

Movies *DO* Arouse Violence

Deborah Read

Studies show aggressive attitude to women can last for a week.

There was a curious experiment done at the University of Wisconsin not too long ago in which men and women were asked to give one another electric shocks.

Not surprisingly, there was some reluctance displayed by people asked to thus physically assault total strangers.

But — and this was the real purpose of the experiment — men who had just viewed films showing sexual violence towards women were more likely to give electric shocks to their female partners.

Researchers came to the conclusion that violence against women in pornographic films may lead to aggression and even criminal assaults on women by men who watch such films.

Unfortunately, those findings are not restricted to American researchers. Dr. Neil Malamuth of the University of Manitoba, who has conducted similar research here in Winnipeg, has also found that watching violent pornography increases male aggression towards women, and that the effects can last for as long as a week.

In fact, says Prof. Malamuth, the data linking violent pornography and aggression is 'quite remarkably uniform and consistent.'

However, he stresses this is laboratory data which supports conclusions that have never been proven in real life.

That, as they say, is the good news.

The bad news is that pornography is a relative term. What Malamuth and other researchers are really talking about is sexual violence, and that's not restricted to trashy and unrealistic X-rated movies that most people would never admit seeing anyway.

Along with other forms of graphic violence, sexual violence is everywhere — in our news, our magazines, our advertising and our entertainment.

Films that convey such long-standing myths as, 'women really want to be raped,' are saying that violence against women can be justified. When that message is woven into a story or screenplay, then: 'I think that can have a relatively powerful impact,' says Malamuth, who believes such movies and magazines indirectly help to develop a culture that finds violence against women acceptable.

Some of us find it particularly frightening that society seems to view the combination of sex and violence as erotic.

'There's hardly a modern movie you see that doesn't have a rape scene in it,' said Sharon Sawatzky of the Rape Crisis Centre. 'I think



there's a lot more association between sex and violence than there used to be in films.'

She points to portrayals of violence in advertising — women threatened by knives in ads for men's clothing, beaten women on record album covers — and says, 'they're obviously working or they wouldn't be using them.'

Swept Away, a critically acclaimed and widely distributed film by Italian director Lina Wertmuller, which depicts a woman who learns to crave sexual sadism, is an example of popular movies being used by some researchers in their studies on violent pornography.

But at least Wertmuller's movies, considered art films by many, don't have the mass appeal of such movies as *Prom Night*.

Karen White, of the organization Women Against Violence Against Women, feels movies such as *Prom Night*, which depict violent attacks on women, are on the increase.

'There are a lot of movies now that are about very young women who go through this whole night of terror, culminating in this orgiastic murder,' says White.

'I find those movies distressing — they really feed on women's fears; really show them they *should* be terrified.'

Few women walking alone at night are immune to the heart-thumping fears that can be triggered by something as simple as a person walking too quickly behind them.

We know the statistics for rape and other violent attacks on women are increasing, and that no one seems to be able to explain why.

Maybe it's time we took a good look at the kind of advertising and entertainment we normally take for granted.

We should at least be aware of the fact that our own attitudes could be making the problem worse. ③

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