Parents and pedagogues are frequently frustrated to find that their adolescent children's conception of dramatic entertainment and performance bears little relationship to their coordinated strategies of what mimesis, performance, didacticism and play should be all about.

After a kindergarten and early-primary phase of apparent harmony between TV and classroom, in which Fraggle Rock, Sesame Street, Video Door, or You Can't Do That on Television are at least there to compete with the purely commercial nature of the Strawberry Shortcake or Thundercats absurdities, the influence of educators on TV and video production (notwithstanding the efforts of the new Youth and Family TV channels in Canada) seems to have minimal effect on what adolescents actually watch and play. For the age group eleven to 15, unbridled commercialism dictates extra-curricular viewing habits. Here I would briefly like to indicate what is watched — primarily on video, but also on TV and film (the overlaps are, of course, very great) — why, and whether this should give any cause for concern.

Adolescents' favourite viewing material might be broken down into five groups: musical (notably video rock which is sometimes, but not necessarily, accompanied by buying records or tapes and listening to the radio); participatory games (including attendance at video arcades, use of computers and hooking up Nintendo or Atari systems to the TV set), non-participatory spectacles (which does include sports to a degree, but is more likely to be carnivalesque wrestling), horror films and certain kinds of psychological thrillers as the children get older, and a variety of comedies both as films and TV sitcoms. This classification is decidedly male, but the major female variation in the pattern of viewing might be in the part played by soaps operas, which, by and large, are essentially a TV rather than a video format. (One of the major points of this article is the extent to which the content and marketing of video, in all its forms at this level, is essentially a male prerogative.) The significance of these classifications, which emerged from interviews with groups of (all male) eleven- to 13- and (mixed gender) 14- to 15-year-olds in Toronto, is that they cover most of the regions that we would associate with theatre, though with a peculiar postmodern twist. The "musical" element is directly mediated through an unabashed selling of the recording industry and the presentation of "video poems," as Andy Warhol so romantically put it. Much more significantly, however, rock music itself has acted as the fulcrum for a newly perceived subculture which develops as the basis for an anti-language to any form of "established" culture. The video-rock industry, aided by the compact disc revolution of video, is seen by some as a "dissemination of popular music which has been purged of all that is "classical.""

Even if the "classical" elements occasionally pop up, the video image is all that is needed to see/hear, and not in terms of the music, which is sometimes just there, and not a serious part of learning. Even the education of the young, its pretense at objectivity and understanding, is becoming infected with the environment of the video, both by pedagogues and also by the market. Video, then, even more than in the past, can be the symptom of a collection of the worst - the most vacuous, video, produced by people who are also by nature a market.

Video as theatre

Video games and shows are the contemporary medium for the carnivalesque and the grotesque in a new morality play.
revolution in music reproduction, has created both a timeless and situationless smorgasbord of rock music within which "divert" is submerged in the sense of being part of an epiphenomenal world in which rock is part of "tradition" (the "golden oldies") but also part of a visual presentation which is frequently indistinguishable from commercials for Pepsi-Cola. One issue that kids have to face in making sense of this tradition is whether there is a real difference between a Mendelssohn or a Mahler converting to Christianity in order to reach the appropriate audiences, and a Michael Jackson or a Madonna trimming their sails in order to achieve wider sales. In this sense contemporary teenagers are more astute than the hed policy who turn up at Roy Thomson Hall to listen to "authentic" music. They know who is being bought, and by whom, because the message is delivered unequivocally across their screens. Even if they are not provided with the critical equipment to locate the music in its historical context, they do know how to place it in its present politico-economic context and also to decide why, in spite of all that, they like or dislike what they hear.

The trick of video rock is to place image, lyric and rhythm in the present, wherever it originated, and thus to learn to dance to the music of the spheres. The tradition of rock music and its incorporation into blatantly commercial video images provides for all teenagers the central area within which politics, economics and culture can be seen to contend. One of the successes of Miami Vice was that it was able to turn ostensibly detective plots into fashion commercials using rock music. Miami Vice was the logical extension of rock video, and thus could be watched equally by people who unconditionally accepted it but also by the many who saw it displaying the ultimate corruption of rock music.

Video games give adolescents the occasion to perform, to experience colour and movement, to mould their identities. Vitally, the video game is dominated by the symbolism of military contest (but isn't chess?), and thus the appeal is largely to boys — though, as Sherry Turkle shows in The Second Self, many girls also spend a lot of time at arcades and playing at their home videos. The central feature of video games, however, is neither the sex nor the apparently mindless addiction, but rather the context between the personal gameplan and the machine's. Almost every video gamer is also a potential inventor: working out strategies on how this game could be better, or even how an even better game could be devised. The performance expected of the player is not one which calls into play the whole body (though it demands a lot of the reflexes), but one which structures the imagination, the internal resources. Video games allow the player to enter into the rituals and logic of another situation, to try to beat this other system on its own terms. It is thus cathartic, mimetic and innovative. It is also, of course, largely a solitary experience, pulling the player out of the "real world" into a fantasy world where Dungeons & Dragons, Starfight or Platoon become the only worlds worth inhabiting. But because the fantasy is projected out of a machine, the machine itself becomes the object of confrontation. Thus the theatre of the mind gains a new dimension, the ultimate resting place of dada and surrealism where the play of the world is acted out in our very personal confrontations with the minds of the robots we make.

It's a short leap from the Frankenstei- nian reality to the cosmic horrors of Night- mare on Elm Street or Friday the Thirteenth. The tense struggle of fighting in 'Nan or battling the intergalactic werewolves which video games provide is nothing compared with the real (and evident) issues of personal death, of dark nightmares, of the destruction of mother-figures, of sexuality in general, of the insane "man with the gun at the door." The themes are, of course, as old as Rebekah and the broth- ers Grimm's fairy tales, and as recent as Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker and Sigmund Freud. What Sesame Street papered over will not lie down. In Nightmare on Elm Street, for example, the street name is taken from the Dick and Jane books (Nightmare on Sesame Street would have been too obvious) and as Robert Englund (the "Freddy") of Nightmare put it in a recent interview:

Nightmare on Elm Street is a sort of loose, allegorical symbol for a kind of evil re-turning to the white, Anglo-Saxon sub- nth of North America ... They're politi- cal and they're Freudian and they've intellectual content, which is all sublim- inal, but there, via Wes Craven. Freddy is out there, bringing back those evil sins to the adolescent who's just em- barking on a serious adult life. Even though I don't think the teenage audi- ence intellectualize, I think they know it's for them.1

The "horror" of the video is thus a hor- ror which has been with us for some time, though now the context of the horrors is made more specific to white middle class (probably male) adolescents. Because the horror is excessive — and therefore not polite — it rarely ranks high either as literature or as film/video, but as an educative artform. Who are we in a post-Auschwitz age to deny children the right to explore issues which are very much alive in our own subconscious? Titus Andronicus or Macbeth have nothing on The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. The adolescent sense of tragedy is that they may be part of the Manson killings.

Fortunately, teenagers do not only engage in battles with the machine nor live through nightmares of the destruction of their everyday world. The sense of carnival, of masquerade, is kept alive in the spectacle of wrestling, which acts out the games that are taken seriously on all forms of video, but as parody. The great attraction of TV and video wrestling is that like computerised games it is based on context, like horror films it appeals to the sense of evil lurking in our everyday world, and like music video it plays with myths of sexuality and bonding. It is, of course, orchestrat- ed and produced as pure theatre, as self-
most important other form of comic video is the film slapstick which deals with identifiable situations by playing on the edge of horror. The really mindless patriotic horrors — the Rambos or Dirty Harry series and Predator or The Running Man — act as the backdrop for the interminable Police Academy films, Good Morning Vietnam, the Ninth series, the best of Eddie Murphy or Richard Pryor. The thin line between macho violence in the name of some patriotic or moral cause, and its own self-parody, is always there, of course, none more so than in the last two Rambos films. However, the immense popularity of comedy as a corrective to the forces of law and order taking themselves too seriously is perhaps another indication that the carnivalesque is an important part of teenage culture even where, as in Police Academy, the quality is abysmal. The ultimate parody is, however, RoboCop, where commercialisation of entertainment and the mechanisation of law and order meet in a series of brilliant engagements.

One important feature of all of this is the blatant sexism that dominates the video industry, including of course wrestling, and the almost total lack of product (with the exception of some video rock) that appeals to adolescent girls. This may give the schools an advantage in maintaining their influence over female students; but, to be truly effective, for boys as well as girls, teachers must become knowledgeable about the popular theatrical culture that is available through video. For theatrical instruction in schools to be more than a fringe activity, an engagement between the constituents of teenagers’ existing dramatic encounters and those in school that are important should be the basis of any discourse.

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NOTE

SUGGESTED READING
Cultural Studies, Vol. 1, No. 2 (May 1987); special issue edited by Angela McRobbie on young women and popular culture.

Media literacy and The Globe and Mail

Why is The Globe and Mail alerting its readers to the ideological danger of a high school media studies programme?

Media have long provided the “first curriculum” for most Canadian kids; it has been estimated that by the time they finish high school, they’ve spent an average of 11,000 hours at school, compared to more than 15,000 hours watching television and 10,500 hours listening to popular music. This fall the Ontario education ministry, after four years of preparation, released its media resource guide Media Literacy for Intermediate and Senior grades, the first province to officially tackle this touchy subject. The guide is tentative, offering suggestions to teachers rather than a formal curriculum, and it is probably an attempt to test the political waters before proceeding any further. Since its release it has received three hostile responses in Canada’s national organ for the business community, The Globe and Mail (September 13, 15 and 30), and these may well be indicative of how the economic and political power represented by The Globe will respond to the notion that schools should try to develop “critical media consumers.”

Why is The Globe and Mail alerting its readers to the ideological danger of a high school media studies programme? While Media Literacy bends over backwards to stress that understanding media is just another “life skill,” like learning to ride a bicycle or using a condom dispenser in the boys’ washroom, the guide does in fact offer an opportunity to think about media in a new and potentially liberating way. Inspired by critical media theory and research in the last two decades, it directly attacks the fact-value distinction of the dominant ideology and, by implication, the “objectivity” of news. It offers quite a tough-minded political/intellectual argument which is worth paying attention to.

This thoughtful and sophisticated rationale for a media literacy programme takes only a few pages in the guide, which

excursions

is mostly about how, at the very least, we need to undertake a critical analysis of the media. While the article doesn’t alert the education sector, it is a critical piece on the contributions that the media make to the ideological education of young people. The, quite sad, trend is that there is very little reaction from the editorial pages as such.

The Ontario education ministry is not alone in taking this initiative: A number of Canadian provinces have produced or are currently revising media literacy curricula. This is an important development, especially given the growing concern in media studies circles about the role of media in the socialisation process. The media are not only a reflection of society but also a powerful force in shaping our perceptions of the world. They can influence our views on issues such as politics, economics, and culture. In this context, media literacy becomes an essential tool for understanding and critically evaluating the media's role in society.

In conclusion, while media literacy programs face significant challenges, they hold great promise for fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry. By empowering individuals to become critical consumers of media, these programs can help to address the ideological and social issues that are increasingly prevalent in our world today. As such, they are an important step towards creating a more just and equitable society.