

## 9

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

### An archaeology of popular anxieties

*Graham Murdoch*

On the morning of Wednesday, 13 March 1996, Thomas Hamilton, a middle-aged man with no criminal record, walked into the primary school in the small Scottish town of Dunblane, shot sixteen children and a teacher and then killed himself. It was a deeply disturbing incident and, although there was no evidence that he had a particular interest in watching screen violence, it prompted a rash of commentary condemning the morality of popular film and television. Here is Andrew Neil, writing in the *Sunday Times*:

There are some crimes so horrific that they make us all wonder what kind of country we have become... It should be cause for concern that, in the values and mores of modern society, we have created a quagmire from which monsters are bound to emerge...far too much of what passes for popular entertainment pollutes our society and creates a new tolerance in which what was thought to be beyond the pale becomes acceptable. Young minds are particularly vulnerable.  
(Neil, 1996, p. 5)

An almost identical catalogue of complaint followed two other traumatic events of recent years: Michael Ryan's random shootings in Hungerford and the brutal murder of 2-year-old James Bulger by two boys of 10. Again, although there was no firm evidence of direct 'effects' in either case, screen violence was singled out as a major contributory cause. In recent discussions, a small number of films containing scenes of violence have come to stand for the state of contemporary cinema. Quentin Tarantino's début feature *Reservoir Dogs* has been a particular target. One popular cartoon, which appeared in the wake of the intense debate on the James Bulger case, showed two children sitting in front of a television set displaying the film's title. One is turning to the other saying: 'Let's go and drown some puppies.'

This simple image of direct effects draws its power from a deep reservoir

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

of social fear and dogma which first formed in the mid-nineteenth century as commentators began to link the social costs of modernity with the proliferation of new forms of popular entertainment. Then, as now, the perceived disorders of the present were often counterposed against an idealised image of the past.

Once upon a time, so the story runs...violence and disorder were unknown in Britain... But now all that is no more. Now violence and terror lurk in the once-safe streets. The family no longer holds its proper place and parents have abandoned their responsibilities.  
(Pearson, 1983, p. 3)

Here is Andrew Neil again:

There was a time, within my memory, when popular culture sought to lift our spirits and encourage what was good, honourable and just in our society. We aspired to what we saw on our screens, and evil was generally given a bad press.

(Neil, 1996, p. 5)

This is a startling case of selective recall. Though Neil grew up in the 1950s he has conveniently forgotten the moral panics about media 'effects' which greeted the American 'horror comics', the hard-boiled pulp thrillers of Mickey Spillaine and Hank Janson, and the 'Teddy Boy riots' in cinemas showing early rock 'n' roll films. For a newspaperman, he also displays a woeful ignorance of the long history of condemnation that has accompanied popular media throughout the modern age.

By the 1850s the core patterns of modern social life had begun to crystallise, and popular fictions, dramas and journalism were assuming their familiar contemporary forms. The blood-soaked melodramas playing in the 'penny gaffs', the lurid stories carried by the 'penny dreadfuls' and the sensationalised coverage of crime in the populist Sunday newspapers established traditions of representation which are still very much with us. Violence and lawlessness were one of their principal stocks-in-trade. They paraded the dark side of modernity's promise of progress, the monstrous doubles of order and respectability, the animalistic potentials that continually elbowed and jostled sobriety and rationality. Commentators were quick to see them as both a potent symptom of moral decline and a powerful new incitement to anti-social behaviour. Because they supposedly lacked an adequate training in moral and social restraints, young people were widely seen as particularly open to suggestion. As the critic who reviewed a series of recent publications on juvenile crime for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1851 lamented:

UON/E3B00F82-AF69-EE11-A7AC-0050569FD662

## GRAHAM MURDOCH

One powerful agent for depraving the boyish classes of our population in our towns and cities is to be found in the cheap concerts, shows and theatres, which are so specially opened and arranged for the attraction and ensnaring of the young...when our fear of interfering with personal and public liberty allows these shows and theatres to be training schools of the coarsest and most open vice and filthiness—it is not to be wondered at, that the boy who is led on to haunt them becomes rapidly corrupted and demoralised, and seeks to be the doer of the infamies which have interested him as a spectator.

(*Edinburgh Review*, 1851, p. 409)

This attractively simple notion, that what young people watched was directly linked to what they later did, rapidly moved to the centre of debate. Despite the serious reservations that have been lodged against the research evidence claiming to ‘prove’ these connections (e.g. Murdock and McCron, 1979; Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989; Gauntlett, 1995) studies in this tradition are still routinely cited by commentators arguing for more stringent controls on film and video. According to Melanie Phillips of the *Observer*, for example:

The remarkable fact is that there is a vast amount of evidence, more than 1,000 studies carried out in the United States and elsewhere, demonstrating a link between screen violence and aggressive behaviour in children... True, there are problems with this kind of research... But there are simply too many studies all pointing the same way to be ignored.

(Phillips, 1994, p. 25)

Anyone who questions this conclusion is presented as an arrogant, self-opinionated member of ‘the progressive, libertarian intelligentsia’, out of touch with the justified concerns of ordinary people.

The attraction of these ‘many studies’ is not simply that they offer the illusion of strength in numbers, but that they fit perfectly with the commonsense assumption that, since ‘it stands to reason’ that there must be a link, responsible research is simply confirming what reasonable people already know, and that refusing to accept this is patently unreasonable.

As we shall see, this circular relationship between empiricist science and common-sense thinking was built into academic work on media ‘effects’ from the outset. The dominant research tradition adopted the definition of the ‘problem’ already established in popular and political commentary. The result was banal science, which failed to ask awkward questions, to pursue other possible lines of inquiry or to place ‘effects’ in their social contexts. But because its investigative procedures corresponded to common-sense notions of what ‘proper’ science was—the image of controlled experimentation being

UON/E3B00F82-AF69-EE11-A7AC-0050569FD662

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

particularly central—its ‘findings’ seemed to offer strong confirmation of popular assumptions and anxieties. These, in turn, were anchored in a deeprooted formation of fear about the precarious balance between anarchy and order in the modern age.

As nineteenth-century observers knew very well, the dynamics of modernity called all pre-existing moral and social relations into question. As Marx put it in 1848, in one of his most lyrical passages, there was an ‘uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions...all fixed, fast-frozen relations are swept away... All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned’ (Marx and Engels, 1968, p. 38). What Marx celebrated as a liberation others mourned as a loss. They saw established social restraints crumbling away. They were haunted by the spectre of moral decline amidst material plenty. Many worried about the loosening grip of religious faith, and drives to ‘purify’ popular entertainment were often linked to campaigns to re-Christianise society.

As Andrew Neil’s piece illustrates, anxieties about the moral and spiritual costs of social and cultural change remain central to present debates. They establish potent connections between concern about media violence and more general fears for the future. If we are to develop a more comprehensive analysis of the interplay between popular media and everyday thinking, feeling and behaviour, and to argue convincingly for expressive diversity in film, television and the new media, we need to challenge popular fears. Retracing the intellectual and political history that has formed them is a necessary first step. This is a substantial task. What follows is simply a very bald sketch of an embedded structure of feeling which will, hopefully, suggest some lines for future inquiry.

### Dangerous associations

The civic culture of high modernity was increasingly based around the social contract of citizenship. Every adult was entitled to participate fully in social and political life. In return they were expected to behave responsibly. Citizens were model Enlightenment individuals. They made rational choices on the basis of careful reflection and disinterested evidence. But the fact that the French Enlightenment had also produced the French Revolution and the Terror left an indelible impression on contemporary observers. As the great British constitutionalist Walter Bagehot warned in 1876: ‘Such scenes of cruelty and horror as happened in the great French Revolution...we now see...were the outbreak of inherited passions long repressed by fixed custom, but starting into life as soon as that repression was catastrophically removed’ (quoted in McClelland, 1989, p. 162). From the outset, the imagination of citizenship was shadowed by the fear of the elemental power of the crowd and the mob waiting to be detonated just below the surface of routine social

## GRAHAM MURDOCH

life. As the journalist Charles Mackay put it in his highly successful book *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, first published in 1841, men 'go mad in herds, while they only recover their sense slowly, and one by one' (Mackay, 1956, p. xx).

The packed tenements and slums of the major cities offered the most visible image of the crowd, and depictions of the 'mass' as a physically dense body continually on the edge of unpredictable motion played a central role in the formation of respectable fears. They constituted what Matthew Arnold called, in a memorable passage written after a crowd broke down the railings around Hyde Park during a demonstration protesting at the defeat of the Reform Bill of 1866, a 'vast residuum', a murky mass left at the bottom of the decanter after the drinkable wine had been poured off (Arnold, 1966, p. 105). This notion of a population at the bottom of the pile, disconnected from the mainstream, finds powerful contemporary expression in the notion of an urban 'underclass'. Mackay, however, was careful to stress that 'the madness of crowds' was a psychological rather than a physical phenomenon, and he set out to explore a variety of 'moral epidemics which have been excited, sometimes by one cause and sometimes by another, and to show how easily the masses have been led astray, and how imitative men are, even in their infatuations and crimes' (Mackay, 1956, p. xvii). These ranged from the fashion for beards to the craze for magnetism and a spate of slow poisonings.

The idea of the 'psychological crowd', physically separated but united by shared experiences, regularly surfaced in debates throughout the second half of the century and, by the time the Chicago sociologist and former journalist Robert Park came to write on the subject in 1904, the view that 'it is the psychological conditions rather than the spatial relationships of individuals which forms the essential content of the concept of the crowd' (Park, 1972, p. 12) was widely accepted. It found its most forceful and widely quoted formulation in Gustave Le Bon's massively influential 1895 book, *The Crowd*.

Crowds were the beast within, the absolute antithesis of a public composed of citizens. As Le Bon argued, 'by the mere fact that he forms part of a crowd, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation. Isolated he may be a cultivated individual, in a crowd he is a barbarian—a creature acting by instinct' (Le Bon, 1960, p. 32). Where citizenship relied on rational debate and respect for evidence, psychological crowds, Le Bon argued, were formed by images. They worked with emotional associations rather than sequential arguments:

Crowds being only capable of thinking in images are only to be impressed by images. It is only images that attract them and become motives for action... Nothing has a greater effect on the imagination of crowds than theatrical representations... Sometimes the

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

sentiments suggested by the images are so strong that they tend, like habitual suggestions, to transform themselves into acts.

(Le Bon, 1960, p. 68)

This argument appeared eminently plausible since it coincided with a major shift towards a more visually oriented popular culture. The Lumière Brothers' first film performance in Paris in 1895 ushered in the age of commercial cinema, and the rising generation of press entrepreneurs (such as Alfred Harmsworth who launched his *Daily Mail* in 1896) were pioneering new styles of popular journalism in which visual illustrations had a much more central role to play.

It was almost universally assumed that the seductions of imagery operated particularly powerfully among groups who were either pre-literate or semi-literate. Children were seen as particularly vulnerable to suggestion and exploitation. In a fierce attack on the 'penny dreadfuls', James Greenwood, one of the leading muck-raking Victorian journalists, pictured the publishers as vampires preying on the innocent, and urged 'careful parents' to beware: 'already he may have bitten your little rosy-cheeked son, Jack. He may be lurking at this very moment in that young gentleman's private chamber, polluting his mind and smoothing the way that leads to swift destruction' (Greenwood, 1874, p. 168). Children were vulnerable but they were not regarded as a threat to social order. Dangerousness lay with adolescents. They were not only suggestible, but capable of acting out what they had seen.

The new psychology of adolescence, pioneered by writers like Stanley Hall, argued that, because puberty unleashed physical and emotional potentials which young people did not have the moral and mental maturity to cope with, they were in constant danger of 'descending the ladder of civilisation'. As Frank Lydston, a professor of medicine in Illinois, put it in 1904:

The pubescent is in the greatest danger...the emotions are keyed to the highest pitch; centres of ideation are plastic. As the psychic twig is bent at this time, the cerebral tree is indeed inclined. Many a life has been ruined by psychic wounds—wounds from infected and infective ideas at this critical period.

(Lydston, 1904, p. 101)

Working-class adolescent boys were a particular focus of respectable fears. They were highly visible on the streets of the cities, they regularly featured in press reporting, and they figured prominently in the official crime statistics. Moral entrepreneurs believed that they were locked in an uphill battle for young hearts and minds. As one prominent expert on 'Boy Life' put it:

The boy's mind is in many respects a blank sheet at fourteen, and the writing that will be engraved upon it is dependent on the influences

## GRAHAM MURDOCH

through which the boy passes. The senses of the adolescent, now open at their widest, are opened not to Art, but to cheap and tawdry pantomime, his emotions are fed, not with gracious and elevating influences, but with unnatural excitements.

(Freeman, 1914, p. 151)

These 'excitements', many observers believed, had turned young men into 'hooligans'. As *The Times* complained in 1900:

Our 'Hooligans' go from bad to worse...they hustle and waylay solitary old gentlemen with gold watches; they hunt in packs too large for a single policeman to cope with... At best they will be bad citizens. They are an ugly growth on the body politic...a hideous excrescence on our civilisation.

(Quoted in Schwarz, 1996, p. 104)

The figure of the hooligan (and the parade of later folk devils) comprehensively undermined the idealised image of the citizen and condensed 'with great power a cluster of anxieties...around masculinity and youth, read through the lens of class' (Schwarz, 1996, p. 119).

Within this framework of concern, censoring 'infective ideas' or trying to keep them out of adolescents' reach (as in systems of film classification) was not simply an expression of aesthetic judgement but a social duty designed to repair the rents in the body politic. However, because these measures cut across two of the most cherished values of capitalist democracy, freedom of artistic expression and freedom of consumer choice, their supporters were obliged to look for plausible proofs to support their demands for action.

### Persuasions and panics

Some commentators seized upon the substantial sums of money being spent on advertising by the turn of the century to argue that, since marketing seemed to work in the world of goods, as shown by sales figures, images of crime and violence probably promoted anti-social behaviour in the same way. They saw the sensationalist popular press as a potent agent of both kinds of persuasion. As W.I.Thomas, the Chicago sociologist, argued in 1908:

[A]n article in commerce—a food, a luxury, a medicine or a stimulant—can always be sold in immense quantities if it be persistently and largely advertised. In the same way the yellow journal by an advertisement of crime...in a way that amounts to approval and even applause, becomes one of the forces making for immorality.

(Thomas, 1908, p. 496)

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

This argument still features regularly in contemporary comment, as in the editorial carried in the *Independent on Sunday* after the Dunblane shootings:

The modern, liberal mind is strangely resistant to cause and effect... Yet millions of pounds are spent annually on advertising and the entire media industry strains over presentation, using music, visual effects, camera, lighting, to put audiences in the right mood. How can we possibly believe that the film shoot-out never has an effect?

(*Independent on Sunday*, 1996, p. 20)

At first sight, this is an attractive argument, but it ignores the fact that popular representations of crime organise pleasures, fears and excitements in complex combinations that can be responded to at a number of levels. Some readers may be attracted to the aggressor but many more are likely to identify with the victim and to support calls for tougher policing and sentencing.

As *The Times* leader quoted earlier illustrates, by the turn of the century 'hooligan' had become a handy popular label that was liberally applied by the press to all kinds of youthful street disorder. And, as one London magistrate of the period remembered, this continual labelling prompted a response out of all proportion to the threat.

Southwark and Bermondsey were famous for some years as the headquarters of hooliganism...the press had so boosted the heroes of it that it was quite dangerous at one time for a group of youths to walk together down a street. They were sure to be charged with insulting behaviour and to be reported with the words 'more hooliganism in the Borough'.

(Chapman, 1925, pp. 11–12)

As a number of commentators observed at the time, the popular press had played a leading role in orchestrating concern. The educationalist John Trevarthen, for example, was quick to castigate sensationalist reporting for prompting an over-reaction:

Gangs of young roughs and thieves are no new thing in London and other large towns...though something like a scare has been produced by paragraphs in popular newspapers... The result has been numerous leading articles in various papers, with reports of speeches and sermons on the subject, followed as usual by letters from people, some of whom are evidently very imperfectly informed on the subject.

(Trevarthen, 1901, p. 84)

## GRAHAM MURDOCH

This argument was pursued more systematically in one of the pioneering works of critical criminology, an inquiry into the workings of the criminal justice system in Cleveland, Ohio, published in the early 1920s. The authors noted that 345 crimes were reported in the city's newspapers in the first half of January 1919, and 363 in the second half, but that the amount of news space devoted to issues of crime and justice jumped dramatically over the same period, from 925 column inches to 6,642. As they argued, although there had been no appreciable change in the situation on the ground, the press had set in motion an escalating cycle of public fear, leading to calls for tough action that placed order above law or civil liberties. They went on to provide a very clear outline of the main stages in this cycle of response:

News treatment tends to create...the belief that all crimes committed at such a time are part of some phenomenon that constitutes a 'crime wave' and can be cured by some quick panaceas [and stimulates] a tendency to demand summary action and quick reportable 'results' on the part of police, prosecutors, and judges... Officials responsive to popular whims will, at least unconsciously, care more to satisfy popular demands than to be observant of the tried process of law.

(Pound and Frankfurter, 1922, pp. 545–6)

This pioneering anatomy fits the career of later 'moral panics' about the possible links between popular media and social violence almost exactly.

### Unreliable accounts

As public reactions to the Hungerford killings, the James Bulger murder and the Dunblane shootings illustrate, moral panics are often sparked off by one particularly dramatic and newsworthy event that crystallises and distils a range of latent social fears and concerns. The practice of generalising from single cases has a long history; but, as sceptics were quick to point out in the nineteenth century, miscreants hoping to appeal to notions of diminished responsibility had every reason to try to blame their actions on allegedly corrupting influences from outside. As one commentator observed at the height of the nineteenth-century panic over 'penny dreadfuls':

It often happens, we are aware, that some juvenile till-robbler is found to be a reader of 'penny dreadfuls'. Nevertheless, we cannot agree with the conclusion usually taken for granted in these cases, that the reading and the robbery stand in the relation of cause and effect. Young gentlemen 'in trouble' are ready enough to avail themselves of this plea when it is put into their mouth.

(Wright, 1881, p. 35)

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

The problem of putting convenient words into young men's mouths surfaced again and again. In their eagerness to establish a secure link between misdirected reading and subsequent misdeeds, interviewers often asked leading questions designed to elicit the response they were looking for.

In the spring of 1875 the American publisher James T. Fields visited the adolescent murderer Jesse Pomeroy in prison. The case, which had involved the killing of children, had received enormous publicity, and Fields was concerned to discover what had prompted Pomeroy's actions. As his memoir records, in the course of their conversation he asked him about what he liked to read:

*Fields* 'Were there any pictures in the books?'

*Pomeroy* 'Yes, Sir, plenty of them, blood and thunder pictures, tomahawking and scalping.'

*Fields* 'Do you think these books were an injury to you, and excited you, and excited you to commit the acts you have done?'

*Pomeroy* 'Yes, Sir, I have thought it all over, and it seems to me now they did.'

Unfortunately for Fields, the reliability of Pomeroy's testimony is immediately undermined by his next remark: 'I can't say certainly of course, and perhaps if I should think it over again, I should say it was something else' (quoted in Hawes, 1971, p. 112).

### Diseased imaginings

One response to the unreliability of individual witnesses was to assemble a large number of cases, on the grounds that there might be safety in numbers. Doctors, lawyers and other professionals working in the proliferating institutions set up to maintain surveillance and control over the urban poor and the youthful population could draw on their practical experience and invest their hunches and prejudices with claims to an expertise won in the rough-and-tumble of investigation. Hence William Wadsworth could in 1911 write to the American Academy of Medicine claiming that:

After years of observation of a stream of crime, in one of the largest centres of population in our country, and a careful professional study of the details of a very large number of cases of crimes, I have no hesitation in pointing out the fact that newspaper accounts of crimes influence those who commit crimes.

(Wadsworth, 1911, p. 316)

Wadsworth, who practised as a coroner's physician in Philadelphia, worked with a medical model which presented media influence as a

## GRAHAM MURDOCH

contagious disease attacking the mentally and morally unfit. This powerful metaphor was deeply attractive to many commentators. As Frank Lydston, a professor of genito-urinary surgery, argued in his book *The Diseases of Society*:

There is a moral or psychic contagium in certain books that is as definite and disastrous as that of the plague. The germs of mental ill-health are as potent in their way and, as things go nowadays, as far-reaching in evil effects as syphilis or leprosy.

(Lydston, 1904, p. 101)

From this vantage point, the new popular media appeared as open sewers of the imagination, carrying a continuous flow of infection. The sensationalist newspapers were seen as a 'gutter press'. As the Italian criminologist Corre put it: 'Infectious epidemics spread with the air or the wind; epidemics of crime follow the line of the telegraph' (quoted in Tarde, 1912, pp. 340–1). The metaphors changed later, the image of a hypodermic needle injecting drugs into an unresisting body being a particular favourite, but the basic elements of the medical model remained remarkably stable.

But the new professionals were by no means unanimous. Those with other claims to expertise frequently rejected the medical model's argument for direct effects and emphasised more tangible environmental causes. As Newcastle's Director of Education, Percival Sharp, told a British inquiry into the influence of cinema in 1917:

I have not during the last three years of investigation (covering 186 cases of committal) had a single case brought to my notice in respect of which it has been alleged or even suggested by police, school attendance officer or head-teacher that the genesis of the wrong-doing was to be found in the cinema show, EITHER IMMEDIATELY OR REMOTELY.

(National Council of Public Morals, 1917, p. 284;  
emphasis in the original)

Other critics, like the American author Horace Kallen, went further, insisting that

Investigation discovers no ground for the belief that any one of the arts...has in and by itself any important influence at all on conduct ... The fact is that crowded slums, machine labour...barren lives, starved emotions...are far more dangerous to morals, property and life than...any motion picture.

On the contrary, he argued, in a version of what later came to be called the

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

catharsis theory, films ‘are substitutes for more elaborate and more serious overt actions, not inciters to them’ (Kallen, 1930, pp. 50–1)

Faced with their critics, supporters of imitative effects could appeal to one further source of evidence: they could try to establish strong correlations between the details of well-publicised court cases and subsequent ‘copy-cat’ crimes. Gabriel Tarde, one of the leading early criminologists, was happy to support his case for contagious imitation by drawing on Corre’s argument about the effects of press reporting of the notorious Whitechapel murders:

What more striking example of suggesto-imitative assault could there be... The newspapers were filled with the exploits of Jack the Ripper and, in less than a year, as many as eight absolutely identical crimes were committed in various crowded streets of the great city. This is not all; there followed a repetition of these same deeds outside of the capital and very soon there was even a spreading of them abroad...the Hamburg murder accompanied by disembowelling of a little girl; in the United States disembowelling of four negroes.

(Quoted in Tarde, 1912, p. 340)

Leaving aside the view, widely held at the time and since, that Jack the Ripper was a serial killer, this argument rests on a classic conflation of correlation and causality. It is possible to see the cases cited as similar only by removing them from their contexts and ignoring all other possible situational causes. At a time when racist attacks were a constant feature of black life in America and the ‘bitter fruits’ of lynchings hung from trees across the South, there were many more obvious places than London’s East End to look for an explanation of a mass murder in Alabama.

Despite the obvious flaws in Corre’s case, and in other similar forms of anecdotal and impressionistic evidence, the argument that there was a direct, cause-and-effect relationship between images and actions continued to dominate common-sense thinking. Much of the work undertaken by university-based researchers, from the turn of the century onwards, simply took over this agenda. It was a marriage of convenience. Academics seeking to establish new disciplines could bolster their claims to utility, relevance and research grants. In return, commentators and politicians could draw on seemingly ‘scientific’ evidence to support their calls for greater controls over popular entertainment.

## Banal science

The search for factual support took two main forms. First, there were content-analysis studies which set out to provide statistics on the prevalence of violent imagery by painstakingly counting the space taken up by stories or incidents

## GRAHAM MURDOCH

featuring violence. Second, there were studies designed to isolate direct links between imagery and behaviour. Some of these relied on experiments conducted under laboratory conditions. Others used quasi-experimental designs in real-life settings or applied statistical controls to the results of questionnaire surveys in an effort to eliminate other possible causes. The 'findings' of these inquiries over the years have provided the 'scientific' evidence that is ritually cited in support of claims for direct 'effects'.

Although commentators had been attacking representations of violence in popular literature and journalism more or less continually since the 1850s, it was not until the century's turn that researchers set about calibrating sensationalism more precisely. Delos Wilcox's extensive content study of American newspapers, published in 1900, was a pioneering effort. He used his calculations to show that newspapers defined by critics as 'yellow' tended to feature materials thought likely to activate the mob spirit—advertisements, illustrations, and news of crime and vice (Wilcox, 1900, pp. 77–8). But, unlike most commentators, he was reluctant to draw firm conclusions about effects, arguing that 'the great mass of information we get in reading the papers affects our action only vaguely and remotely, if at all' (Wilcox, 1900, p. 87). Other writers, like Frederick Peterson, writing in 1906, were rather less restrained, however:

It is not overstating it to say...these newspapers represent in the domain of culture and enlightenment the mob spirit, a vast, impersonal, delirious, anarchic, degenerating and disintegrating force. And it is this force which, acting upon the minds of the masses, sways them irresistibly in its own direction, making chaos where there should be order.

(Peterson, 1906, p. 13)

This same basic argument was pursued in another important early study, Frances Fenton's 'The influence of newspaper presentations upon the growth of crime and other anti-social activity', which appeared in 1910–11. This combined a content analysis and a close reading of selected news stories with a model of influence which drew heavily on current writings on imitation and suggestion. After reviewing the evidence, Fenton concluded that 'On the basis of the psychology of suggestion...a direct causal connection may be established between the newspaper and crime and other anti-social activities' (Fenton, 1910–11, p. 370).

Gabriel Tarde had already assigned a central place to imitative effects in his influential work on crime. In *Penal Philosophy*, which first appeared in 1890, he had no hesitation in arguing that:

All the important acts of social life are carried out under the domination of example... One kills or does not kill, because of

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

imitation... One kills oneself or one does not kill oneself, because of imitation. How can we doubt that one steals or does not steal, one assassinates or does not assassinate, because of imitation.

(Tarde, 1912, p. 322)

But how did imitation work? In searching for an answer Fenton and a number of other analysts turned to fashionable theories of subconscious suggestion. These shared a number of the overlapping oppositions which made up the structure of respectable fear: rationality versus emotion, progress versus degeneracy and the crowd versus the citizen. As Boris Sidis put it in 1898, in his book *The Psychology of Suggestion*: 'the subpersonal, uncritical social self, the mob self, and the suggestible subconscious self are identical' (Sidis, 1927, p. 364).

Sidis' book carried a foreword by William James, one of the influential central figures in the struggle to establish psychology as an independent discipline in America. But the theory, though attractive, presented formidable problems of evidence. As Fenton pointed out, because people are unaware of 'unconscious suggestion', cases cannot be analysed by getting them to reconstruct their experiences and motivations through introspection (the standard procedure in psychology at the time) and, as a result, 'it is not possible to measure this influence quantitatively' (Fenton, 1910–11, p. 61, p. 370).

This presented a serious problem for a fledgling science attempting to establish its ability to produce firm factual evidence on pressing social issues. One solution was to build on Freud's techniques for unlocking the dynamics of the unconscious mind. The other was to reject the notion of the subconscious altogether and to focus on what people actually did rather than on what they claimed or thought had happened. This line of inquiry was pursued with great vigour by John Watson in his enormously influential theory of behaviourism.

Freud's central ideas first became widely available in America in 1910 when the talks he had given at Clark University were published as *Five Lectures on Psycho-analysis*. Watson, who had been working with his notion of behaviourism since 1903, dismissed them out of hand, claiming that they could 'never serve as a support for a scientific formulation' (Watson, 1924, p. vii). He not only rejected the idea of the unconscious but also set out to make 'a clean break with the whole concept of consciousness' and the prevailing methods of introspection (Watson, 1924, p. viii). He argued that if psychology was to become a true 'science' and to contribute to 'the prediction and control of human action' (*ibid.*, p. xiii) it had to focus on observed behaviour. He claimed that, providing the relevant stimuli were correctly identified, it was possible to explain all forms of behaviour 'from jumping at a sound' to 'having babies, writing books, and the like' as simple, predictable responses (Watson, 1930, p. 6). Unlike Freud, who argued that experiences (particularly

## GRAHAM MURDOCH

in childhood) may only affect action years later, Watson insisted that the relations between stimulus and response were immediate and direct. This made them eminently suitable for investigation by laboratory experimentation, or by studies that followed the basic logic of experimentation.

Laboratories commanded pride of place in popular conceptions of 'science'. They were the spaces where important discoveries were made and conjectures subjected to rigorous testing. Hence any discipline claiming to be a 'science' had to have laboratories. Even so, Watson initially had strong reservations about their relevance to social issues. In the first edition of his major work on behaviourism, published in 1924, he conceded that 'certain important psychological undertakings probably can never be brought under laboratory control. Reference here, of course, is made to the social problems which psychology sometimes has to study. There are many problems of this character that yield only a little at the hands of a laboratory man' because key influences in the outside environment are 'not under the immediate control of the observer' (Watson, 1924, p. 28). By the time the revised edition of the book came out in 1930, however, he had become more assertive, arguing that behaviourism 'is basal to the organisation of society' and expressing the hope that 'sociology may accept its principles and re-envise its own problems in a more concrete way' (Watson, 1930, p. 44).

By then sociological researchers were themselves deeply divided, however. Some shared Watson's enthusiasm for hard-nosed empiricism and set out to gather 'social facts' using large-scale, relatively impersonal sample surveys. But others argued that the human sciences should be concerned with understanding the close-grained textures of everyday experience and not with prediction and control. They saw them not as 'an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

These divergent traditions of inquiry produced two major research literatures on the possible relations between popular imagery and social violence. One followed the general model of experimentation and attempted to isolate the impact of screen violence, using an array of physical and statistical procedures designed to rule out 'all extraneous influences that might produce the observed effect' (Eysenck and Nias, 1978, p. 66). This approach has produced research practices which single-mindedly neglect 'questions about the social construction of meaning', relegating them to 'on the one hand, technical problems in Content Analysis and, on the other, taken-for-granted views of the general cultural context' (Tudor, 1995, p. 87). The concerted search for statistical proofs of strong effects has led its enthusiasts to make some odd claims. In January 1995, for example, the respected Swedish researcher Karl-Erik Rosengren wrote an article for *Dagens Nyheter*, one of the country's most influential newspapers. In it he claimed that 'one can say that 10–20% of all kicks and smacks in our school yards, and also

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

with time, on our streets and squares, can be explained as direct or indirect effects of media violence' (quoted in Linné, 1995, p. 8). As critics were quick to point out, there was absolutely no way that he could make these calculations on the basis of the evidence he had collected. They were pure guesswork masquerading as 'scientific' precision.

In opposition to this euphoric dream of certainty, the interpretive tradition has developed a range of qualitative techniques—depth interviewing, focus groups, ethnographic observations of everyday life—designed to explore the myriad ways in which the experience of violence (as a reader, viewer, witness, victim or aggressor) is woven into personal identities and everyday thinking and action. Where empiricist approaches depend on a 'transportation' model of media, which sees popular forms as simple vehicles for moving meaning from one place to another, interpretive studies work with a 'translation' model (Murdock, 1994). This views popular representations as complex ensembles of meaning that can be interpreted and responded to in a variety of ways and, in its more critical variant, insists that people's relations with them can be properly understood only in the context of the networks of social relations and forces that envelop and shape them (Murdock, 1989).

Interestingly, Watson's own research experience had presented him with a perfect illustration of the dynamics of 'translation' and the limits of behaviourism. In 1919 he was asked to assess the effect of an anti-VD film on the sexual behaviour of young people. The film, a modified version of *Fit to Win* which had originally been shown as a warning against the dangers of loose living and venereal disease to American troops being shipped to the Western Front, was released for general viewing against the background of a rising tide of concern about the 'loose' morals of 'Flaming Youth'. Watson and his team observed screenings around the country, and attempted to measure any subsequent changes in the sexual behaviour of members of the audience over a period of up to three months. After sifting through the results, Watson reluctantly concluded that 'no lasting effects were found' and that 'there is no indication that behaviour is modified significantly' (Lashley and Watson, 1922, p. 216). However, he did note that observations made during screenings of the film suggested that 'the manner in which the picture presents prostitution and other material tends to break down the sense of reserve, modesty or shame' (*ibid.*, p. 203). He was particularly concerned about the responses that greeted the appearance on the screen of captions such as 'I wouldn't touch a whore with a ten foot pole' and 'Ain't you afraid you'll have a wet dream tonight?' (*ibid.*, p. 209), warning that flippant banter 'readily slips to the indecent, and the step from indecent in word to indecent in act is short' (*ibid.*, p. 203). He had inadvertently discovered a classic 'boomerang' effect.

The instability of anti-VD propaganda films as bearers of meaning was recognised by a number of social purity campaigners at the time. They applauded their message, but saw problems in the way they spoke to popular

## GRAHAM MURDOCH

audiences through the conventions of narrative cinema. They viewed the pleasures of the screen as, themselves, intrinsically erotic. As one campaigner complained: ‘instead of affecting the mind [film dramas] affect the nerves and, above all, the sexual instincts... In that lies the mysterious secret of the astonishing success of the cinemas’ (quoted in Kuhn, 1985, p. 127).

Ironically, in the year that the report on *Fit to Win* was published, Watson was accused of misbehaviour with a female student and forced to leave his professorship at Johns Hopkins. He moved to the country’s leading advertising agency, J.Walter Thompson, where he rose to become vice-president, a position that provided the perfect platform from which to sell his behaviourist theories and to experiment with the promotional stimuli that might prompt a swift purchasing response.

Although Watson has long since fallen from intellectual favour, his singleminded search for simple, direct links between stimulus and response has continued to underpin almost all later work on violent imagery in the effects tradition. This represents an unbroken line of banal science that succeeds in its own terms only because it fails to acknowledge that the making and taking of meaning in everyday life is never as straightforward as it first appears. Before we can understand how popular representations are woven into popular thinking and action, we need to restore a proper sense of complexity and context.

### Addressing exclusion

As I have sought to show, the dominant ‘effects’ tradition has proved so resilient partly because it chimes with a deeply rooted formation of social fear which presents the vulnerable, suggestible and dangerous as living outside the stockade of maturity and reasonableness that the ‘rest of us’ take for granted. ‘They’ are the ‘others’, the ones ‘we’ must shield or protect ourselves against. As Horace Kallen noted when the new censorship began to bite in Hollywood at the beginning of the 1930s: ‘When a censor proclaims that a state of danger has been created by...a motion picture... whose is the danger? His own? Never. Ostensibly, he is secure, he is beyond the reach of any subversive influence, an untouchable’ (Kallen, 1930, p. 30). He was thinking of commentators like William Wadsworth, who was careful to stress that he was calling for tighter controls over popular entertainment not

for the better care of the smug lawns and pretty garden plots, but for...a very real and deadly mischief lurking in our waste places... It is for the protection of those accidentally potential ones and for the help of those congenitally defective ones that we plead for methods of prevention.

(Wadsworth, 1911, p. 321)

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

This bifocal vision remains at the centre of contemporary debate. As *Independent* columnist Bryan Appleyard argued, Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* might well be a 'brilliant' film but 'I would prefer [it] not to be seen by the criminal classes or the mentally unstable or by inadequately supervised children with little else in their lives' (Appleyard, 1993, p. 33).

The easy exclusions of these cavalier common-sense labels signal not simply a failure of the respectable imagination. They also have a hard material edge. If we are to understand and respond constructively to social violence in contemporary Britain we need to place it in the context of the massive social and psychic disruptions set in motion by mass unemployment, the decay of communal life and public space, and the evaporation of hope. It is unreasonable to expect 'hooligans' to become upright citizens unless they are offered the full range of resources required for social participation. These include not only jobs, decent living standards and a stake in the future, but also access to the information, arguments and representations that enable people to understand their situation and to recognise and respect the claims of others. Diversity of expression and debate is a precondition for dismantling exclusion. Increased censorship is a precondition for its reinforcement and for the reproduction of the violence it generates.

British controls over the content of films, television programmes and videos are already among the most restrictive of any advanced society. There is no reliable research evidence to suggest that they should be tightened further and, indeed, there are good arguments for encouraging greater openness. The justifications are not to do with the rights of media professionals but with the rights of citizenship.

## NOTE

- I first used this title for an earlier version of the present paper, presented to a seminar on 'Expression and Censorship' organised by the Institute for Public Policy Research. It was later used by the organisers (with due acknowledgement) as the title for the seminar's published proceedings (see Collins and Purnell, 1996, p. 1).

## REFERENCES

- Appleyard, Bryan (1993), 'Making a killing in videos', *Independent*, 1 December, p. 33.  
Arnold, Matthew (1966), *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. with introduction by J.Dover Wilson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Chapman, Cecil (1925), *The Poor Man's Court of Justice: Twenty-Five Years as a Metropolitan Magistrate*, London: Hodder & Stoughton.  
Collins, Richard and Purnell, James (1996), *Reservoirs of Dogma*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

## GRAHAM MURDOCH

- Cumberbatch, Guy and Howitt, Dennis (1989), *A Measure of Uncertainty: The Effects of Mass Media*, London: John Libbey.
- Edinburgh Review* (1851), 'Juvenile delinquency', 94, October, pp. 403–30.
- Eysenck, H.J. and Nias, D.K.B. (1978), *Sex, Violence and the Media*, London: Maurice Temple Smith.
- Fenton, Frances (1910–11), 'The influence of newspaper presentations upon the growth of crime and other anti-social activity', *American Journal of Sociology*, 16, pp. 342–71, 538–64.
- Freeman, A. (1914), *Boy Life and Labour*, London: P.S. King & Son.
- Gauntlett, David (1995), *Moving Experiences: Understanding Television's Influences and Effects*, London: John Libbey.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books.
- Greenwood, James (1874), *The Wilds of London*, London: Chatto & Windus.
- Hawes, Joseph M. (1971), *Children in Urban Society: Juvenile Delinquency in Nineteenth-century America*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Independent on Sunday* (1996), 'They deserve our answers', 17 March, p. 20.
- Kallen, Horace (1930), *Indecency and the Seven Arts: And Other Adventures of a Pragmatist in Aesthetics*, New York: Horace Liverlight.
- Kuhn, Annette (1985), *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lashley, Karl S. and Watson, John B. (1922), *A Psychological Study of Motion Pictures in Relation to Venereal Disease*, Washington, DC: Interdepartmental Social Hygiene Board.
- Le Bon, Gustave (1960), *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, New York: Viking Press.
- Linne, Olga (1995), 'Media violence research in Scandinavia', *The Mordicom Review of Nordic Research on Media and Communication*, 2, pp. 1–11.
- Lydston, G. Frank (1904), *The Diseases of Society (The Vice and Crime Problem)*, Philadelphia, Pa: J.B. Lippincott Company.
- McClelland, J.S. (1989), *The Crowd and the Mob: From Plato to Canetti*, London: Unwin Hyman.
- Mackay, Charles (1956), *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, London: George Harrap.
- Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick (1968), *Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Murdock, Graham (1989), 'Critical inquiry and audience activity', in Brenda Dervin et al, eds, *Rethinking Communication*, Vol. 2, *Paradigm Exemplars*, London: Sage Publications, pp. 226–49.
- Murdock, Graham (1994), 'Visualising violence: television and the discourse of disorder', in Cees J. Hamelink and Olga Linne, eds, *Mass Communication Research: On Problems and Policies*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, pp. 171–87.
- Murdock, Graham and McCron, Robin (1979), 'The television and delinquency debate', *Screen Education*, 30, Spring, pp. 51–67.
- National Council of Public Morals (1917), *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities*, London: Williams & Norgate.
- Neil, Andrew (1996), 'Shots straight to the heart of our sick society', *Sunday Times News Review*, 17 March, p. 5.
- Park, Robert (1972), *The Crowd and the Public and Other Essays*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

## RESERVOIRS OF DOGMA

- Pearson, Geoffrey (1983), *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears*, London: Macmillan.
- Peterson, Frederick (1906), 'The newspaper peril: a diagnosis of a malady of the modern mind', *Collier's*, 1 September, pp. 12–13.
- Phillips, Melanie (1994), 'Mediocrity's fight against violent truth', *Observer*, 17 April, p. 25.
- Pound, Roscoe and Felix Frankfurter (1922), *Criminal Justice in Cleveland*, Cleveland: The Cleveland Foundation.
- Schwarz, Bill (1996), 'Night battles: hooligan and citizen', in Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea', eds, *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, London: Routledge, pp. 101–28.
- Sidis, Boris (1927), *The Psychology of Suggestion: A Research into the Subconscious Nature of Man and Society*, New York: D.Appleton.
- Tarde, Gabriel (1912), *Penal Philosophy*, London: William Heinemann.
- Thomas, W.I. (1908), 'The psychology of the Yellow Journal', *American Magazine*, March, pp. 491–6.
- Trevarthen, J. (1901), 'Hooliganism', *The Nineteenth Century*, 49, pp. 84–9.
- Tudor, Andrew (1995), 'Culture, mass communication and social agency', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 12:1, pp. 81–107.
- Wadsworth, William S. (1911), 'The newspapers and crime', *American Academy of Medicine Bulletin*, 12:5, pp. 316–24.
- Watson, John B. (1924), *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviourist*, Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company.
- Watson, John B. (1930), *Behaviourism*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilcox, Delos F. (1900), 'The American newspaper: a study in social psychology', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 16, July, pp. 56–92.
- Wright, Thomas (1881), 'On a possible popular culture', *Contemporary Review*, July, pp. 25–44.

## 10

## US AND THEM

*Julian Petley*

Debates about media effects tend to focus on how children and young people are supposedly affected—usually for the worse. But lurking behind these fears about the ‘corruption of innocent minds’ one finds, time and again, implicit or explicit, a potent strain of class dislike and fear. The object is often the spectre of the working class in general—at other times it is more specifically defined as an ‘underclass’, an ideologically loaded version of what used to be called (equally ideologically) the redundant population, the relative surplus, the residuum, the *lumpenproletariat*, the social problem group, the dangerous classes, the undeserving poor and so on.

There is nothing new about such fears and dislikes, and nothing new about attempts to locate the causes of working-class ‘hooliganism’ in the allegedly malign effects of various forms of popular entertainment. As Orwell put it: ‘the genuinely popular culture of England is something that goes on beneath the surface, unofficially and more or less frowned on by the authorities’ (Orwell, 1968a, p. 78). Geoffrey Pearson (1983) has made a seminal study of the history of middle-class disapproval of working-class culture, in which he concludes that:

popular entertainments of all kinds have been blamed for dragging down public morals in a gathering pattern of accusation which remains essentially the same even though it is attached to radically different forms of amusement: pre-modern feasts and festivals; eighteenth-century theatres and bawdy houses; mid-nineteenth-century penny gaffs; the Music Halls of the ‘Gay’ Nineties; the first flickering danger signs from the silent movies; the Hollywood picture palaces between the wars; and then television viewing in our own historical time. Each, in its own time, has been accused of encouraging a moral debauch; each has been said to encourage imitative crime among the young.

(Pearson, 1983, p. 208)

## US AND THEM

Nor are such attitudes unique to Britain. Herbert Gans (1974) has argued that dislike of popular culture frequently stems from 'a marked disdain for ordinary people and their aesthetic capacities'. He also quotes with approval the conservative sociologist Edward Shils to the effect that 'fictions about the empirical consequences of mass culture' are based partly on a dislike of those that consume it, and also stem from the fact that 'the objects of mass culture are repulsive to us' (Gans, 1974, p. 61).

Chief amongst these 'repulsive objects' are films, whether on cinema or television screens. From its inception the cinema has been regarded by moral entrepreneurs as a cause of decline and deterioration, and as a veritable textbook of bad examples to the young, the easily influenced, the working class. Nowhere was this more clearly the case than in Britain which, consequently, had by the 1920s and 1930s built up one of the most strict and elaborate systems of film censorship in Europe. Although cinema-going was hugely popular by then, 'highly educated people saw in it only vulgarity and the end of old England' (Taylor, 1970, p. 392). Indeed, Rachel Low, the leading historian of the early British cinema, has suggested that this snobbish and fearful attitude hampered British cinema's development as an industry, making it unable to attract the necessary talent and capital. She concludes that

in Britain the film had to overcome the resistance of a particularly inelastic social and intellectual pattern. In France and Italy the film might be a younger sister of the arts, in America art itself. In England it was a poor relation, and, moreover, not a very respectable one.

(Low, 1949, pp. 137–8)

Evidence for this view is not hard to find. Pearson (1983, p. 32) quotes H.A. Secretan's 1931 account of youth work, *London Below Bridges*, to the effect that 'every boy's sympathy goes out to the lithe and resourceful crook... Occasionally a weak-minded youth may be urged by the exploits of a Chicago gangster to essay a feeble imitation'. Meanwhile Hugh Redwood's *God in the Slums* (1932) infantilises the working class thus:

the boys of the slums are wonderful training material for good or evil. They are children in their love of pictures and music. Hollywood's worst in the movie line has recruited hundreds of them for the gangs of race-course roughs, motor-bandits, and smash-and-grab thieves.

(Pearson, 1983, p. 32)

The Second World War brought its quotient of fears about 'spivs' and 'Blitz kids', and the arrival of the Americans in Britain in large numbers served only to fuel the anti-Americanism which was to become an increasingly

JULIAN PETLEY

prominent feature of attacks on working-class popular culture. Thus, for example, George Orwell in his essay 'Raffles and Miss Blandish', comparing English and American crime fiction:

the common people, on the whole, are still living in the world of absolute good and evil from which the intellectuals have long since escaped. But the popularity of *No Orchids* and the American books and magazines to which it is akin shows how rapidly the doctrine of 'realism' is gaining ground.

This was something which Orwell viewed with alarm:

in Mr Chase's books there are no gentlemen and no taboos. Emancipation is complete, Freud and Machiavelli have reached the outer suburbs. Comparing the schoolboy atmosphere of the one book [*Raffles*] with the cruelty and corruption of the other, one is driven to feel that snobbishness, like hypocrisy, is a check upon behaviour whose value from a social point of view has been underrated.

(Orwell, 1968b, pp. 259–60)

By the late 1940s, in spite of the efforts of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), the American style had found its way not only into British crime novels but into British crime films, too, such as *Noose*, *They Made Me a Fugitive*, *Brighton Rock*, the Diana Dors vehicle *Good Time Girl*, and a version of the aforementioned *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. These 'spiv' films, with their working-class settings, then rather unusual in the overwhelmingly middle-class British cinema, aroused considerable concern on the part of society's self-appointed moral guardians, including the film critics of the national press. Thus we find Fred Majdalany of the *Daily Mail* complaining of *They Made Me a Fugitive* in the same terms that nineteenth-century critics had lambasted stories about Dick Turpin:

I deplore the picturesque legend that is being created round that petty criminal fashionably known as the spiv. The spiv as stylised by the writers and caricatured by the actors seems to be a mixture of delightful Cockney comedian and pathetic victim of social conditions. For myself, I find the activities of sewer rats—in or out of a sewer—of strictly limited interest.

(Quoted in Murphy, 1986, pp. 294–5)

Meanwhile *Miss Blandish*, even though heavily interfered with by the British Board of Film Censors, was the object of a quite extraordinarily hysterical campaign of vilification by the press, which led MPs to allege that it would

## US AND THEM

'pervert the minds of the British people', local councils to ban it and, eventually, the President of the BBFC, Sir Sidney Harris, to apologise to the Home Office for having 'failed to protect the public'!

By the early 1950s the first of the major working-class folk devils of the post-war period had appeared—the Teddy Boy. Inevitably the media were blamed, in this case music (the newly emergent rock 'n' roll) and the cinema. An early victim of this particular panic was the Marlon Brando film *The Wild One* which, it was thought, would encourage anti-social behaviour among the young, and specifically the working-class young. Thus the BBFC told the film's distributor, Columbia, that

having regard to the present widespread concern about the increase in juvenile crime, the Board is not prepared to pass any film dealing with this subject unless the compensating moral values are so firmly presented as to justify its exhibition to audiences likely to contain (even with an 'X' certificate) a large number of young and immature persons.

(Quoted in Mathews, 1994, p. 128)

This attitude was to persist. In 1959, on the occasion of one of the film's periodic rejections by the BBFC, its then Secretary John Trevelyan stated that

the behaviour of Brando and the two gangs to authority and adults generally is of the kind that provides a dangerous example to those wretched young people who take every opportunity of throwing their weight about... Once again we have made the decision with reluctance because we think it is a splendid picture. I only hope the time will come, and come soon, when we do not have to worry about this kind of thing.

(Quoted in ibid., p. 130)

In other words, the film is fine for us middle-class intellectuals who will judge it on 'aesthetic' grounds, but it can't be shown to the plebs in case it gets them worked up.

The Board were equally worried about the potential effects on the young of the film *The Blackboard Jungle*, which they rejected out of hand when it was first submitted, complaining, as in the case of *The Wild One*, that 'the moral values stressed by the film' were not

sufficiently strong and powerful to counteract the harm that may be done by the spectacle of youth out of control... We are quite certain that *Blackboard Jungle*, filled as it is with scenes of unbridled, revolting hooliganism, would, if shown in this country, provoke the strongest criticism from parents and all citizens concerned with the

JULIAN PETLEY

welfare of our young people and would also have the most damaging and harmful effect on such young people.

(Quoted in Robertson, 1989, p. 114)

In the event the film was passed with heavy cuts; the occasional trouble in the audience was not because of the effects of the scenes of ‘unbridled, revolting hooliganism’ but because the soundtrack contained Bill Haley’s ‘Rock Around the Clock’ and teenagers, long denied proper access to rock ‘n’ roll by a censorious and nannyish BBC, got over-excited!

The alleged ill effects of rock ‘n’ roll, whether on film, record or in clubs, filled acres of column space in the press. According to a 1956 edition of the *Daily Sketch* ‘rhythm-crazed teenagers terrorised a city last night’, and in the same year the *Daily Mail* actually printed a front-page editorial entitled ‘Rock ‘n’ roll Babies’ in which it claimed that the music is ‘often known now as rock, roll and riot’ and has ‘led to outbreaks of rowdyism’. It links this ‘music of delinquents’ with the picket-line troubles which, then as ever, were obsessing the British press, concluding that both were ‘manifestations of the primitive herd instinct’. But at least the pickets were British, whilst the music ‘has something of the African tomtom and the voodoo dance... We sometimes wonder whether this is the negro’s revenge’ (quoted in Pearson, 1983, p. 24). Nor were such sentiments confined to the Conservative daily press. The same year, the *Melody Maker* described rock ‘n’ roll as ‘one of the most terrifying things to have happened to popular music’ and featured a review by Steve Race of Elvis Presley’s ‘Hound Dog’ which concluded that ‘I fear for the country which ought to have had the good taste and the good sense to reject music so decadent’ (quoted in Chambers, 1985, pp. 19, 30).

By the late 1950s fears about disaffected working-class youth, media effects, Americanisation, crime and national decline had become thoroughly sedimented in British ‘common sense’ and had formed a pervasive mythology which could routinely be wheeled out to ‘explain’ each and every new object of panic. In 1957 these feelings found their most comprehensive expression, up until that time, in Richard Hoggart’s celebrated *The Uses of Literacy*. Whilst it needs to be stressed that Hoggart does not draw a causal connection between crime and the consumption of popular culture, his strictures on the negative effects on working-class consumers of ‘Americanised’ culture are unremitting. An important section of the book is devoted to the ‘juke-box boys’. According to Hoggart, these are particularly symptomatic of the general trend whereby the working class has been ‘culturally robbed’ and fed on an ersatz diet which

is surely likely to help render its consumers less capable of responding openly and responsibly to life, is likely to induce an underlying sense of purposelessness in existence outside the limited range of a few immediate appetites. Souls which may have had little opportunity to

## US AND THEM

open will be kept hard-gripped, turned in on themselves, looking out 'with odd dark eyes like windows' upon a world which is largely a phantasmagoria of passing shows and vicarious simulations.

Thus the juke-box boys, 'living to a large extent in a myth-world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life'. Furthermore (and this is particularly important in the present context), although the whole of the working class is exposed to the 'debilitating masstrends of the day', certain sections are more prone than others to surrender to their blandishments. Hoggart notes that if the juke-box boys

seem to consist so far chiefly of those of poorer intelligence or from homes subject to special strains, that is probably due to the strength of a moral fibre which most cultural providers for working-class people are helping to de-nature. The hedonistic but passive barbarian who rides in a fifty-horsepower bus for threepence to see a five-million dollar film for one-and-eightpence, is not simply a social oddity; he is a portent.

(Hoggart, 1957, pp. 246–50)

In the 1960s the debate about the effects of the media, especially upon the young (implicitly or explicitly working class) tended to shift its focus on to the television, and it would take a book in itself to map the features of this particular, and on-going, debate. Such a book urgently needs to be written; but, for the moment, I want to cite a couple of other cinematic instances which illustrate the class basis of many fears about media effects before going on to a more detailed study of two key 'moments' in the history of domestic video in the UK which prove the point only too clearly.

Both examples come from 1972. That was the year that the British Board of Film Censors looked as if it were going to ban the Warhol/Morrissey film *Trash* and thus confine it, like its predecessor *Flesh*, to the limbo of the specialist film club. In the end the film was passed with cuts, but not before the furore had elicited the immortal remark from a BBFC chief censor to the *Guardian's* film critic, Derek Malcolm, to the effect that 'it is all very well for sophisticated, educated people like you to go to the ICA cinema and see Warhol's *Trash*. But think of its effect on your average factory worker in Manchester' (quoted in Malcolm, 1984). (I myself was present at a National Film Theatre screening of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in the late 1970s when the then BBFC Director, James Ferman, made a similar remark, except that the 'average factory worker in Manchester' became the 'car-worker in Birmingham'.)

Nineteen seventy-two was also the year that *A Clockwork Orange* was released. Even before it had appeared, the Labour MP Maurice Edelman was

## JULIAN PETLEY

writing in the *Evening News* that ‘when *Clockwork Orange* is generally released it will lead to a clockwork cult which will magnify teenage violence’ (27 January 1972). Needless to say, within weeks of the film’s release the press was full of stories about ‘copy-cat crimes’ and wild denunciations of both Kubrick and his creation. The *Evening News* dug out a former chaplain to Pinewood Studios to denounce this ‘celluloid cesspool’ and allege that ‘it is the weak, the impressionable and the immature which such a film helps to destroy’ (4 July 1973). Needless to say, the stories of ‘copy-cat crimes’ don’t bear up to investigation, but this hasn’t stopped them passing into effects mythology (see Martin, 1995; Petley, 1995; Wistrich, 1978, pp. 129–30).

As Tom Dewe Mathews has argued (1994, p. 2), in Britain censorship is governed by the ‘long-serving, silently spoken rubric: the larger the audience, the lower the moral mass resistance to suggestion’. In other words, the more popular the cultural form, the more likely it is to be seen by members of the working class, the more heavily its content is likely to be regulated and, if necessary, censored. The whole attitude is perfectly summed up by the prosecution’s famous question at the start of the *Lady Chatterley* trial in 1960—‘Is it a book that you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?’—but it is often overlooked that an important part of the prosecution’s closing speech rested on a quite explicit contrast between the way in which the defence’s academic and literary experts would read the book and the way in which ‘the ordinary man in the street’ would do so. Thus, for example, the film critic Dilys Powell’s reading is explicitly contrasted with how ‘the young men and boys leaving school...at the age of 15, going into their first jobs this last September’ would supposedly read it; the Bishop of Woolwich with ‘the girls working in the factory’; Rebecca West with ‘the average reader’; and all of these witnesses with the ‘ordinary, common men and women’ (Rolph, 1961, pp. 214–19).

No one should be in the least surprised, therefore, given the prevalence of such attitudes, that the prospect of unregulated, uncensored videos being freely available to the British public at the start of the 1980s was greeted with such horror and dismay from certain quarters, and that draconian censorship was soon imposed (for the full story of this process see Barker, 1984; Petley, 1984; Martin, 1997). What concerns us here are the threads of class dislike and fear that weave their way through this particular saga. Admittedly, most of the concern expressed about the original so-called ‘video nasties’ was about their supposed effects on children and young people, but from time to time the class dimension of the perceived problem rose visibly to the surface.

For example, in the *Mail* on 28 June 1983, Lynda Lee Potter complained of ‘the impact that this sick, beastly, money-making corruption is having on illiterate minds’, whilst in the *Telegraph* of 2 November 1983 the Prime Minister’s daughter Carol Thatcher quoted the NSPCC’s director Dr Alan Gilmour as describing

## US AND THEM

the experience of a senior social worker in a deprived area of Greater Manchester who, making a call on a family at 9.30 a.m., had to wait until the whole family had finished watching the rape scene in *I Spit on Your Grave*.

Mathews (1994, p. 250) also quotes a revealing remark by Ken Penry, the deputy director of the BBFC, about one of the most notorious 'nasties', *Driller Killer*:

now and again, you get clever dicks who say, 'Ah, this is art. This is bigger than it seems'. But I think of Joe Bloggs who's going to the Odeon on Saturday night who's not on that wavelength. He's going along seeing it literally and I always keep that in mind. Joe Bloggs is the majority and film censorship is for the majority.

The issue of class also crops up in the *Video Violence and Children* report which played such a major role in the passing of the 1984 Video Recordings Act. This is not the place to recount the story of the report (see Barker, 1984) but it is important to note what it has to say about social class and exposure to 'video nasties'.

Thus, for example, apropos children's alleged exposure to 'nasties', the report says that 'social class seems to be a relevant variable...working-class children, especially those from large families, appear most at risk in watching the "nasties"' (Hill, 1983, p. 15). There's a suggestion that this remark is based on a questionnaire sent out to parents, but the only problem is that this had not been analysed at the time the report was published. The remark appears in the section entitled 'Reactions of Children', but the report itself makes clear that this is not based directly on answers to questionnaires which were handed out to schoolchildren but was 'compiled from data supplied to us by teachers who conducted the survey and subsequently led discussions and had conversations with individual children' (Hill, 1983, p. 14). In a later document (Barlow and Hill, 1985, p. 14) it is explained that the purpose of these discussions was

to provide additional data relating to the children's viewing patterns and to act as a check upon the accuracy of the answers provided in the questionnaires... Further data was obtained from head teachers who often gave an overview of the situation in their school with age groups other than those included in the sample obtained from their school. Hence a dossier of anecdotal data was produced to go alongside the statistical data derived from the analysis of questionnaire returns.

Clearly, then, a good deal of the report is based on teachers' *perceptions* of

## JULIAN PETLEY

their pupils' viewing habits. In responding to criticisms of the report's methodology, Hill (1983, p. 164) offers a rather unfortunate hostage to fortune by stating that 'children are notoriously unreliable respondents. But so are adults!' In this respect it is extremely difficult to take seriously those sections of the report which seem to have been strained through a sieve of intense teacherly disdain for popular culture—not to mention for their pupils as well. For example, this is a teacher in a South London comprehensive with a mixed fourth-year class of boys and girls:

this is quite a 'nice' class by this school's standards. In discussion afterwards I was quite surprised. They nearly all prefer the horror films. They like the blood and they didn't think that 'video nasties' should be banned. For most there was no parental control over television or video viewing. Most parents would allow younger children to watch violent videos.

(*ibid.*, p. 143)

In the earlier document we find that:

One headmaster of a school in the Surrey commuter belt said that even those children who come from home backgrounds where they are highly protected and where parents take them and fetch them from school are nevertheless being affected by the values of violence and horror that are being transmitted in the playground from children from less protected home backgrounds.

(Hill, 1983, p. 15)

Nor were such attitudes confined to the Home Counties:

the headmaster of a primary school in a mixed social class London suburb said that the reaction of middle class children to hearing the playground stories of those who were allowed to watch violent videos was often one of 'suppressed envy'. He spoke of the great danger facing the children through the permissive attitude of the playground that reinforces the values of violence and impresses them upon the children despite the values they derive from their home and family backgrounds.

(*ibid.*, p. 16)

Teachers' observations also led them to conclude that

among many boys, especially from working class backgrounds, watching the 'nasties' has become a test of manliness... For working class boys, especially those who are unable to achieve educationally,

## US AND THEM

knowledge of the most intimate details of violent video films carries with it a kind of ‘butch kudos’.

(*ibid.*, p. 16)

As Michael Tracey put it at the time: ‘it is very difficult to see what can be claimed for such information, which of its nature can have no real social scientific significance’ (Tracey, 1984)—except as, one might add, a depressing indicator of the degree of paedophilia and snobbery amongst teachers. To be asked to regard such people as reliable rapporteurs of young people’s viewing habits—particularly in the midst of a lurid press blitz on ‘video nasties’—is quite frankly preposterous.

Such sentiments would matter less if they had remained firmly in the staff room; but, unfortunately, if entirely predictably, they were massively amplified by the way in which the report was treated by the press—often as the lead story on the front page, no less. Such stories build on the alreadyexisting repertoire of class dislike which, as we have seen, has a long history. They, in turn, then enter the mythology: witness Harry Greenway, the Conservative MP for Ealing North, in a debate on the Video Recordings Bill on 16 March 1984, who argued that videos ‘are often a higher priority in the homes of people who are not particularly articulate, and who do not read books or listen to music very much. In some homes videos even take priority over food and furniture’. Clearly, the Sturdy Beggar was alive and well and stalking the streets of West London in 1984.

By the time of the next most significant ‘moment’ in the seemingly neverending ‘video nasty’ débâcle in Britain—the aftermath of the murder of James Bulger, and the efforts of the press to blame it on the effects of *Child’s Play III* on his killers (see Petley, 1993)—the discourse of class had become even more evident in the ‘debate’ (and this in spite of John Major’s rhetorical evocations of the ‘classless’ society). More specifically, the ‘video nasty’ issue was deliberately and explicitly used as an illustration of the dangers of the so-called ‘underclass’.

Broadly speaking, there are two versions of ‘underclass’ theory. The liberal version, of which Frank Field’s *Losing Out: The Emergence of the British Underclass* is a clear example, holds that increasingly uneven economic growth, the restructuring (or destruction) of manufacturing industry, poor education, poor childcare facilities and the general failure of the ‘flexible’ economy to create a sufficient number of decently paid jobs have detached a growing number of people from society and from citizenship. The Conservative version of this theory, best represented by Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground* and *The Emerging British Underclass*, and L.M. Mead’s *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship*, is really little more than an updating of the notion of the ‘undeserving poor’. Its more recent antecedents can be traced at least as far back as the ‘Cycles of Deprivation’ project initiated by Sir Keith Joseph when he was Secretary of

