

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
TRANSCRIPT



Challenging media

THE KILLING SCREENS

MEDIA & THE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

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Media & the Culture of Violence

**One of Three Videos in the Series:
George Gerbner on Media and Culture**

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Featuring an interview with **George Gerbner** Dean Emeritus, Annenberg School
for Communications

Hosted by **Jean Kilbourne**

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INTRODUCTION

[News] *Is violence in today's movies, television, other media, making the society more violent, or reflecting the violence in the society?*

[CBS News] *Studies show that children see five violent acts per hour in prime time television, and up to twenty-five each hour on Saturday morning cartoons.*

[CNN News] *No one has convinced me that so called violence, that no one's been able to find, is really as a causal relationship with violence in streets.*

[News Coverage: Ted Turner, Chairman, TBS] *As a parent of five children I don't need experts to tell me that the amount of violence on television today, and its increasingly graphic portrayals, can be anything but harmful to young people.*

[News Coverage: Rep. John Bryant (D) Texas] *It is sickening, in my opinion, what you put on television. It's an absolute outrage.*

[CNN Crossfire] *Clearly they're giving the people the exact right, and the exact amount of violence that the market would suggest the people want. I don't...*

[CBS News] *The networks made prime time blood bath was the final straw for congress, who threatened to step in and regulate television's escalating arms race.*

[News Coverage: Janet Reno] *If immediate voluntary steps are not taken, and deadlines established, government should respond, and respond immediately.*

JEAN KILBOURNE: Hello, I'm Jean Kilbourne. Violence and the media, why is there so much of it? What are its effects? And, what can be done about it? Concern about this issue has captured America's attention. As educators, parents, and citizens, we become more aware of how pervasive violent representations have become in our cultural environment. But, have the debates and discussion in the media, in Congress, between psychologists, and policy makers made us any more able to answer these questions?

Coming to terms with the consequences of violent images in our culture goes far beyond a simplistic causal connection, often drawn between viewing violence and committing it. Coming to terms with what to do about violence in the media goes far beyond questions of censorship versus free speech.

Today we'll meet Dr. George Gerbner, America's foremost, and most respected Communications scholar. Dr. Gerbner is Dean Emeritus at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. For the past twenty-five years he has headed the Cultural Indicators Project, the single most

comprehensive study on the impact of television. If this research has proven one thing over the past two decades it this: the more television we watch, the more we believe the real world to be like that of television. Out of this finding come new questions and new answers about how the media cultivate our perceptions of the world and how these perceptions affect the ways we all think and act as citizens, and individuals.

PART ONE – STORIES OF POWER

JEAN KILBOURNE: Lets turn first to the question of why violence is so pervasive in our popular media. Do the media simply reflect our world, or do they distort it? One of the first things we'll notice is that TV looks very different from the world that you and I inhabit. We can make sense of why television looks the way it does by understanding who produces television, as well as the motives that guide the media industry as a whole. Let's turn to Dr. Gerbner:

GEORGE GERBNER: For the first time in human history a child is born into a home in which television is on an average of about seven hours a day. In some countries a little more in some countries a little less, but in all industrial countries this is about the situation. And for the first time in human history most of the stories are told not by the parent, not by the school, not by the church, not by the tribe or the community, and in many places not even by the native country, but by a relatively small and shrinking group of global conglomerates who have something to sell. And it changes in a very fundamental way, the cultural climate, the cultural environment into which our children are born, in which they grow up, in which they become socialized, in which they become human beings, and we are going to spell out some of the consequences of that change.

We have been studying the nature of that world for many years, and the consequences of growing up and living with television. But we only have time for a few highlights, a few examples that we might start with asking the question now, what is that world like? Who are the people who animate that world? What is the cast of characters with which we grow up?

Well that cast of characters on television drama, in prime time is essentially a very skewed, a very distorted cast. Men outnumber women about 3 to 1. By reproducing an over-representation of white males in the prime of life, television is reproducing and is appealing to its own best customers. The reason for that is not only dramatic formulas, but the reason for that is that television has to adjust to a marketing strategy in which it in effect has to represent, over-represent, and to a large extent flatter their best customers. So we're growing up in a world that is designed to the specifications of a marketing strategy regardless of other conditions. And the cast that you put on the stage has a great deal to do with the kind of stories that you will be able to tell. When you put on the stage a cast--more than half, almost two-thirds, of which is white males in the prime of life, what is the kind of story that is most likely, most easily told, with that kind of a cast? Well we find that that it is a story of power...

[Movie] *Get out of here before I give you a smack right in the face.*

GEORGE GERBNER: There is a story of conflict, there is a story of violence, which is one reason, one of several key reasons, why violence is such a prevalent, pervasive, and troubling aspect of the new world of stories, and of culture in which we are born.

So, let's consider violence and why is it so pervasive? Many people say well, that's what the people want, because it's very popular. That is not so. Violence in itself is not a popular commodity. To be sure, there are some good stories, and some very strong stories that have a lot of violence, but their popularity does not rest in the violence. Most of the highly rated programs on television are non-violent.

[TV: Cheers]

What's going on here Sammy, what went wrong?

-- Well if you ask me, that girl's got a big problem.

-- You're right. It's called good taste.

GEORGE GERBNER: Violence projects a sense of male power. Violence projects a sense of male power, and of course males are the producers, men are the producers of most of these programs, but most of all, it doesn't take great talent, it doesn't take a lot of time, it doesn't take much creativity. It can be plugged in whenever a dull program is beginning to lag, and it kind of livens up its activity-- livens up the program. Furthermore, it's a good commodity for the global market, and most television, and most motion pictures are produced for a global market. They are not even produced for a domestic, national market. They are produced for a global market, and as they say in the trade, violence travels well. You don't need to translate.

[Movie clips of Spanish versions of Terminator, Hard to Kill]

GEORGE GERBNER: Humor is culture bound; it is more expensive to produce. It is less easy to circulate in different cultures, so that global marketing imperatives make violence an excellent commodity, and inject it into our lives in a way has never happened before. There may have been more blood thirsty heroes in the history of human kind, although I'm not sure about that, in fact I'm not even sure how one would find out, but I can tell you that there has never been the amount of violent imagery that permeates every home today than we are at the present time. This is historically totally unprecedented. We are awash with a tide of violent representations such as the world has never known, and I think the consequences are very troubling.

[Montage of violent movie clips]

Next time you have the chance to kill someone, don't hesitate.

--Thanks for the advice.

PART TWO – HAPPY VIOLENCE

GEORGE GERBNER: To be sure, there is violence in Shakespeare, there has been a lot of blood and gore in, even in fairy tales, but those are mostly legitimate artistic creations that show the tragedy, that show the pain, that show the destruction that violence creates, but most of the violence that we have which is essentially a cheap industrial ingredient to hype otherwise dull programs is happy violence. It's violence that is entertaining-- that is thrilling.

[Montage of “happy violent” movie clips]

[TV: Promotional Spot for “Last Action Hero”] *I'll just tell you that one of the things that's best about the film is the sense of good times and the sense of fun – and I think that goes all the way through the film – it'll carry people out of the theater with that feeling.*

GEORGE GERBNER: So again the marketing imperatives force us to produce this happy violence that shows that all problems can be solved by violence, that it has serious consequences, and that it has disastrous consequences for the perspective that it cultivates in our children, and in ourselves, and in our society, and I'll say a few things about those consequences in a minute, but let me first just sketch how frequent, how repetitive, how ritualistic violent imagery and representations are. In prime time violent incidents, violent scenes occur at the rate of between six and eight per hour, that is something very stable over twenty-eight/twenty-nine years that we have been tracking it. There are two entertaining murderers a night on the average. That is the nightly diet of our children. And when they go into children's programs like Saturday morning cartoons, the amount of violence is between twenty and thirty per hour.

[Montage of violent children's entertainment]

PART THREE – ACCELERATING VIOLENCE

GEORGE GERBNER: Growing up with violence, with inescapable expertly choreographed brutality in every home builds not only a kind of desensitization for it, but it also creates a market for violent entertainment by people for whom even what they see on television is not enough, is not graphic enough, is not explicit enough, and some movie productions, some big productions really cash in on that market. What is peculiar about this is that as time goes on, a greater dosage is necessary to satisfy this need. I shouldn't even call it a need. I don't think it's a need. I think the reason for violence is first of all not that it is popular, because most highly rated programs are non-violent, but it is active, and it always has some relation to persons physical integrity, therefore it has kind of a minimal activity interest. It is essentially cheap to produce, except in these big productions. Now what happens is that as time goes on they have to increase the dosage. So we found that when you remake a famous action oriented movie, the amount off violence doubles or triples each time. For example, let me give you a few example of that.

When *Robocop* was first produced it had thirty-two corpses, and we just count the corpses in this not just the acts of violence because that's too many. The second time-- the first time it was thirty-two -- the second time it was eighty-one.

Death Wish started out in its first production with nine corpses, *Death Wish II* is fifty-two. *Rambo* started with sixty-two, and by the time it got to be *Rambo III* it was 106. Even a wonderful movie like *Godfather* started out with twelve, then went on to eighteen, and *Godfather III* had fifty-three.

The record achievement, if you want to call it that, is the marketing sensation of the past few seasons, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. That is the most violent movie and videotape that was ever produced for young audiences. It as an average of 130 acts of violence per hour, and in addition to that of course, it is basically a celebration of the martial arts, plus a kind of blind obedience to the leader, the old rat character that teaches a sense of authoritarianism, as well as a sense of violence, and that became profitable not only, and not so much because of the kind of innovative technique and interesting characters, but also because it was part of a very large global marketing operation that sold many other things for which the *Teenage Turtles* became a vehicle of selling.

[TV ad: Chef Boyardee pasta] *There's something new inside Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pasta from Chef Boyardee...I get to be Michelangelo...Radical dude!...but now it also has...new Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles vs. the Shredder with a new thicker sauce...Thank goodness for Chef Boyardee!*

PART FOUR – VIOLENCE IS A SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP

JEAN KILBOURNE: Depiction's of violence in any culture are never simply depictions of a physical act. The stories we tell about violence are always moral tales and lessons. Stories of violence tell us about who can get away with committing violence, who deserves it, and who must suffer. It teaches some people to see themselves as aggressors, and others to see themselves as victims.

GEORGE GERBNER: Violence is a prison through which the question of power can be seen. It is not a simple scenario, it is a social relationship that essentially tells us who can get away or put what over on who else and get away with it. For every ten characters who can assert their own will and make other people behave, do something against their will on threat of being hurt or killed, which is a good definition of violence, for every ten characters who can do that there are about twelve victims who are subjected to that. So for every ten aggressors there are about twelve victims. For every ten women who are cast as being able to put there will over on somebody who is unwilling, there are sixteen female victims.

[Montage of clips of female victims]

GEORGE GERBNER: The lesson of power is what puts people in their place. It shows who can get away with what against whom. It shows what kind of people are most likely to come out on top, what kind of people are most likely to be victimized. And the lessons are multiple lessons. It is important to remember that violence is a fairly complicated scenario. It's not a simple, single action. Violence is really a social relationship between aggressors and victims, and the kind of people who are likely to put something over on other kinds of people, and the kind of people who are most likely to become victimized begin to internalize that role. The consequence of that is that minorities grow up feeling that they are more vulnerable, that there are fewer life chances, that they have to be more dependent on authorities, and therefore they are more controllable, which is how minorities are trained in effect, are cultivated to try to accept their place in a society, to try to accept injustice, to try to accept the fact of having less than their share of all the resources including representation, and as you know, more and more of minorities are simply unwilling to accept that role, and become alienated from and become hostile to the mainstream culture which of course presents us with a whole other set of problems.

PART FIVE – THE LESSONS OF VIOLENCE

JEAN KILBOURNE: The twenty-five year Cultural Indicators Project headed by Professor Gerbner has demonstrated that the more television we watch, the more we perceive the real world to be like that of television. So television in short cultivates our perception of the world. This raises a whole new set of questions about violence in the media. If, for example, you perceive violence to be escalating out of control, what political promises would be attractive to you? What policies on crime and punishment would you support? In talking about the effects of violence on ourselves and our culture, Dr. Gerbner addresses these broader concerns.

GEORGE GERBNER: So we find in our studies, and our many dozens and hundreds of studies that have also done this and have confirmed this, that violence and growing up with that kind of violent representations has several consequences, and it really teaches several lessons not just one. One of the lessons about which most people and most of the media are particularly concerned is the lesson of aggression, is the lesson of threatening the social order, threatening the integrity, violating the integrity of human beings, and indeed exposure to television does tend, especially among certain groups of people who have little opportunity to participate, to get attention and so on does tend to enhance a sense of violence being a good solution to many problems, a sense of inclination to commit violence, and to be aggressive.

There is a relative minority, and in most cases of course it is stupid and it doesn't work. The major lesson however, that all of us absorbs, is the lesson of what we call the mean world. We call it the *mean world syndrome*. That means that if you are born into a heavy viewing home which is by and large lower income, lower education people who have fewer opportunities for cultural participation, people who are essentially monopolized, whose cultural life is monopolized by television, for all practical purposes you live in a meaner world, and your next door neighbor who lives in the same world, in the same neighborhood, the same community, but is a light for you or watches less television.

The consequences of growing up in this mean world is that you project a greater degree of danger onto the world, that you are more insecure, that you are less sensitive to violence that is going on because you believe that that's the norm in the outside world-- that being more insecure, being more anxious, being in many ways more angry about the brutality that you see around you, you are more dependent on people who claim that they will protect you, you are demanding protection, you are-- you even approve repression in the country, or in the world if that is presented to you as enhancing your sense of security.

That is also politically exploitable as more and more election campaigns are essentially calculated on war on crime, war on drugs, that's really war on

people who are presented as threatening, as dangerous, and it leads to a kind of undeclared civil war in our cities. That is one of the corrosive consequences of growing up with violence: desensitization, insecurity, a sense of frustration and anger that is exploitable in many ways, and also among people who have little opportunity for participation or gaining attention a sense of aggression a sense of actually engaging in violent and sometimes outrageous acts.

PART SIX – CITIZENSHIP IN THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

JEAN KILBOURNE: What can be done about all this? Mostly when this question comes up the issues are defined in terms of censorship vs. free speech. Professor Gerbner suggests that this is a misleading, and perhaps dangerous way to think about our cultural environment. If anything the present problems are a result of too much censorship. The censor here is not government, but transnational corporations who monopolize the market. Rather than focusing on how to further close things down, he concentrates on how to open them up to allow more people more participation in cultural production.

GEORGE GERBNER: The First Amendment to the Constitution says that congress shall make no laws abridging the freedom of speech, press, religion, etc., and we dealt with it in a negative way. We said nobody should streamline, nobody should orchestrate, nobody should legislate about cultural policy. What this overlooks is that the founding fathers, the framers of the constitution, had in mind government as the public authority. That, in their experience, was the only authority capable of legislating in a way that would abridge the press. Today we have another government, a private government: large, national, transnational corporations that are governments in the real sense of being the authoritative decision makers in many areas of life. And these are governments that are exempt from the prohibitions of the first amendment. In fact they can use the protections of the first amendment as a shield for privilege and for monopoly by which they claim the freedom to censor everybody else.

[TV interview: Steven Bochco, Producer] *Censorship by any name remains censorship.*

[TV interview: Diane English, Producer] *I think that if we don't watch out we're going to wind up being forced to produce television that doesn't portray our world realistically, and I personally don't want to work in that medium.*

GEORGE GERBNER: So we're in a situation in which we have reached a position in our culture where the policies, the unwritten, the unrecognized policies, that the virtual ministry of culture of a handful of people who determine what the American and the international community should see is out of the reach of democratic decision making. It's a new challenge which we never had to face, and one with which we now have to cope, and the question is how do we cope with it? This has to be done by what I would call a Cultural Environment Movement. First it is, and it should be, a kind of a coalition of existing groups: citizens groups that are interested in media, educational groups, professional groups, groups of scientists, groups of artists, and even groups in the media who would like to have more time, more resources, more opportunities for talented people to engage in a greater diversity of production, and the

representation, both journalistic, artistic, dramatic, that they know how to do, and they know are prevented from doing right now. And secondly, we need to build a constituency for media reform, a constituency for engaging with the decision makers, and engaging with legislators, and the rule makers with a view toward diversifying, freeing, liberating production, liberating expression and representation from the existing restraints partly of the market, partly of a kind of narrow conception of power in relatively few hands.

To think about a movement in the cultural environment is a new task; to turn things around that almost everybody takes for granted is going to take a long time, and many people will consider it impossible. Well in a sense I would say it is impossible, but then look around in the world and see how many things that only five, ten years ago we considered impossible are now reality. So I would say if it's impossible, if it seems impossible, it means that it is worth doing. You remember the old slogan? It says, "The possible we do immediately, the impossible will take a little longer."

PART SEVEN – WHAT PARENTS, TEACHERS & SCHOOLS CAN DO

GEORGE GERBNER: Many people ask what parents should do. And of course, parents themselves are trapped in a situation in which television is as I say very often the baby-sitter, and I think one has to respect the fact that there are more and more single parents, there are more and more parents where both parents have to work outside the home, that indeed television should be able to be trusted to be a baby-sitter when the situation demands. Unfortunately it is not produced to take care of those needs. We're one of the few civilized industrial countries who do not have high quality children's programming in prime time at all. But given that situation, what should parents do?

First of all, I think parents should not use television as a form of reward or punishment. Although to some extent that becomes inevitable, they should be aware of the fact that using television as reward or punishment, using it as something you can turn on and off-- it doesn't matter what you watch-- essentially teaches indiscriminate viewing. It teaches that it's not so much what you watch, but how much you watch that really matters. It's important that a kind of selective and discriminating viewing is the objective of parents, rather than simply the amount of viewing.

Secondly, parents should participate with their children in enough viewing that they have some standing because if children know that they are just talking about programs they have never seen, they lose credibility. Participating gives them some standing to express an opinion, to express a perspective, not just a control, but to show there is another way of looking at the world, that there is an alternative way of looking at life other than what they see on television. And that is very important.

The most powerful effects of a kind of cultural mainstream that television is, is when it monopolizes the cultural life of the child or the person, and when they're not aware that there are any alternatives. Just having a notion of alternatives is already a kind of immunizing factor. It shows that yes, this is one way, but here's an institution that has its own agenda, that has its own vested interest, that has its own purposes, that looks at and illuminates life from a restricted point of view. There are other alternative ways that one can seek out to look at life. I think that is very important.

Finally I think that parents should prevail upon, and demand that schools teach analytical, and critical viewing. The teaching of how to handle this new cultural environment is very important as anything that the schools can do. The new task of the liberal arts, the new tasks that the tools of the teachers of English, and of Social Studies, and of History should now be applied to is the everyday cultural environment of the individual. Then I think parents should remember

that they're not only parents, they're not only teachers, they're not only members of school systems important as those roles are, but they're also citizens. What's the point of bringing up children in a relatively healthy and diversified environment if you bring them up into a world, and into a culture that is a mess? You can't just do one and ignore the other.

JEAN KILBOURNE: We have learned that we cannot understand TV without understanding where it comes from, who produces it, and why. We have seen why TV doesn't look like the real world, and why we see so much violence, even though it's not very popular with audiences. We have seen how the marketing imperative forces dangerous and damaging stories of power and violence onto our TV screens, and the negative consequences this has on how we perceive the world. Dr. Gerbner has issued a challenge to all of us: citizens, students, parents, interested in democratic participation in our cultural environment. As he says, this change may take a long time to complete, but the time to start is now. I'm Jean Kilbourne.