

A MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION PRODUCTION

THE MEAN WORLD SYNDROME

Media Violence & the Cultivation of Fear

Featuring George Gerbner & Michael Morgan

“[Viewers] integrate and absorb a sense of danger, of mistrust, of meanness in the world – it is what we call the Mean World Syndrome.”

– George Gerbner

For further information about this film, please contact:

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CREDITS

A Media Education Foundation Production

Written & Directed by Jeremy Earp
Script Consultant | Michael Morgan
Producer | Scott Morris
Editor | Andrew Killoy
Executive Producer | Sut Jhally
Co-Producers | Loretta Alper, Andrew Killoy, and Jason Young
George Gerbner Interviewed by Sut Jhally
Camera | David Rabinovitz
Sound Mix | Rikk Desgres, Pinehurst Pictures & Sound
Motion Graphics | Andrew Killoy
Offline Editors | Scott Morris & Jason Young
Media Research | Loretta Alper & Scott Morris
Additional Graphics | Shannon McKenna

UNITED STATES • 2010 • 51 mins • Shot on Mini-DV • Color • NTSC • BETA/DVD/DVCAM

Aspect Ratio 4:3 • Stereo • English/English Subtitles

FILM SYNOPSIS

For years, debates have raged among scholars, politicians, and concerned parents about the effects of media violence on viewers. Too often these debates have descended into simplistic battles between those who claim that media messages directly cause violence and those who argue that activists exaggerate the impact of media exposure altogether. The Mean World Syndrome, based on the groundbreaking work of media scholar George Gerbner, urges us to think about media effects in more nuanced ways. Ranging from Hollywood movies and prime-time dramas to reality programming and the local news, the film examines how media violence forms a pervasive cultural environment that cultivates in heavy viewers, especially, a heightened state of insecurity, exaggerated perceptions of risk and danger, and a fear-driven propensity for hard-line political solutions to social problems. A provocative and accessible introduction to cultivation analysis, media effects research, and the subject of media influence and media violence more generally.

BIOGRAPHIES



George Gerbner was one of the world's foremost authorities on the effects of media violence. After earning a Bronze Star during World War II, he turned to academe, serving as dean of the Annenberg School for Communication for 25 years, presiding over the influential Cultural Indicators Research Project, and later establishing the Cultural Environment Movement, an international organization dedicated to democratizing media.



Michael Morgan, a professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, worked with George Gerbner for more than two decades. He has published widely on Cultivation Theory; the cultural and socializing effects of television; the international and intercultural effects of mass media; and the effects and functions of new media technology. He is the author or co-author of *Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research*; *Democracy Tango: Television, Adolescents, and Authoritarian Tensions in Argentina*; and "Television and the Erosion of Regional Diversity."

NOTABLE QUOTES FROM *THE MEAN WORLD SYNDROME*

MICHAEL MORGAN: “Children now see about 8,000 murders by the end of elementary school, and about 200,000 violent acts by the age of 18. From movies to television shows to video games to children’s programs to 24-hour news channels, aggression is now routine, everyday, formulaic, a staple industrial ingredient.”

GEORGE GERBNER: “The contribution of television violence into the actual committing of violence is practically negligible. Nobody has been able to demonstrate that it is a significant contributor compared to poverty, compared to subcultures in which violence is very frequent, compared to many other factors that really are the root causes of violence.”

GEORGE GERBNER: “Most of us live rather insulated lives and we don’t meet too many people of other groups, of other races, other ethnic backgrounds than our own. Most of what we know about other races, other ethnic groups, we know from television. And on television we get some very peculiar type of information.”

GEORGE GERBNER on what he calls "happy violence", the function of humor in violent entertainment: “Humor makes the pill easier to swallow. Humor is an excellent communication device because the pill is the pill of power: who can get away with what against whom?”

MARSHALL MCLUHAN on the difficulty of measuring the effect of media on viewers’ perceptions: “It’s like the fish in the water. We don’t know who discovered water, but we know it wasn’t the fish. A pervasive medium, a pervasive environment, is always beyond perception.”

MICHAEL MORGAN: “The oversimplified view that media violence causes violent behavior has its roots in the earliest media research, which grew out of fears about the sensational and violent content of Hollywood’s first talking motion pictures, and what this violence was doing to the minds of kids who were now flocking to movie houses.”

MICHAEL MORGAN: This is the breakthrough of cultivation analysis: a clear correlation between the amount of media we consume and the degree of fear and anxiety we have about the world – a phenomenon that comes into especially clear focus when we look at how we view and treat others, especially those who are different from us.

MICHAEL MORGAN: Whether we're talking about Blacks and Latinos being depicted as violent criminals, or Arabs and Muslims as extremists and terrorists, what troubled Gerbner the most was how such an irrationally fearful view of others, and the world, could make people, in his words, "more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures, making them more likely to accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities."

MICHAEL MORGAN: "Gerbner's bottom-line point was that without positive representations to balance the bad, the meanest members of minority groups are allowed to stand in for all the rest – creating a distorted and menacing picture that leaves viewers feeling under attack, and reinforcing a siege mentality that feeds – and feeds off of – anger and rage."

MICHAEL MORGAN: "Despite [a] steady drop [in violent crime over the past 30 years], polls have consistently shown that most Americans believe just the opposite to be true – that crime has actually been increasing."

MICHAEL MORGAN: "The finding that if you watch a lot of TV you're likely to be more afraid of violence than those who watch less TV, may help explain why so many people seem to think violent crime is far worse than it actually is -- a widespread misperception that started to be noticed a decade ago when crime rates began to drop."

GEORGE GERBNER: Indeed, the telling of stories, the cultivation of a sense of who we are, what the world is like, has always been the principal shaper of human behavior. The new task, then, is to try to design a media system – a cultural environmental system – which will address the issue of how can we create an environment for our children, of stories, of all the socializing influences in which they grow up that is more fair, that is more equitable, that is more just, and less damaging than the one we have today.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

JEREMY EARP | Co-Director & Co-Writer

Jeremy Earp is the director of production at the Media Education Foundation (MEF). Prior to his work on *The Mean World Syndrome*, he co-wrote and co-directed the MEF documentaries *Consuming Kids*, *Blood and Oil*, *War Made Easy*, and *Hijacking Catastrophe*, and was the co-writer of *Tough Guise: Violence, Media & the Crisis in Masculinity*. Before joining MEF full time in 2003, he taught English and communications at Northeastern University, The Art Institute of Boston, the Parsons School of Design, and New School University in New York City, and coordinated an adult literacy program in Jamaica Plain, Mass. Prior to teaching, he worked as a news and sports reporter for a daily newspaper in the Greater Boston area. He holds a Master's degree in English from Northeastern University.

SCOTT MORRIS | Producer

Scott Morris is a producer with the Media Education Foundation. Before producing *The Mean World Syndrome*, he was the producer and co-writer of the MEF documentary *Blood & Oil*, and has done media research on a number of other MEF titles, including *War Made Easy: How Presidents & Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death* and *Consuming Kids: The Commercialization of Childhood*. He also coordinates MEF's internship program. He graduated with honors from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst in 2004 with a degree in Social Thought and Political Economy.

SUT JHALLY | Executive Producer

Sut Jhally is Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and founder and executive director of the Media Education Foundation (MEF). He first gained national recognition for his film *Dreamworlds: Desire, Sex & Power in Music Video* (1990) when MTV threatened him with a lawsuit over copyright infringement. The resulting press storm led to numerous requests for the video, and provided the rationale for MEF's founding in 1991. In the time since, Jhally has been the executive producer and/or director of more than 45 films produced and distributed by the Media Education Foundation, including the critically acclaimed *Peace, Propaganda & The Promised Land* (2003) and *Hijacking Catastrophe* (2004). He is the author of *The Codes of Advertising* and *The Spectacle of Accumulation: Essays in Cultural Politics*, co-author of *Social Communication in Advertising* and *Enlightened Racism*, and the co-editor of *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*. A recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award at UMass (2000) and the UMass Chancellor's Medal (2005-06), Jhally is regarded as one of the world's leading scholars in the areas of advertising, media, and consumption.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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The non-profit Media Education Foundation produces and distributes documentary films and other educational resources to inspire critical reflection on the social, political, and cultural impact of American mass media.

www.mediaed.org

FACT SHEET

- Children now see 8,000 murders by the end of elementary school and 200,000 violent acts by the age of 18.ⁱ
- Local news is the primary news source for two-thirds of Americans. 61% of all lead stories on local news are dedicated to crime, fires, disasters, and accidents.ⁱⁱ
- Two-thirds of those who say crime is a serious or very serious problem get their news from television.ⁱⁱⁱ
- While Latinos are mentioned in just 2% of cable news programs overall, programs such as *Lou Dobbs Tonight* have been found to focus on illegal immigration in upwards of 70% of their episodes.^{iv}
- A poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Center found that 73% of Americans believe that "more immigrants cause higher crime rates."^v
- Over the last century, approximately 90% of Hollywood portrayals of Arabs have been negative.^{vi}
- 48% of Americans believe torturing suspected terrorists is often or sometimes justified. 39% of Americans believe Muslims living in the U.S. are not loyal to America. More than one-third of Americans believe Muslims living in the U.S. are sympathetic to Al Qaeda. Nearly one-fourth of Americans say they would "not like to have a Muslim as a neighbor."^{vii}
- As attention to TV news increases from low to heavy viewing, the number of people supporting restrictions on Muslim Americans increases nearly 50%.^{viii}
- Blacks are twice as likely as whites to be shown as perpetrators of crime on local news.^{ix}
- Heavy viewers of local news are more likely to perceive black people in general as violent. In reality, white people are 4.7 times more likely to be victimized by another white person than by a black person.^x

ⁱ Parents Television Council

ⁱⁱ Pew Research Center, 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ John Jay School of Criminal Justice, 2006

^{iv} Pew Research Center, 2009 & MediaMatters.org, 2007

^v Social Science Research Council, 2007

^{vi} Reel Bad Arabs, Olive Branch Press

^{vii} USA Today/Gallup Poll, 2006

^{viii} Cornell University, Media & Society Research Group

^{ix} Journal of Communication

^x Journal of Communication, 2008 & US Department of Justice, 2004