Video
as
theatre

Video games and shows are the contemporary medium for the carnivalesque and the grotesque in a new morality play.

IOAN DAVIES

Parents and peda-gogues are frequently frustrated to find that their adolescent children's conception of dramatic enter-tainment and perfor-mance bears little relationship to their coordinated strategies of what mimesis, per-formance, narrative, didacticism and play should be all about.

fter a kindergarten and early-primary phase of apparent har-mony between TV and class-room, in which *Fraggle Rock, Sesame Street, Polka Dot Door,* or *You Can't Do That on Television* are at least there to compete with the purely commercial na-ture of the *Strawberry Shortcake* or *Thunder-cats* absurdities, the influence of educators on TV and video production (notwith-standing 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 some-times, but not necessarily, accompanied by buying records or tapes and listening to the radio), participatory games (including attendance at video arcades, use of com-puters 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 carnival-esque wrestling), horror films and certain kinds of psychological thrillers as the chil-dren get older, and a variety of comedies both as films and TV sitcoms. This classifi-cation is decidedly male, but the major female variation in the pattern of viewing might be in the part played by soap 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 interviewing groups of (all male) eleven- to 13- and (mixed gen-der) 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 "music" element is directly mediated through an unabashed selling of the recording indus-try 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 in music reproduction, has created both a timeless and situationless smorgasbord of rock music within which "dissent" is submerged in the sense of being part of an ephemeral 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 any 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 hoi polloi 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 see/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 uncritically 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. Virtually every 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 sexism nor the apparently mindless addiction, but rather the contest between the personal gameplan and the machine's. Almost every video gameplayer 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, Starflight* or *Platoon* be-

come 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 made.

It's a short leap from the Frankensteinian reality to the gothic horrors of *Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Friday the Thirteenth*. The tense struggle of fighting in 'Nam 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 Rabelais and the brothers 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 returning to the white, Anglo-Saxon suburb of North America ... They're political and they're Freudian and they've intellectual content, which is all subliminal, but there, *via* Wes Craven. Freddy is out there, bringing back those evil sins to the adolescent who's just embarking on a serious adult life. Even though I don't think the teenage audience intellectualize, I think they know it's for them.[1]

The "horror" of the videos is thus a horror 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 art-form. 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 contest, 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, orchestrated and produced as pure theatre, as self-

conscious parody. Although it has roots in non-video wrestling, which always had an element of carnival with grotesque and obese bodies struggling for mastery, contemporary wrestling takes place in an area where all the symbols are drawn from popular culture but where good and evil, black and white, male and female are portrayed as caricature, where cheating is everywhere evident though ultimately taboo. Video wrestling acts out a morality play which invites the audience to identify with the characters and the moral situations. For under-tens the spectacle is as "true" as a fairy tale or nursery rhyme, but for adolescents the true nature of the carnivalesque is appreciated, as is the irony of the media hype associated with the production of the major Wrestlemania contests. Ultimately, of course, wrestling is a satire of the whole business of organised sport — of the Olympics, the Grey Cup, the Stanley Cup, the World Series, the soccer World Cup — and of beauty contests, the Oscars and fashion shows. The sheer commercialism of these are displayed nakedly in Wrestlemania, as is the idea that athletic skill and beauty can be manufactured and manipulated. Wrestling is the true adolescent theatre of our time.

If we ignore TV sitcoms and soap operas, which translate badly onto video, the
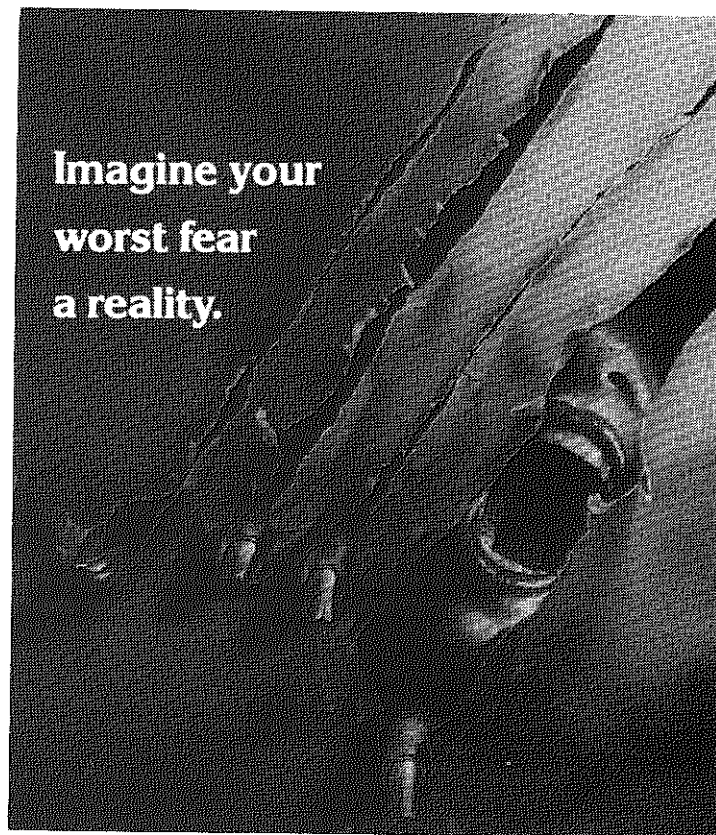
Imagine your worst fear a reality.

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?

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 *Rambo* or *Dirty Harry* series and *Predator* or *The Running Man* — act as the backdrop for the interminable *Police Academy* films, *Good Morning Vietnam*, the *Nerds* 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 *Rambo* 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 computerisation 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 that teachers think are important should be the basis of any discourse.

Ioan Davies teaches at York University and is a member of the Border/Lines collective.

NOTE

1. "Freddy and the Dreamers," interview with Robert Englund conducted by John Minson, *The Guardian*, 27 April 1989, p. 25.

SUGGESTED READING

Turkle, Sherry. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit.* London: Granada Publishing, 1984.
Journal of Communication Inquiry, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 1986): special issue on MTV.
Angus, Ian, and Sut Jhally, eds. *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America.* New York: Routledge, 1989.
Gitlin, Todd, ed. *Watching Television.* New York: Pantheon, 1986.
Cultural Studies, Vol. 1, No. 2 (May 1987): special issue edited by Angela McRobbie on young women and popular culture.
Hebdige, Dick. *Hiding in the Light.* London: Routledge, 1988.
Easthope, Antony. *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture.* London: Collins, 1986.
Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

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?*

SATU REPO

edia 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 water 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 is the gist of it:

Despite loud claims to objectivity, media do not present a clear reflection of external reality, but productions which have specific purposes. They construct an appearance of reality, using different "languages" or "codes": visual, verbal, aural, technical and ideological. Each medium adds its own æsthetic and epistemological "effect." Predominantly, media are commercial enterprises, out to make a profit. This factor enters into both the choice of what is being produced and how items get produced. The media are also an integral part of the established economic and social order and have a vested interest in maintaining it. They may not be directly responsible for creating values and attitudes, but they definitely serve to legitimise and reinforce them. In addition, media have larger social and political implications. For a combination of economic and technological reasons, they influence both the nature of political life and national cultures. For example, for Canadians the domination of American media means that the struggle for a distinctive Canadian identity continues to be difficult. Finally, media productions, because they are shaped by complex and conflicting social forces (for instance, the need to be ideologically sound may have to be tempered by the commercial imperative to be popular), are often highly ambiguous and are themselves interpreted differently by different audiences who use their own values to make sense of what is offered to them. Media literacy is important because critical and knowledgeable "readers" may be able to draw their own conclusions from the offerings presented to them.

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

It is esti

is mos
of how
not su
directe
underp
alert to
sector,
studen
the co
that de
entert:
tivity
ideolo
editori
cided
quite s
attack
as suc

Thi
land F
the gu
"Onta
media
tario s
deciph
partic
contii
how t
"medi
see th
the tr
doesn
even ;
affirm
the n:
afflue
wome
unque

Aft
discre
tembe
repor
Abele
"the
the C