

## Popular culture and moral panic: From comics to video nasties

Roy Shuker

Department of Education, Massey University, Palmerston North

### ABSTRACT

From the 1930's onward, increasing concern was expressed at the negative influence of some types of comic available in New Zealand. In the mid-1980's, a similar debate emerged over video censorship, with concern focusing on "video nasties". This paper examines the comics and video debates in an attempt to show a convergence of the two episodes. My main argument is two-fold: firstly, each episode constitutes a moral panic, in that the generally professed reasons for concern over both comics and video are either contestable or unsubstantiated; secondly, these surface issues have concealed more significant issues.

From the 1930's onward, increasing concern was expressed at the negative influence of some types of comic available in New Zealand. This concern reached a peak in the early 1950's, with numerous complaints from a wide range of community groups, investigations by Government Departmental Committees, and public meetings. Events culminated in the Mazengarb Report identifying, comics as a factor contributing to juvenile delinquency, and the Indecent Publications Amendment Act (1954) provided for a system of registration of the distributors of printed matter. From 1956 to 1963 a comics advisory committee exercised a system of informal censorship. The seriousness with which the whole matter was taken is indicated by the banning of the *Lone Ranger* comics because of the prominence of pistols in the pictures and because the hero always wore a mask (a practice which was an offence by law in New Zealand).

In the mid-1980's, a similar debate emerged over video censorship, with concern focusing on "video nasties". Again a wide range of community groups was involved, ranging from the feminist Women Against Pornography and the conservative Society for the Promotion of Community Standards, to the liberal Society for the Protection of Individual Rights and the Video Retailer's Association. Again too, the Government was involved, with an inter-departmental committee report on video censorship followed by the Video Recordings Bill, 1985. And yet again the debate has been in part couched in terms of the perceived negative effects of a medium, particularly on the young.

The parallels between these two episodes suggest that they both constitute a form of "moral panic", a term popularized by sociologist Stanley Cohen in his seminal study of mods and rockers. (Cohen, 1980), Moral panics follow a characteristic sequence: (1) the emergence of a "problem", frequently associated with negative influences on the young; (2) community concern, amplified - and, to a degree, orchestrated - by the media, and arguably out of all proportion to the actual scale of the problem; followed by (3) a political reaction, usually involving hasty legislation aimed at providing stricter controls.

This paper examines the comics and video debates in an attempt to show a convergence of the two episodes. My main argument is two-fold: firstly, each episode constitutes a moral panic, in that the generally professed reasons for concern over both comics and video are either contestable or unsubstantiated; secondly, these surface issues have concealed more significant issues. In the case of comics, the surface concern was their perceived link with juvenile delinquency, while the more significant issue was the protection of "high culture" tradition.

With video censorship, the interrelated surface issues have been the question of individual autonomy (rights) in the private sphere; claims about the negative effect of "video nasties", particularly on the young; and the nature and effects of pornography. While it is not entirely distinct from these issues, I wish to argue that what is really at stake in the video debate are the limits of state intervention and the social construction of sexuality.

The comics and video debates are linked in that they are both at heart political representing episodes in cultural politics. Both culture and politics are conceptualized here in broad fashion, "culture" including representations and social activities, the determination of both involving the active interrelationship of various social groups in the political sphere. (See Sites, 1986, Williams, 1981). Moral panics embody a notion that the State is facing a threat to its control of the culture; this is not control in a direct, coercive sense, but rather control through the exercise of hegemony.

The concept of ideological hegemony was advanced by Gramsci to explain how a ruling class maintains its dominance through achieving a popular consensus mediated through the various institutions of society, including the schools, mass media, the law, religion and popular culture. Ideological hegemony thus represents the organisation of consent, a process underpinned by the threat of actual physical coercion by the State. Carl Boggs elaborates the concept:

By hegemony Gramsci meant the permeation through civil society - including a whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, the churches and family - of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc., that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it. Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an 'organising principle', or world view (or combination of such ~rid views) that is diffused by agencies of ideological control and socialisation into every area of daily life. To the extent that prevailing consciousness is internalised by the broad masses, it becomes part of 'commonsense'; as all ruling elites seek to perpetuate their power, wealth and status, they necessarily attempt to popularise their own philosophy, culture, morality, etc. and render them unchallengeable, part of the natural order of things. (Boggs, 1976:39)

An important aspect of hegemony is that it mystifies and conceals existing power relations and social arrangements. Particular ideas and rules are constructed as natural and universal 'commonsense'.

Boggs' definition of hegemony, though useful, tends to be somewhat deterministic. Hegemony cannot be taken for granted, but is a contested process: 'This requires persistent activities to maintain and strengthen the social authority of the ruling class in all areas of civil society, and the making of such compromises as are needed to adapt the existing system of alliances to changing conditions and to the activities of the opposing forces' (Simon 1982:37).

The creation and maintenance of hegemony is an historical process. I have argued elsewhere (Shuker, 1986) that, in New Zealand the period 1890-1930 saw the "capture" of the developing interventionist State by an emergent "new" middle class. The professional section of this new middle class attempted to stake out areas of expertise and authority so that while dealing with perceived social problems, they were also engaged in enhancing their own status, power and security. This process established middle class cultural hegemony - middle class norms of behaviour coming to be equated with the desired forms of social life. It should be noted that this rather Machiavellian-sounding process was frequently done with the best of intentions. Well intentioned individuals may be latently serving ideological functions in the same moment as they are seeking to alleviate some of the problems facing others.

Thus, in attempting to promote the ideals of social welfare and equality, the new middle class 'common sense' classifications (of individuals, social groups, problems) tended to confirm and reinforce patterns of power and inequality in society. We can see this process occurring across society from the 1890's onward in the medicalisation of childbirth and the push, for a science of mothercraft; in the eugenics movement and a concern with national efficiency; in the development of prisons and asylums; and in the consolidation and extension of compulsory education and the schools' credentialing function. This process of governments becoming interested in controlling things previously left unregulated also included censorship, and was initially evident in the development of State film censorship (see Shuker and Openshaw.) Subsequent episodes also illustrate middle class concern about 'threats to the social fabric', and it is to our two case studies we now turn.

## Comics<sup>1</sup>

Comics have a long history, dating back to antecedents in 18<sup>th</sup> century artists such as Hogarth, who combined word and image to produce telling political satire in their cartoons. The late 19th century saw the development of comic strips in a number of American Sunday newspapers. The publication of Richard Outcault's *Yellow kid* on 16th February 1896 is often taken to signify the birth of comics as a medium, and the next decade saw the development of distinctive strips which laid the foundations of style, vocabulary, and comic syntax.

During the 1920's, the "family strip" was the most prominent style of comic: "Home from a (supposedly) hard day's work at the factory or office, a father could chuckle at the doings and sayings of characters bearing enough resemblances to himself that they could elicit glimmers of recognition; yet, they remained so unlike him in their stylized attire and stereotyped responses that he could laugh at them without laughing at himself" (Horn, 1976: 18). *Blondie* dates from this period. The 1930's was the time of the adventure strip, including *Tarzan*, *Prince Valiant* and *Buck Rogers*. The logical extension of these was the superhero; *Superman* (1938) was the first of these. The popularity of these types of widely syndicated comics followed a period of exploration and interest in things foreign, but also marked a form of escapism during the depression and the increasing threat of war in Europe.

Several of the early comic strips were published in booklet form (e.g. *Mutt and Jeff*, 1911), but this approach did not really prove commercially viable until the 1930's. Such comic books were initially collections of previously published strips. *Detective Comics* (March, 1937) was the first comic book featuring original stories instead of reprints of strips, and proved highly successful.

The strips and many of the early comic books were generally accepted as simply harmless diversions - a leisure time reading activity. No evidence has been found of objections in New Zealand to either the family or adventure strips, though with hindsight one can note their sexism and prevailing ideology of individualism. With the economic depression, however, American publishers turned to cheap publications, emphasizing sex and violence. Prominent here was the crime comic, which drew considerable criticism in the late 1930's.

A leading example of the crime comic was "Dick Tracey", the first realistic police strip. The violent, brutal and often cruel adventures of the Chicago detective broke many taboos and the themes, script, and style of the comic were widely influential. Tracey's often grotesque villainous opponents frequently met ends as horrible as their deeds: they were shot through the head, impaled on flag poles, buried alive, scalded, hanged, frozen to death (Horn, 1976).

The American suppliers sold crime comics to overseas distributors at bargain prices, in order to popularize the comics and to attract advertising. Much of this advertising was for contraceptives, sometimes luridly stressing the dangers of venereal disease, while books on sex (education, technique) were also promoted. In New Zealand, the resulting influx of American comics was criticized not simply in terms of their low tone, but also because of this type of advertising: "30,000

copies of magazine filth pollute New Zealand”, proclaimed a *Truth* cover story in 1937. The issue was taken up in other press editorials and articles, and concern was also expressed by several community groups. The concern focussed on the United State’s “pulp”, churned out in millions under such titles as “Inside Detective”, “Dream World Romance”, and “Real Experiences”.

The Customs Department worked informally with the New Zealand distributors to have objectionable adverts deleted. When this proved not possible, the magazines involved were prohibited under Section 6 of the 1910 Indecent Publications Act. Twenty American magazines were thus dealt with in March 1933. Informal censorship was, however, more favoured. In July 1936, a meeting was held between the Minister of Customs and booksellers, librarians, and comic importers. The result was an understanding among the importers present to refrain from importing magazines “which gave undue prominence to matters of sex, obscenity, horror, crime and cruelty”. Those importers not at the meeting subsequently agreed to this arrangement. The situation of virtual censorship was confirmed with the introduction of import licensing restrictions at the end of 1936, which were applied to some of the publications objected to.

Following the prohibition of pulp magazines, the whole issue of undesirable, mass-produced literature and its possible impact on youth subsided, though it did not die. Apparently, if later commentators are to be believed, the arrival of American troops in New Zealand provided the spark which rekindled public concern. Along with chocolate bars and nylons, both of which were commonly held to have played some part in corrupting young New Zealanders, came comics. Much later, a harassed Auckland publisher, H.B.K. Hislop, attempting to deflect public criticism of local comic distributors, claimed that there had been no problem in New Zealand with comics before 1942, but “In that year, booksellers were besieged by men asking for ‘cahmics’”.

Concern over comics continued to surface occasionally in the years immediately following the war. While the import licensing system curtailed the large scale importation of American comics, local publishers got around this to some extent by bringing in the plates and printing the comics in New Zealand. Press and public concern was on-going, and there was an awareness of controversy overseas.

During 1949, the Education Department undertook a survey of comics, examining the 63 types “at present on the market in New Zealand”. John Ewing, who compiled the survey, concluded: “there cannot, I consider, be any question of official censorship of content. The content of the comics may be banal and infantile, but none I saw was suggestive or downright vicious; nor was the element of horror overplayed”. Nonetheless, there was a general feeling evident that the situation had somehow deteriorated during the immediate post-war years. One editorial writer subsequently conjectured whether:

It is possible that the violence, sadism and distorted emotional life which became common in wartime have carried over into the cheap fiction of post-war years and their influence has reached down into young people’s comics. (Dominion, 9 April 1952)

In February, 1951, the Minister in charge of import licensing noted: “For some time now, I have been receiving complaints concerning the importation of pulp literature.” The concern was partly fuelled by the Incoming National Government’s freeing up of previous tariff restrictions on imported comics. Although there are no reliable figures indicating the extent of the increase in imported comics and magazines, it is worth noting that when Ewing undertook his 1949 survey, there were only 63 different comics available; a similar Department of Education survey in 1952 found 214. Later commentators certainly believed the change in import regulations to be a decisive factor in the influx of foreign comics into New Zealand. John A. Lee, writing two years later, curtly reminded the Minister of Education, R.M. Algie, that at the time “... we attempted to reproduce a splendid range of English School Adventure Stories (in association with Gordon and Gotch) ... but Australian six-pennies poured in at five pence a copy and we were slaughtered, and the Government did not care a damn”. During the height of the comics debate in Parliament, in 1954, the Leader of the

Opposition, Walter Nash, was able to somewhat smugly observed that “during the time of the Labour Government the importation of that type of literature had been avoided to the maximum”.

Certainly public concern became markedly more articulate after National had come to power, not merely from disgruntled individuals but from organisations, church bodies and educational associations. In 1951, the Hon. Mrs. G.H. Ross, claimed that research showed 45 percent of school children and 75 percent of 18-25 year olds to be reading “unclean literature”. The Education Department survey of 1952 concluded that of the 214 comics studied, “37 had a substantial proportion of objectionable features and 19 were completely objectionable on such grounds as extreme violence, undue horror, and criminal behaviour”. Throughout 1952 a wide range of groups expressed concern on the issue. The Annual Conference of the Associated Booksellers of New Zealand, for example, protested against the continued importation of “comics of a gangster, criminal, or salacious type”.

The Government responded by setting up a Customs Department investigation of comics. The Customs Department Report (March, 1952) entitled “Worthless and Indecent Literature” prompted Cabinet to set up an Interdepartmental Committee to make recommendations. The editor of the *Dominion*, however, probably echoed public feeling when he argued that:

There has been enough talk. It is time the Government acted. Meanwhile children remain exposed to insidious influences that should have been dealt with before now. (*Dominion*, 9 April 1952)

Given growing public and press concern, it seems likely that the Interdepartmental Committee was put under some pressure to produce its report quickly; the first of several such committees to become a casualty of the controversy. In May 1952 its report was completed, and its recommendations included a call for all comics to be registered. Such a recommendation was not entirely welcome to a Government which had publicly pledged itself to reducing the power and influence of the State. Despite a subsequent public meeting attended by a wide range of interested parties, there followed no further initiatives concerning comics, and press and public interest in the issue appears to have waned somewhat during 1953.

In 1954, however, within the space of a few weeks, the problem of juvenile delinquency within New Zealand, and along with it, the comics issue, became crucial national concerns inextricably related in the public mind. In particular, three revelations, each widely reported in the press, served to personalise the impact of comics for thousands of New Zealanders.

First, came the shock revelation that police statistics revealed an apparent marked increase in what was subsequently labelled ‘assaults on women’, or else generalised still further to 9 sexual crime’. Secondly, there was the discovery of what one newspaper termed “Large Scale Depravity by Hutt Teenagers” in July 1954. Thirdly, there was the sensationalised Parker-Hulme murder trial in Christchurch. The details of each are beyond the scope of this paper; suffice to note that commentators were quick to identify comics as a major cause of delinquency. For example, Hilda Ross, Minister for the Welfare of Women and Children, inquired:

Is it just mere coincidence that the steep rises in sexual offences is almost exactly parallel with a similar steep rise in the amount of readily available indecent literature over the same period? I do not think it is mere coincidence. As people think and desire, so will they act. If minds are filled with lustful images flowing from trashy magazines and unclean reading matter, then, as surely as night follows day, we may expect the degradation which the police statistics reveal. Every publication I have in mind has cartoons, diabolically and suggestively devised, which are an absolute degradation of womanhood. (*NZPD*: vol. 304, 1954, p. 377)

Revelations such as these came at a time when Frederic Wertham’s sensational bestseller, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1953) was becoming known throughout New Zealand. Wertham’s book remains the most famous and influential investigation of comics. In the early 1950s, it became the primer in the anti-comics campaign in the United States and was widely cited during comics debates in Britain and Australia, as well as in New Zealand. Basic to Wertham’s argument was the notion of imitative behaviour and the link between comics and juvenile delinquency:

Our researches have proved that there is a significant correlation between crime comics reading and the more serious forms of juvenile delinquency. Many children read only few comics 9 read them for only a short time, read the better type (to the extent that there is a better type) and do not become imbued with the whole crime comics atmosphere. Those children 9 on the other hand, who commit the more serious types of delinquency nowadays, read a lot of comic books, go in for the worst type of crime comics, read them for a long time and live in thought in the crime comics world. (Wertham, 1955: 164)

It is not possible in this context to subject Wertham's arguments to detailed scrutiny. Such an analysis has been undertaken by Barker (1984), who convincingly shows the questionable assumptions underlying Wertham's claims, and the difficulties involved in looking at particular frames of comics out of their total context.

The response to this moral crisis was the hastily assembled Mazengarb Committee, which was to study the causes of juvenile delinquency. The Committee's report reflected the common conviction that comics, along with films and radio, constituted prime causes of youthful waywardness. The report recommended the registration of comics. The Committee deplored the "... suggestiveness of cover pictures of glamour girls dressed in a thin veiling", and even claimed that comics were more harmful to girls than boys "... in that girls more readily identify themselves with the chief characters" (AJHR; 1954, H.47, pp20-21). In such statements, of course, lay the long shadow of the Wertham research and the recent indigenous revelations, all of which had served to shatter the social calm of early post-World War Two New Zealand. A British correspondent, James Brittain, discussing the Mazengarb Report, shrewdly concluded that the country was in turmoil because it had prided itself on "... its excellent dairy produce, thermal wonders, volcanoes, and above all, for highly idealised athletes and Rugby footballers ..." it (had) bemused itself with the comforting idea that it (was) a place apart".

Shortly after the release of the Mazengarb Report, three pieces of legislation were rushed through Parliament aimed at providing a comprehensive package to combat juvenile delinquency and its causes. The Indecent Publications Amendment Act was specifically aimed at comics. It deemed all literature which unduly emphasised, in the opinion of a Magistrate, 'sex, horror, crime, cruelty or violence' to be indecent. The definition of 'indecent', was much more specific than under the original Act. All publishers and distributors of literature were to be immediately registered. Conviction on an indecent literature charge was to result in suspension or cancellation of registration. Such hastily devised legislation bristled with ambiguities and problems of definition, proved difficult to implement, and was eventually superseded by the 1963 Indecent Publications Tribunal.

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, the concern over comics was closely tied to fears regarding "increased" juvenile delinquency and crime. Such concerns were to a significant extent amplified and even orchestrated by the media, thus strengthening the position of those advocating greater social control. At a deeper level, the panic represented an episode in cultural politics. Underlying the debate over comics were a series of assumptions about "mass" culture, which was seen as diametrically opposed to a "high" culture tradition: High culture (exemplified by "literature") was educational, involved imagination and the higher emotions, appealed to the rational mind, was based in the real world and brought out the best in human nature. Low culture (exemplified by comics) was stultifying and immature, promoted illiteracy and wild fantasies, appealed to primitive emotions and brought out the worst in human nature.

Such a dichotomy is, of course, a very arguable basis for evaluating particular forms of culture. The whole notion of a "high-low" culture distinction is a social construct, resting on class-based value judgement, Even if such a distinction is accepted in regard to various forms of literature, ... there remains the salient point of how themes are treated and how they are deconstructed by the reader. Imagine for example, a story read by thousands of school children every year. It features sex and violence, incest, grave-robbing, a supernatural apparition and political treachery, intrigue and murder. Its redeeming feature: it is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

## Video nasties<sup>2</sup>

Our second case study considers the recent debate over video censorship, a debate culminating in the Video Recordings Bill, 1985, which is to provide the basis for legislation to be introduced in late 1987. The reasons for the emergence of this debate included the rapid expansion of VCR ownership and the marked increase in the range and quantity of videotapes available to the public for private use; the consequent increased pressure placed on the Customs Department and the Film Censor; the confused situation regarding responsibility for video censorship, compounded by the broadness of the relevant legislation; and a frequently expressed view that mass usage had been accompanied by mass tastes and negative effects, and 'stronger' restriction of videos is required.

The resultant debate has focused on claims and assumptions about the negative effects of 'video nasties' on the young, the question of the legitimate limits of state intervention in the private sphere and the nature and effects of "pornography". The construction of the debate in such terms has arguably made it a moral panic: an issue out of proportion to the actual scale and nature of the problem. The consequent opting for a State-imposed legal solution to video censorship is, I wish to argue, the wrong approach to resolving what is really an issue of cultural politics, particularly concerned with the social construction of sexuality. Before examining the issues identified in the debate, however, it is important to define the object of attention.

### *What is a video nasty?*

The video debate has been characterized by a striking lack of specificity, with little intelligent critical examination of the particular titles frequently referred to. The critics of video nasties have largely subscribed to a capsule description based on a few videos. In the debate in the United Kingdom, papers complained of films which show castration, sadistic attacks on women and violence including the use of chain saws and electric drills, and of films which specialize in extreme violence, sadism, mutilation and cannibalism (Petley, 1984). Recognizable in such descriptions are several videos available in New Zealand which have attracted attention, such as *I Spit on Your Grave*, a rape-revenge story, and *Driller Killer* and *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the titles of which are fairly self-explanatory.

Instead of a close examination of particular videos there has emerged a vague yet pervasive video nasty stereotype. This consists, says Barker, of "bad acting, bad filming; no real story line; endless successions of scenes of sex and violence, with no reason for showing them; everything cheap and poorly done." (cited Petley, 1984). Linked to this stereotype is the serious misconception that video nasties represent some kind of homogeneous category or self-contained genre. As Barker notes: 'Quite different kinds of films have been labelled as "nasty" without regard to form, narrative meaning or skill of making' (cited Petley, 1984).

New Zealand comment on video nasties illustrates the definitional problems involved, although there does appear to be a coalescing of objections around two types of film:

1. those depicting violence against women, as in *I Spit on Your Grave*; and
2. non-sexual ultraviolence, as in *Driller Killer*.

(See WAP, undated; Campbell, 1984; and press statements by Patricia Bartlett.)

Despite the concern, however, the objects of the debate - the video nasties - have been largely conspicuous by their absence. As occurred in Britain, discussion of the videos themselves has been either highly generalized, or absurdly selective. We have, for example, Patricia Bartlett, of the Society for the Promotion of Community Standards, with the liberal aid of the fast-forward control, showing "the nastier bits" of *Driller Killer* (reported Evening Standard, 10 October 1985); while attempts to show compilations of violent and pornographic excerpts from videotapes to MP's were only stalled when such video tapes were rejected by the Film Censors office. (Customs Minister Margaret Shields, Dominion, 3 October 1985).

The sweeping assertions of the supporters of stronger video censorship can be seen at their most extreme in the comments of Mr Tapsell, the Minister for Internal Affairs. While admitting that he had not personally seen any of the videos in question, later in the same interview he claimed that 'people do not realise the depravity of some of this material' (Insight, 1984)

### *The issues*

The debate surrounding video censorship has once again raised a number of issues and claims related to censorship. While these are interrelated, four are distinguished here in the hope that clarity of analysis will be enhanced.

#### **(1) Behind Closed Doors**

The video debate is often framed in terms of a distinction between the public and private spheres, a distinction involving the question of the legitimate limits of State interference in everyday life. It is generally argued that a balance must be struck between people's right to see what they want and "the public good": 'a balance between prudity and nudity' (Dominion, 3 October, 1985).

The public/private distinction has been advanced as an argument against censorship:

Some of the video sex is pretty raunchy stuff, but most of it is destined for private exhibition on home videos. Who says the state can determine what is acceptable conduct behind closed doors in the homes? (Evening Post, editorial, 10 November, 1985)

The films Censorship Board of Review has also commented that whether or not a film should be available for New Zealanders to view privately gives rise to different considerations from whether or not the same film should be shown publicly (New Zealand Herald, 4 June, 1984). The Board did not elaborate on what these considerations were, but did claim that the availability and acceptance of a video of a certain type may eventually lead to a more ready acceptance of the some subject matter being exhibited publicly. The Society for the Protection of Individual Rights (SPIR), on the other hand, has argued for leaving the matter entirely up to individual responsibility, including the individual's right to import a video tape purely for private use (Scrutineer, 1985).

Acceptance of a public - private distinction, however, is not without its difficulties. If the argument is that video nasties harm the viewer alone, the public-private distinction can be accepted and discussion turns to the legitimacy of the State's paternalistic intrusion into the private sphere. If, on the other hand, the argument is that video nasties lead to harm to others (violence, rape, etc.) the public-private distinction is of little value, and the focus turns to an examination of the effects of visual stimuli in different viewing contexts. This last is an important point with regard to video. Does it matter if the viewing context is a public cinema, a hotel room or bar, or a private residence? Is the individual's response going to be the same in the anonymity of a darkened theatre, in a bar with their drinking companions, or in the lounge at home with friends and family? These are empirical questions, which require answers if the debate is to move beyond the simple assertion of values positions.

#### **(2) The corruption of the innocent**

One of the main arguments advanced to legitimate the State's regulation of home viewing, is that while indecision continued, violent and pornographic videotapes remain widely available to children and teenagers (Paul East, Opposition Spokesman on Justice, Evening Standard, 25 September, 1985). Women Against Pornography have heard of a number of cases of children watching pornographic videos in the home (Evening Post, 7 June, 1984). The Films Censorship Board of Review claim that many children would be exposed to these films because of derelict parenting or natural childhood curiosity (New Zealand Herald, 4 June, 1984), and Patricia Bartlett of the Society of Protection of Community Standards has frequently expressed concern over the access young



people could have to such material. As is the case with many of the claims in the video debate, however, hard evidence is in short supply.

The appeal to “the corruption of the innocent” has always proved a useful catch cry in moral debates (Pearson, 1983), and is one that needs to be closely examined. It is worth noting that children’s access to particular videos will not necessarily be prevented by any system of classification, or even banning, of videos. The current legal position is that anyone exhibiting “indecent” or restricted material to children commits an offence (under the Indecent Publications Act). As the Interdepartmental Committee noted, however, ‘detecting and prosecuting such offences is very difficult, particularly when the parents of the children are involved and where the conduct involves no more than leaving the relevant material and the videotape recorder unattended’ (Report, 1985: para. 8-10). Given the unfeasibility of preventing banned videos from entering the country anyway, the committee could see no legal solution to this difficulty.

The liberal position here is that the onus should remain with parents to ensure that “adult” material is not freely available to their children (and their children’s friends). A colleague suggested to me that such videos should be treated as one would a firearm held in the household. This view is an extension of the argument for individual responsibility in the “private” sphere, and, like that argument, rests on the question of the effects of viewing video nasties. The negative effects of such viewing is frequently all too readily assumed. When critics can combine the consciousness of both aesthetic and moral superiority, the temptation to condemn is hard to resist. While aesthetic preference can be justified - no one makes great claims for video nasties as an art form - moral judgements assume the direct influence of medium on behaviour. This is a much contested relationship, and the controversy over mass media violence (and sexuality) and behaviour is now a long standing one - for overviews, see Noble, 1975; Burstyn, 1985: Appendix I; Brody, 1977. A skim of the research literature indicates widely differing assumptions about human nature and some problematic methodologies. (Grixti, 1985; Bart and Jazsa, 1980). That there is a link between viewing violence and participating in violent behaviour is now widely accepted. However: ‘there is no evidence to suggest any ill-effects at all from sexually explicit movies ...’ (American researcher Ed Donnerstein, *Dominion*, 21 May, 1985). Do we need to worry more about the violence of a popular television series like the A-Team rather than the explicit sexuality of the controversial Electric-Blue video series?

### **(3) In the Groin of the Beholder**

A prominent aspect of the debate has been the question of what constitutes “pornography”. At the personal level of course, “pornography” is what you like, “erotica” is what I like, or to quote (I believe) Oscar Wilde, ‘pornography is in the groin of the beholder’. Any rigorous attempt at definition is fraught with difficulties (and, I shall argue Hater, may indeed be counterproductive). It appears, for example, that a difference exists between the genders on what constitutes pornography and their reactions to such material - see Faust, 1980; Snitow, 1979; Yaffe, 1979. Radical feminists’ analysis of pornography illustrates some of the difficulties involved here (see note 2; Thornton, 1986). An important aspect of the radical feminist stance is the claim that apparently disparate sexual practices - on the one hand representations of sex, and, on the other, violent sexual assault - are connected (Coward, 1982). This view underpins slogans such as “pornography is violence against women”, claiming that the representation of women found in pornography is the theoretical expression of the same physical violence found in rape. Women Against Pornography argue that pornography encourages men to commit violence against women by showing women as submissive, there for men to use sexually ... (and) by showing women as enjoying being raped and beaten’ (WAP, undated: 10).

Specific examples of such an apparent connection can be pointed to, while one piece of research found that (under controlled experimental conditions) massive exposure to pornography resulted in a loss of compassion toward women as rape victims and toward women in general (Zillman and Bryant, 1982). However, studies of sex offenders provide no basis for establishing a

connection between pornography and rape (Burstyn, 1985:198), while Donnerstein goes so far as to assert that no research every has proven a causal link between pornography and rape (Reported Dominion, 21 April 1985).

#### (4) Constructing Sexuality

Let me turn finally to the question of what is, I think, really at stake here. While the concern over children and videos, the public/ private distinction, and the nature of pornography are all important issues, I want to argue that of greater significance is what can be termed the social construction of sexuality.

The issue of pornography has generally been dichotomised by two major political positions:

1. the liberal, "anything goes so long as it is private and without offense to "reasonable" people; or
2. the extreme conservative, pro-family, antisex, position.

The monopolising of the debate between these two standpoints has tended to collapse the arguments into the simplistic question: "Are you for intervention in sex or against it?" What the debate should really focus on, however, is definitions of "sexuality" and the attendant concepts of the body, pleasure, desire, and morality that are at issue here (Mort. 1983). This is a political matter. Private/domestic gender relations (including sexuality) are reconstituted in the public sphere, and therefore become a matter of public concern and regulation.

In *Sex, Politics and Society*, Jeffrey Weeks (summarising and extending Foucault), demonstrates that '...there are class sexualities (and different gender sexualities) not a single uniform sexuality. Sexuality is not a given that has to be controlled. It is an historical construct that has historical conditions of existence' (Weeks, 1981:10). Within the "historical" we can incorporate the "social" - here, specifically the role of the media in establishing "gender sexualities" (i.e. patterns of behaviour and attitudes between male and female, men and women, men and men, and women and women in our society).

Let us try to relate this more closely to the video debate. An Evening Post editorial (11 June, 1984) observed that most women, whether their attitude is one of contempt or anger, see pictures of scantily clad or naked females in suggestive poses as exploitative of their sex because physical attributes are emphasised at the expense of humanity. It seems clear that such visual material caters predominantly for male fantasies, presenting a stylised, unrealistic and stereotyped view of the female body, sexual activities, and sexual needs. While I would regard fantasy as a necessary element of human existence, its social sustenance must become questionable when its representations are offensive to a significant proportion of the population. The question remains, however, whether such offence is best dealt with in terms of more rigorous attempts to define guidelines for censorship of video (and film).

While I think that common agreement exists on the need for the restriction of child pornography and bestiality, it seems difficult to go much beyond these specifics. Consider for example one of the guidelines within the much heralded Australian Commonwealth regulations: censoring for 'explicit violence against non-consenting persons'. While this criterion can be used to exclude depictions of violent rape, it can also be applied to films, such as *The Day After*, with anti-nuclear themes. In both cases, the Australian Censor's Office has recourse to considering such themes in terms of the overall context and intent of a particular film and the way such incidents are treated, but difficulties of interpretation nevertheless remain. One must also concede some force to the "artistic defence" viewpoint: the vital and inalienable right of artists - whether painters, anarchists, playwrights or film makers - to create nightmares as well as dreams. 'A society without the freedom to dream is a dead or atrophying society' (Andrews 1984:46).

Legal attempts to define censorship are not only extremely difficult but are accompanied by the danger of handing over to the state the right to define what constitutes "sexuality". This usually

means the legitimization of heterosexuality in the context of the family, and the active repression of other forms of sexuality (particularly homosexuality). As King notes: 'The vast and complex body of the state is not neutral, but works along dearly patriarchal lines. It is therefore irrational to expect that same state to adopt feminist principles when dealing with sexual representation' (King, 1985:84).

This leads us into a closely associated issue - the question of the extent of the State's intrusion into the private sphere. Certainly, the so-called "moral majority" has given clear indication that its ambitions extend well beyond the regulation of homosexuality and videos. In the U.S. and Canada, legal prohibitions against pornography have been used against gay and sex education literature (Burstyn, 1985: 99-129). In the United Kingdom, the Video Recordings Act, aimed at video nasties, has been used in attempts to prevent the screening of the anti-nuclear film *The Day After*, anti- vivisection films, and birth control material. Such developments illustrate a central difficulty of imposing legal solutions on social problems - in this case ceding to the State the right to impose a particular definition of what constitutes sexuality in society. Nevertheless, New Zealand is currently adopting a legal response to video censorship, a response embodied in the Video Recordings Bill. This Bill sets up a procedure for determining whether- video recordings available for sale or hire to the public are indecent, and for ascribing a classification to such video recordings. The criteria to be used for determining whether a video recording is "indecent" are substantially the same as those under the Films Act, 1983, and the Bill establishes a Video Recordings Authority to examine and classify videos.

While legal solutions should not be neglected - the law represents one site of struggle - a purely legal approach does not go far in meeting the difficulties outlined here. A more desirable alternative to broadening legal attempts to control pornography would be to shift the parameters of the debate. As Burstyn puts a feminist alternative: 'The sexism inherent in so much pornography requires not the repressive response of censorship. Rather, we must make our own explorations of sexuality known throughout society.' She outlines constructive alternatives to both censorship and pornography, to giving concrete content to a strategy based on 'responsible pluralism in sexual life' (Burstyn, 1985:156-7). Such alternatives need to be developed here if we are not to cede to the State an important aspect of the production of cultural meanings.

In conclusion, the two case studies presented here illustrate how controversies over popular culture can be interpreted at two levels: dominating public discourse have been sets of concerns which, in the case of both comics and videos, have served to conceal more fundamental issues. Both episodes represented forms of moral panic, threatening middle class cultural hegemony and necessitating State intervention to reassert control over the culture.

## Notes

1. This case study is drawn from Roger Openshaw and Roy Shuker "'Worthless and indecent literature.' Comics and moral panic in early post-war New Zealand", *History of Education Review*, forthcoming. Detailed references to sources are provided therein.
2. This case study is abridged from Roy Shuker, "'Video Nasties': Censorship and the politics of popular culture", *New Zealand Sociology*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1986, pp. 64-73.

## References

- Andrews, Nigel. 1984. 'Nightmares and nasties'. In Barker, (ed). (1984) q. v., 39-47.
- Barker, Martin. (ed). 1984. *The Video Nasties, Freedom and Censorship in the Media*. Pluto, London.
- Barrowclough, Susan. 1982. 'Not a love story', *Screen*, 23(5) 9 November/December.
- Bart, Pauline and Jozsa, Margaret. 1980. 'Dirty books, dirty films and dirty data'. In Lederer, (ed). (1980). q.v.
- Benn, S I and Gaus, G F 1983. *Public and Private in Social Life*. Croom Helm, Beckenham.

- Bigsby, C.W.E., 1976. 'The politics of popular culture'. In C.W.E. Bigsby, (ed). *Approaches to Popular Culture*. Edward Arnold, London.
- Boggs, C. 1976. *Gramsci's Marxism*, Pluto Press, Oxford.
- Brody, S. 1977. *Screen Violence and Film Censorship - a Review of Research*. HMSO, London.
- Brown, Brian. 1984. 'Exactly what we wanted'. In Martin Darker. (ed). (1984). q.v. 68-87.
- Burstyn, Varda (ed). 1985. *Women Against Censorship*. Douglas E McIntyre, Vancouver. Esp. Appendix 1: Making sense of research on pornography'.
- Burstyn, Varda. 1985. 'Beyond despair: positive strategies'. In Burstyn. (ed). (1985). q.v.
- Campbell, Gordon. 1984. 'Videos and pornography'. *New Zealand Listener*. 10 November.
- Cohen, Stanley. 1980. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics. The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Martin Robertson, Oxford.
- Coward, Ros. 1982. 'Sexual violence and sexuality'. *Feminist Review*, No. 11, June.
- Dworkin, Andrea. 1981. *Pornography*. Women's Press, London.
- Faust, Beatrice. 1981. *Women, Sex and Pornography*. Penguin
- Griffin, Susan. 1981. *Pornography and Silence*. Women's Press, London
- Grixti, Joe. 1985. 'The controversy over "Mass Media Violence" and the study of behaviour'. *Educational Studies*. 11(1), 61-76.
- Horn, M. 1976. *World Encyclopedia of Comics*, Chelsea House, USA
- Insight. 1984. *Video Censorship*. Audiotape.
- King, Lyn. 1985. 'Censorship and law reform: Will changing the Jaws mean a change for the better?' In Burstyn. (ed). (1985). q.v.
- Lacombe, Dany. 1984. *Justice Policies and Justice Politics in the Canadian State: Pornography*. MA thesis, University of Toronto, Centre of Criminology.
- Lederer, L. 1980. *Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography*. Morrow, New York.
- Mort, Franko 1983. 'Sex, signification and pleasure'. In *Formations of Pleasure*. Journal., RKP, London, 36-43.
- Noble G. 1975. *Children in Front of the Small Screen*. Constable, London.
- Pearson, Geoffrey. 1983. *Hooligan. A History of Respectable Fears*. Macmillan, London.
- Petley, Julian, 1984. 'Two or three things I know about video nasties'. In BFI, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November. 350-352. This article is followed by a checklist of video nasties, compiled by Kim Newman.
- Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on the System of Dealing with Videotapes which may be Indecent.
- Scrutineer. 1985. 10(1), October. Video legislation: What DO we need?'
- Shuker, R. 1986. 'The State, Schooling and Hegemony', *SITES* 12, Autumn, pp. 15-28.
- Shuker, R. and Openshaw, R. "New Zealand Youth and the Silent Movies," *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, forthcoming.
- Simon, R. 1982. *Gramsci's Politics*, Lawrence & Wishart, London.
- SITES*. 1985. *A Journal for Radical Perspectives on Culture*. Editorial Policy, Issue No. 10, 2-3.
- Snitow, A. 1979. 'Mass market romance: pornography for women is different'. *Radical History Review*, No. 20, Spring/Summer. 141-161.
- Swingewood, Alan. 1977. *The Myth of Mass Culture*. MacMillan, London.
- Televiews. 1986 'VCR's. Friend not foe'. Issue 86/7, 24 February, 27-31. TVNZ Marketing Services, Wellington.
- Thornton, Neil. 1986. 'The Politics of Pornography - a Critique of Liberalism and Radical Feminism,' in *ANZJS*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp 3-24.
- Weeks, Jeffrey, 1981. *Sex, Politics and Society. The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*. Longman, London.
- Wertham, Frederick, 1955. *Seduction of the Innocent*, Museum Press, London. (1st published, U.S.A. 1953).
- Williams, Raymond. 1981. *Culture*. Fontana.
- Women Against Pornography*. undated. *It's About Time*. pamphlet.
- Yaffe, Maurice, 1979. 'Pornography: an updated review. 1972-1977. Report of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship. (Williams Report). HMSO, London. Appendix 5.
- Zillman, D and Bryant, J. 1982. 'Pornography, sexual callousness, and the trivialization of rape.' *Journal of Communications*, 32(4).