

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. ■

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NOTE

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

SUGGESTED READING

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Media literacy and The Globe and Mail

SATU REPO

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 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.

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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 aesthetic 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

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It is estimated that upon finishing high school, kids have spent an average of 11,000 hours at school, and over more 15,000 hours watching television.

is mostly devoted to concrete suggestions of how to teach this stuff. However, it is not surprising that the *Globe's* reactions are directed mainly towards these intellectual underpinnings. *The Globe and Mail*, ever alert to ideological deviations in the state sector, is very troubled by the idea that students should be taught to think about the complex political and economic forces that determine what becomes news and entertainment. The notion of the objectivity of the media is still a strongly held ideological dogma in its newsrooms and editorial offices. There, the *Globe* has decided to interpret the media literacy guide quite simplistically as an unwarranted attack on media integrity and dismiss it as such.

This interpretation surfaced with Orland French's report (or is it exposé?) on the guide on September 13, headlined "Ontario helping students assess what the media does to reality," which begins "Ontario school children are going to learn to decipher ways that communication media, particularly television warps reality." He continues to make snide comments on how the guide wants students to appreciate "media wiles" and tries to "help children see the ways in which the media interpret the truth to suit their own purposes" and doesn't forget to mention that the guide even goes as far as to suggest that media affirm the existing social system and define the nature of the "good life" by stressing affluence, consumerism, the proper role of women, the acceptance of authority and unquestioning patriotism.

After this exposé the next step was to discredit the writers of the guide. On September 15, under the headline "Classroom report on the press lacks authority," Joan Abeles, a public relations rep described as "the manager of educational services for the Canadian Daily Newspaper Publishers

Association and a former secondary school-school English teacher and department head," is given ample space for comment. She, too, is offended by the notion in the guide that media "constructs" a reality rather than mirrors a world out there. She accuses the guide of portraying media as "unscrupulous manipulators of an unsuspecting audience" and slams it as cynical and ill-informed. Focusing on the section dealing with newspapers, she wants to know why the guide did not use well-known print journalists as either advisors or as members of its writing team. She claims that it weakens the guide's credibility and has resulted in a "mishmash of inaccuracies and personal bias peppered with a sprinkling of wisdom from assorted media texts." Ignoring the fact that the bibliography of the guide contains both the critical *Report of the Royal Commission on Newspapers* that her own organisation found so offensive, and writings by prominent print journalists like Walter Stewart and Barrie Zwicker who have plenty to say about the social construction of news, Abeles goes on to beat the drums for Canada's "proud journalistic tradition" and our "free and unfettered press."

The *Globe*, having exposed the scandalous views in *Media Literacy* and allowed such a disinterested party as the Canadian Daily Newspaper Publishers Association to pass judgment on it, closes its coverage by inviting us to laugh it out of existence. On September 30, Warren Clements offers us a spoof under the headline "Education benign time-waster or insidious force?" "The media can be a tricky bunch at times," he begins broadly. "They consider themselves trustworthy, but have been known to warp reality and blur the lines between objectivity and subjectivity. You may be sitting there with the newspaper open or a program flickering on the screen, and wham!

— from out of nowhere, a tinge of something suspicious will scurry across the surface of a newsreport and compromise the truth." It is good that educators are exposing these sinister tricks, jests Clements, but shouldn't the media try to return the favour and offer a guide to the ways schooling warps reality? "Too many students grow up believing that reality exists in definable chunks of nine months with summers off for good behavior, and that learning consists of listening to somebody talk for 40 minutes at a time."

Clements is actually quite funny, but behind the jest lurks the larger, and from the point of view of the *Globe*, more disturbing question raised by the guide: if media knowledge is "socially constructed" does that not also apply to other forms of knowledge? Is the guide not teaching students to look at the seams of all the information presented to them? Perhaps it will soon lead them to ask questions about how history texts are constructed and how political speeches should be "read?" What the *Globe* is doing, in fact, is alerting conservative forces, both inside and outside the school system, to the dangers of the approach outlined in *Media Literacy*. By disturbing such holy cows as the objectivity of knowledge and the disinterestedness of experts are the schools encouraging not just "critical autonomy," as the guide promises, but a more disturbing clearheadedness on the part of the student: an ability, for example, to ask questions about how class, race and gender enter into the construction of knowledge? If the *Globe* and the interests it represents have their way, there will be stormy times ahead for any media literacy programme that promises this much enlightenment. ■

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