

**REAL LIFE AND REEL LIFE:
SEX, BLOOD, MONEY & HOLLYWOOD**

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OCT 24 1994

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**Presented at the International Conference on Violence in the Media
St. John's University, Oct. 3 and 4, 1994, New York, N.Y.**

REAL LIFE AND REEL LIFE: SEX, BLOOD, MONEY & HOLLYWOOD

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for presentation at the Violence in the Media--Proposals for Change conference, October 3rd and 4th, 1994, in New York, under the sponsorship of St. John's University

We live in a constant firestorm of signs and symbols; in our modern, technological society a monsoon of information rages, illusion rains down perpetually upon us, competing ceaselessly for our time, attention and consideration.

It distracts us, attacks us, provokes us, and just generally annoys us.

And we love it.

Studies demonstrate that people typically enter their homes and hotel rooms and promptly turn on the TV--and leave it on--even if they're not particularly watching any particular program. The TV set is the equivalent of another person--or group of people--present in the room. Indeed, many people leave the TV on even when they're not at home.

One never has to come home to an empty house; with the new millennium hard upon us there has arrived at long last a Final Solution for the loneliness problem.

In the perpetual battle for even the tiniest sliver of people's attention, endlessly we are bombarded with images. Not reality but representations of reality crop up simply everywhere. A man in a public lavatory standing at a urinal, for example, is likely these days to find himself staring at an advertisement

placed at eye-level directly above the porcelain. The restaurant--or theater or shopping mall--rents the square foot of wall just above the pissoir as men, given their plumbing, from time to time inevitably find themselves with a minute--more or less, depending upon the state of their prostate--to kill.

Why squander even that minute?

What possible excuse for failing to exploit even that miniscule slice of existence in order to send a message that just might sell something to somebody and--however slightly--enrich the owner of the space and the purveyor also of the product whose merit is extolled in the ad?

Do they put these things on the back doors of the stalls in women's lavatories?

For whatever reasons, citizens in a modern world confront a non-stop blizzard of images. Is it not to be expected that as the number of images increases, as their transmission burgeons in time and in space, as the technology of their translation expands and improves there arises ever greater confusion in differentiating between the images themselves and whatever it is they purport to represent? Is it not increasingly difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is reel?

A story is told of a poor family living hand to mouth, struggling daily to survive in their wretched tenement apartment. Such humble tranquility as they are able to muster is disrupted one day by the presence of a rodent who comes to plague the premises. While they are able to scrape together just enough money to purchase a mousetrap, they cannot afford even a nickel for a bit of food to serve as bait. In desperation, from an old

advertisement in a discarded magazine they clip a full-color picture of a big, ripe, yellow chunk of cheese.

They bait their trap with the picture of the cheese.

The next morning, sure enough, they find in the trap a picture of a mouse.

This may or may not constitute an amusing story--a joke--demonstrating ways in which reality becomes confused with illusion. But consider an example from life itself.

In Los Angeles County there are recent laws prohibiting the possession of "look-alike" guns. These are models of weapons, primarily handguns, that are so faithfully reproduced--except for the fact that they cannot fire a bullet--that they are virtually indistinguishable from the real thing. It ought be no surprise that such items are from time to time utilized in crimes. A victim confronted with a look-alike handgun is likely to assume the weapon is real and cooperate with the criminal who wields it.

Reiterating, lookalike weapons are now outlawed. Real guns, however, weapons that can actually fire bullets and wound and maim and kill, remain in the eyes of the law quite perfectly acceptable, wholly legal.

Is this not splendid, dreadful evidence of society's increasing difficulty in differentiating between reality and illusion? The perfectly harmless representation is prohibited while the lethal reality is routinely, cavalierly licensed. This is true even though it is clear enough that pictures of guns don't kill people; guns kill people.

And it confronts directly the growing controversy regarding

violence both in society and, particularly, throughout the media.

Consider, for example, this true story regarding a serial murderer.

A felon was released on parole from a prison sentence for violent crimes against women in upper New York State a couple of years ago. During his probation he serially murdered a substantial number of women by stabbing them in the neck. Upon his re-capture he asserted that it was the movie Robocop that had inspired him to commit the murders. There were the usual and predictable demands for government measurement and monitoring of film and television expression, i.e., censorship.

Perhaps because I have a fancy title in a glamour corner of a world-class instituton of higher learning, I was approached by an eastern reporter in search of a snappy, nifty, spiffy tag for his piece treating the murders. He called me, no doubt, because as a film professor, presumably, I am something of an authority, even if I spend a good deal of my time as an educator debauching that very authority.

He didn't quite realize it at the time, but he had come to the right guy, as it was two of my own former students who happened to write Robocop.

That same reporter, as it turns out, had also been instrumental in the culprit's apprehension. In its earliest stages he had conducted his own investigation into the case, and had concluded long before the police ever got around to it that the various as-yet-not-connected murders were in fact committed by a single offender.

When he communicated his findings to the police they were

actually annoyed. Their own investigation convinced them-- however wrongly--that the killings were all separate from one another. They dismissed and even derided his serial-murder theory. Two more women had to die before law enforcement authorities finally realized the reporter was right. Once they made this connection, they were able quickly to identify, locate and arrest the murderer.

So here, first of all, is a clear failure of the criminal corrections system. A man incarcerated for serious crimes is released long before his behavior had been "corrected" by the state apparatus. And here is a failure also of the parole and probation system. Can anyone believe that the parolee was adequately supervised? And finally here is a failure also of the police system: law enforcement agencies totally discounted a civilian's accurate findings and two more victims lost their lives before the police finally got it right.

So whom to assign the blame?

Why, Hollywood, of course. Film. Television. Ed Neumeir and Michael Miner, to be exact, the writers of Robocop.

This point is underscored further in a more recent experience. A Wall Street Journal profile characterizes myself as "...the prime broker for Hollywood's hottest commodity: new writing talent." Surely lots of people at Hollywood studios read the Wall Street Journal because my phone has been ringing of the hook ever since the piece appeared, with agents and producers seeking material from fresh screen scribes.

Among those responding to the article was the management

team that represents a title-holding prize fighter. He is, in their view, ready to make the break into movies and they are eager to read material that I may deem appropriate or suitable. They placed a caveat, however, on the kinds of tales they would consider. The boxer, it turns out, is unwilling to hurt anybody on screen.

Frankly, I regard the sentiment as admirable in the extreme. Nevertheless, there is no escaping the irony of a situation in which a man who has come to fortune and fame by beating with his fists real, true flesh-and-blood human beings senseless but who is unwilling merely to simulate such activity on the screen.

The actual activity is tolerable, but simulations and representations of such activity are by some curious reasoning held to be unacceptable.

To be sure, not only in prize fights and in movies and TV but in our real, true day-to-day lives we marinate in murder and mayhem. In our desperation to confront violent crime we enact ever more stringent laws, we arrest ever greater numbers of criminals, we build bigger, stronger prisons. And the blood bath, instead of being mitigated, grows still worse, yet more pervasive ever more destructive

And in our frustration over our inability successfully to ameliorate the problem we decide instead to control not the problem but the representation of the problem, not real crime and violence but simulations of the same in film and on television.

Surely there are echoes and evocations here of the struggle against pornography. Since we are apparently unable effectively to confront the real, true horror of sex crimes, we attack

instead simulations and representations of the same, even though experience in Europe, particularly in Scandinavia and Germany, suggest that fanciful depictions of such acts do not encourage similar behavior but, instead, according to statistics gathered and reported by law enforcement agencies, tend apparently to reduce it.

What does this offer except poignant evidence of our inability just generally to distinguish between reality and illusion? If we can't solve the real problem, let us at least create the illusion that we are doing so.

But of course such pretense serves no useful purpose. Quite the contrary, it deepens and underscores both our failure and our pain. Worst of all, it encourages the kinds of limitations upon creative expression that inevitably pollute art at its core, that do not solve but only exacerbate the dilemmas that confound us.

The clearest example of society's broad-based confusion between illusion and reality, it seems to me, is embodied in a single individual: Ronald Reagan. Opinion polls demonstrate that here is arguably the most popular, the most beloved president in the century, rivaling even Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the latter having managed somehow to win election over no fewer than four terms.

And yet the same polls demonstrate that these same people who adore Reagan cite no particularly worthy accomplishments attached to his administration. They assert that in terms of policies and achievements he was not an especially successful president. They say that they regard his domestic and

international programs as generally disastrous.

They assert that his economic programs wrought ruination; deregulation of the airline industry, for example, is seen to have damaged air traffic control and brought chaos and corruption to the industry. They see his law-and-order posturing as vastly at odds with the lawlessness of the Iran/Contra-gate era. They say that the bloodless collapse of the Eastern Bloc demonstrates that throughout his career he vastly exaggerated the threat of communism.

And yet at the same time they attest to their love for him and his presidency.

Surely our purpose here is not to determine the meritorious or meretricious nature of the Reagan presidency. Regarding that issue, therefore, I withhold my own judgment.

At least for now.

What is significant, however, is the marked and apparent schizophrenia between what is perceived to be the sorry state of the record on one hand, and the high regard in which the creator of the record is held, on the other hand.

In my own view, the explanation of the dichotomy is to be found in Reagan's history as an actor. When I first came to California, in the summer of 1966, Reagan was engaged in his first political campaign, seeking the office of governor. Pals back east could not take it seriously. They believed quite sincerely that it was an elaborate prank cooked up by Mad Magazine or the National Lampoon. The citizens of the richest and most populous state were going to elect as their leader a man whose prior experience consisted in its entirety of having been

an actor?

And a fairly undistinguished one at that?

Absurd!

As Johnnie Carson continuously asserted, they sure are whacky out there on the west coast.

Here on the scene, however, it seemed plain as day that the Reagan campaign was anything but a joke. Indeed, there was every appearance that Ronald Reagan would win and win big.

Which is, of course, precisely what came to pass.

Most notably, it was not despite but precisely because of his experience as an actor that Ronald Reagan won the presidency and, still more purposefully, became so admired, beloved, worshiped. Clearly, people are sick to tears of reality.

In the blizzard of illusions, people were ready for a fellow who, if he had no other credentials, was truly gubernatorial--and eventually presidential--at least in his appearance. And who in the world ever fulfilled the role better than Ronald Reagan? As an experienced, professional performer he was uniquely capable of assuming the role. What he did or did not accomplish in office mattered not a whit. What was important was the fact that here was a fellow who looked just exactly like The President of the United States, a man delivered quite literally from Central Casting.

Ronald Reagan's entire career testifies to the truth of the proposition that over reality people will take illusion any day of the week. What's crazy about all this is that it is not crazy at all. In an era of images, where it is increasingly difficult

to tell the difference between appearances and substance, the Reagan phenomenon is in fact wonderfully, wretchedly sensible.

Notwithstanding all the attention paid to film's violent nature, the medium represents more than anything else human cooperation and serene collaboration. Nowhere else but in film is the end of adversity more effectively, more articulately represented. For all the noise, for all the energy in asserting the contrary, movies are no less than the ultimate embodiment of healthful, creative, life-affirming human agreement and peaceful, creative interplay among people.

Sex and violence have a definite place in film and television.

They have been at the heart of dramatic expression since the earliest recorded drama millennia ago in Greece. Armies need not perpetually beat out each other's brains but, more often than not, worthy drama treats precisely such subjects.

What is real, what is important, is not the data but the emotion, not what is factual but what is dramatic.

Cosmologists agree that the universe was formed perhaps some thirteen billion earth-years ago in a vast cataclysm of creation they call the Big Bang. Celestial objects appear not to be coalescing but drifting ever further apart. The universe is presumed to be expanding.

There is a body of opinion that this expansion will continue into infinity.

Many believe, however, that eventually the universe will cease to expand and begin once again to combine. Thirteen billion years ago everything was the same, a single, homogenous,

dense, blob of super-heated plasma that was for an instant wholly constant and consistent and perfectly, wholly unified.

A micro-moment later came diversity, and it has burgeoned ever since.

Soon enough, however, perhaps in only several billion more years, diversity will reach its apex and reverse itself. The vast scattering of phenomena and experience will end and the grand coalescence will commence. This will terminate still billions of years later in a grand and gradiose crashing together of everything into everything else and there will be one, single micro-moment of unmitigated sameness.

I expect that in another moment thereafter will occur yet again a vast re-expansion and sweet, renewed, bountiful, crazy, chaotic diversification.

The same story plays out not only in the cosmos, I submit, but also right here on our own humble orb. Anthropologists agree that man and womankind reared our collective historical head first in Africa. Briefly we were one tribe, one color, spoke but a single language, ate the same food, lived in a common sheleter, wore the same costumes, saw the same sights, experienced the same experiences.

But soon enough humanity's universe expanded. Families migrated north to Europe and east to Asia and across what is now called the Bering Strait into what is now called The Americas. Color, culture and creed came eventually to vary. Diversity replaced sameness.

But in the current era technology has caused us at long last

to meet ourselves coming around our own block. We look out the window of our hotel in Hongkong and see the same scene that is visible from our front porch in Los Angeles. Understandably, here and there individuals and groups stand against it, but there is no stopping intermarriage and ultimately the unification of world culture, language, race.

It is all at once wonderful and dreadful news.

And we can do no more to stop it than we can cap the flow of lava from Mauna Kea, or halt the earth in its rotation in order to steal just another smidgen of day or night. The mountain is the mountain and it does what it wants to do. We can fret all we like but there is nothing for us actually to do other than to observe it, to wonder in it, to wander in it, to fear it, to enjoy and revile it, to embrace and to celebrate it.

If we're not terrorized by it, then we are brain-dead. But if we cannot also derive some satisfaction in its warm, soft glow, then we are not human.

The master Canadian communications philosopher, Professor Marshall McLuhan, in his timeless Understanding Media, proposed that Guttenberg's invention of the printing press made possible the phenomenon that is mass production. The massive shattering of experience into bits and pieces of representational information--the letters of the alphabet, the combining of letters into words, the signs and symbols that constitute grammar--made possible the assembly line and the whole industrial revolution.

Every bit as importantly, however, its very first product, that revolution's opening salvo, its first product, the printed

Guttenberg Bible, became itself the first such object. That is to say, the printed book was the history's first mass-produced product of any kind.

There are echoes of this phenomnom throughout film. Film, first of all, makes possible the world-wide sharing of experience that renders inevitable, the resurrection of the global village. And every bit as importantly, at the same time as film is the instrument of such change, it is itself the embodiment of that change.

Nowhere else is there collaboration among diverse parties in the creation of something whole, something wondrously common, than in the enterprise that is the motion picture.

First and foremeost, therefore, notwithstanding raucous protestations to the contrary, even violent film is not violent, not destructive, but a tranquil, peaceful, life-affirming enterprise that heals and nourishes the human spirit.