

Mind Abuse: Media Violence in the Information Age. By Rose Dyson. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2000. 225 pp. ISBN 1551641526 (pbk.).

This is a readable book that argues for the links between media and violence as framed by George Gerbner's work on the cultural environment. Love it or hate it, Gerbner's work has a strong theoretical base and is grounded in systematic empirical analysis. It is also informed by a critical and ethical perspective: "The issue of media violence is really just the first phase of a major cultural debate about life in the 21st Century. What kind of people do we want our children to become? What kind of culture will best give them the environment they will need to grow up healthy and whole?" (Gerbner, 1993, p. 2, cited on p. 183).

Dr. Dyson's book is in some respects an effort to popularize her dissertation research on the limitations of postmodern approaches to media violence and the harmful negative effects of graphic violence from a Canadian perspective. She blends a wide range of disciplines and sources—including empirical research on the effect of violent media and pornography (which she too often lumps together), an analysis of the political economy of the industry, and opinion research, illustrated with a wealth of anecdotes from her many years as an advocate. Dr. Dyson is not afraid to take on the apologists for violence in the media, irresponsible teachers, the anticensorship politically correct crowd, big business, or the government. Some of her insider's perspectives on the processes that have shaped policy and inaction are interesting and insightful.

However, the book is marred by an intensity that at times obscures the argument. In this respect, Dr. Dyson plays directly into the hands of her enemies, failing, for example to distinguish between explicit sex and graphic violence. For example, she criticizes Telefilm, the Canada Council, and various regional film-development agencies for generously providing tax dollars to a number of sex- and violence-filled Canadian productions, among them some of the following: David Cronenberg's Cannes-prize-winning *Crash* (fetishized car wrecks); Lynn Stopkewich's *Kissed* (necrophilia); John Greyson's *Lilies* (plenty of unabashed gay sex); Bruce Sweeney's *Dirty* (drugs, explicit oral sex, sadomasochism); Atom Egoyan's triple header, the Oscar-nominated *The Sweet Hereafter* (incest), *Exotica* (teen strippers), and *Family Viewing* (voyeurism and masturbation); Cynthia Roberts' *Bubbles Galore* (pornography star Nina Hartley turned porn producer) and *Bride of Chucky* (p. 191). I have not seen all these films, but even my mother would have trouble having *The Sweet Hereafter* reduced to a single word ("incest") and linked with teen slasher films and the Columbine high-school shootings. And would *Lilies* have been okay as long as the gay sex had been abashed?

The "science versus advocacy" dilemma is really highlighted in the book. Dr. Dyson makes no secret of her point of view and marshals whatever evidence and sources support it. The problem for this reader is that the strength of the arguments, as well as the evidence and the sources, range quite considerably. I happen to agree with Dr. Dyson's thesis and know that there is much evidence to support it. However, much of the rigour of the argument and the strong empirical evidence to support it is lost because she indiscriminately mixes sources. For example, newspaper reports and unsubstantiated claims are combined with solid empirical studies, perhaps in an effort to make the argument accessible, but with the effect of diluting it. She notes that at a conference on school violence in 1993 sponsored by the Canadian Institute, many of the speakers stressed the role of the media in exacerbating the problem of violence in the schools. The Canadian Institute is a for-profit organization, and one might expect the author to make some distinction between claims by Don Offord, Professor of Psychiatry at McMaster University, and Bob Horner, Member of Parliament for Mississauga West (p. 12).

Like many advocates, myself included, Dr. Dyson lives in a Manichaeian university—separated into those who are for her and those who are against her. Although she herself

acknowledges that violence results from a complex interaction of factors and that there is no panacea, she is uncritical of the “research” of anyone who supports her position. Indeed, her reliance on the work of National Rifle Association favourites—U.S. Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman (who argued that the hand-eye co-ordination developed playing violent video games contributed to youth violence generally and the Jonesboro school shootings in the U.S. but that access to guns did not) as well as Brandon Centerwall (who blames television for violent crime but argues that access to guns is irrelevant)—simply reinforces her standpoint. Similarly, the *ad hominem* attacks levelled at those who do not agree with her—for example, Bruce Kidd, who refused to cancel a Marilyn Manson concert scheduled at the University of Toronto (p. 13)—reflect the intensity of her commitment but do not necessarily make for rational and persuasive argument.

The book needed a tough editor to expunge the petty paybacks and feverish evangelical bits, such as:

Meanwhile, media scholars, community activists and concerned journalists with a more critical perspective continue to exchange views and calls for decisive action to stem the flow of profit driven cultural commodities with lifestyles and conflict resolution strategies which are plunging us into world wide chaos, whether it is in Kosovo, Colorado or Taber, Alberta. (p. 171)

Finally, the analysis of the lack of success of the advocacy efforts seems to rest on the fact that her own organization, C-CAVE,

has never enjoyed the same support and generous funding as other organizations such as the Alliance for Children and Television (ACT) and the Association for Media Literacy (AML) focused exclusively on alternative programming for children or values-free analysis of the media. As a result its mandate to provide public education on what the research shows on media violence, based on overwhelming evidence pointing to harmful effects, has been marginalized. (p. 169)

This focus on the lack of government funding obscures any real analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the movement. Moral outrage may be a good motivator, but it is not necessarily an effective advocacy strategy. There are many examples of effective advocacy efforts that have managed with virtually no government funding—CAVEAT, for example, which Dr. Dyson mentions in her acknowledgments. There are other advocacy groups that have achieved little, in part because they are too beholden to the governments that fund them. Her analysis of the successes and failures of C-CAVE could be more rigorous and useful. For example, “the Toronto Police morality squad declined an opportunity to lay obscenity charges against the sexually violent book *American Psycho* while the entire matter was ignored despite a media release from C-CAVE” (p. 170). A media release does not a campaign make.

There is also a certain level of pettiness that begins to grate after a while: “An invitation to Ms. Oda [CTV VP] to participate on a panel coordinated by the author for the 1998 Canadian Communications Conference at the University of Ottawa on the ‘Regulation of the Media for the Good of the Public’ was accepted but subsequent follow-up phone calls were ignored” (p. 172). Dr. Dyson just cannot resist an opportunity to repay the many slights she has suffered.

There is a wealth of evidence that supports Dr. Dyson’s basic thesis regarding the “culture of violence.” Cultural history and analysis has shown how world views shape values and behaviour. There is also strong empirical research that links media violence, values, and behaviour. And there are serious questions to be asked about our cultural environment. However, the “cultural environment” movement might actually have been advanced from a more critical self-reflection on its strengths and weaknesses as well as the reasons for its

marginalization. It might have benefited from a careful analysis of the gap between public opinion and political will and the strategies needed to mobilize public action. The key to effective political change is reaching the audience you need to persuade rather than merely preaching to the converted. Regrettably, this book misses that opportunity.

Reference

Gerbner, George. (1993, September 2). *CEM (Communiqué)*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg School for Communication.

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