral and social considerations. Thus, at its worst, we see the sensualization of aggression and destruction. Killing is presented as sensual, sometimes even dying is; sensuality itself becomes saturated with sadistic connotations.

Secondly, the violence permeating the entertainment media acts to legitimate the violence of the capitalist system, a system which not only draws on patriarchal relations of power to structure gender relations but employs violence to structure society along lines of economic class. Women at the top of the ladder, though they are fewer and less powerful than men, benefit from their higher class position. In the stories or in the advertisements which give the Technicolour pictures of the rewards in store, rich is predictably the victor over poor (if poor is even shown); white people dominate over people of colour; Western Europe and North America over the rest of the world. In advanced capitalist mainstream culture the glamorization of masculine violence contains within it a classist and imperialist dimension.

The second function of violence then begins to shade over into the third: not only does media violence glamorize and legitimate real violence, but paradoxically, and very importantly, it also *hides* it. As awful as the violence depicted in most movies and television is, it doesn't hold a candle to what is

happening in this world every minute of every day.

The cop shows and mainstream movies *obscure* the reality of life in the *barrios* and ghettos of American cities or the things that are going on as you read this article on the battlegrounds and in the torture chambers of imperialism. Closer to home, media violence distracts people not only from the violence against women out there on the street or in your neighbours' house, but from the fact that women and men are dying in enormous numbers from toxic chemicals and unsafe working conditions and that workers are being beaten and arrested — even killed — in greater and greater numbers on picket lines. The mass media distort real violence and censor knowledge of the goals of struggles and events with real antisexist, anticapitalist dimensions. "Bad guys" aren't your boss or government or corporations — they are the artificial villains of the mass media.

Fourth, and for all of the preceding reasons, media violence also adds to the accelerating disintegration of human solidarity. Machines of all kinds, but especially machines of aggression and destruction, take on human characteristics (ugly ones) and humans become fair game to be treated as machines without feelings or rights. Because life's pleasures are continually depicted as available only through the acquisition of commodities and the domination of others via these commodities, the pleasures of interaction with other humans in shared work, community organization, play, and sensuality increasingly disappear from the collective vocabulary and imagination. The commercial manipulation of violence and sexuality constitutes an ideological onslaught on people's capacity to know about alternative life-ways and their ability to be able to actually build them. Consciousness of the possibility of a better life is numbed. Only oblivion remains.

The strategic and tactical implications of this kind of analysis of violence and its place in the com-

posite ideological field made up of much mainstream film, television, and advertising suggest that giving Mary Brown an award for her "service to women" is a very serious mistake. Both in her actual and in her symbolic role, Ms. Brown really serves the other side. The board of censors over which she presides fulfils several functions which directly support the kind of problematic material in cinema that I have been discussing. Representatives of the major distribution companies (connected to the major studios) sit on that board, and the negotiations which take place there ensure that they will be protected from criminal prosecution under the criminal code. When was the last time you heard of a Famous Players or an Odeon theatre busted for obscenity and violence for surpassing those mythical measures called "community standards"?

But maybe you did hear about the prosecution of four leading members of the Canadian arts community, including the feminist director of the Canadian Images film festival, for showing a film called *And Now a Message from Our Sponsors?* That film analysed the connection between hard-core advertising and pornography. And what about the censoring of the feminist film *Not a Love Story*? As I see it, Mary Brown's role on the censor board is to facilitate the smooth functioning of mass entertainment, and whenever politically possible, to come down hard on progressive people who are challenging both the gender and class rules of a patriarchal and capitalist society.

Ms. Brown's place in the panoply of other coercive ideological forces within the state apparatus should also be considered. The things being said by some of the people Ms. Brown goes after in the field of film seem also to be echoed by many people who write for publications like the gay-liberation magazine *Body Politic*, which has been under continual prosecution for "obscenity" by the Ontario attorney general's office for

years now; or in lesbian and gay erotica that gets stopped at the border by homophobic customs officials who think *Penthouse* is great, but the other stuff filthy. Ms. Brown is a strong conservative (large and small c) politician who sees herself as accountable to the system of male-dominated private property.

So we need to think more about violence, its sources in social and economic arrangements, and its function in cultural life before we advocate and reward any kind of prior censorship. We need to think more about how we can seriously treat the real violence all around us in our art without further brutalizing ourselves and banalizing

the brutality. We need to think very, very hard about the possibility of regulating the commercial exploitation of violence because it contributes so much to the individual and social violence of men against women at home, at work, and on the streets. Most of all, we need to integrate an anticapitalist as well as an antisexist dimension with our understanding of violence in the media and in life, to work toward its eradication.

Varda Burstyn is a Toronto critic, writer, and teacher, whose special expertise is studies in media, particularly film.

The fat woman confronts a diet

The fat woman went on a diet because that is what fat women are supposed to do. The diet sheet said: fat women never eat breakfast, so that is one meal which is not a problem; the fat woman stopped eating breakfast. Fat people, said the diet sheet, should use smaller plates and only eat half as much; the fat woman drank glasses of cold water to keep her stomach quiet and she used smaller plates. Fat people should not, said the sheet sternly, stuff their fat faces between meals; the fat woman was not a nibbler nor a drinker, so she considered taking up smoking. The fat woman now felt tired all the time but the diet sheet said serenely, that was psychological. She collapsed one day; the diet sheet was beside itself with joy, fine, it said, you're doing fine.

Christine Donald
Toronto, Ontario

From the collection *The Fat Woman Rides Out*

SCHOLARSHIP AND WOMEN'S LIVES

A symposium on "Scholarship and Women's History: Exploring Women's Lives" will be held at Smith College October 19 and 20, 1983, to celebrate the opening of Alumnae Gymnasium, the new home of the College Archives and The Sophia Smith Collection (Women's History Archive). Anne F. Scott will deliver the keynote address, "The Historian and Her Sources," on Wednesday evening, October 19. Panelists Thursday night, October 20, will be Ellen C. DuBois and Linda Gordon. For further information contact Virginia Christenson, The Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northhampton, MA 01063.

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