
Cable TV's Shame: 'Gore-nography'

By Al Goldstein

People who make pornography are accustomed to all sorts of calumny, from sneers to outright threats, a lot of it connected with the possibility of material intended only for adults falling into the hands of children. It makes no difference that I have always advocated strict control and absolute segregation of sexually explicit material; it is a well-known debate tactic to force an opponent to defend himself against crimes he has not committed, and the foes of the adult entertainment industry indulge in it regularly. But my opinion has never wavered: As a parent and a human being, I am against the sexualization of children, in all its aspects.

That is why I am shocked and angered by the programming of Home Box Office and Cinemax, cable television's most popular premium channels. In the sheep's disguise of entertainment, these channels are wolfishly exposing young children to gore and explicit violence by showing repulsive horror movies at a time when most children are awake and watching TV. HBO and Cinemax, owned by such a bulwark of American business as Time-Life Inc., are doing more damage to the ideals of innocence and childhood than the most radical fringes of the pornography industry.

The offense is so severe that a few examples will suffice. In the space of a few months, these films will have appeared in the 8 o'clock time slot, all featuring "adult language," "graphic violence" and/or "nudity": "First Blood," "Prom Night," "Psycho II," "Road Warrior," "Cujo" and "Amityville II." These films range from brutal "adventure dramas" to schlocky examples of "gore-nography," but they were all scheduled for prime time on either HBO or Cinemax.

Let us imagine a small child, his play or homework done, who plops down in front of the TV and flips it on to whatever channel it happens to be receiving. Natural enough — only the channel is on cable, and suddenly the child is confronted with shocking images of horror. In "Prom Night," a shard of glass is used to slash a woman's throat, and a decapitated head lodges in a pool of blood. "Road Warrior" features a brutal rape and a hand being cut off by a razor boomerang. And in "Psycho II," a butcher knife is pushed through a woman's mouth, to exit in the back of her head.

These images are sickening and upsetting even to an adult. For a small child they could cause permanent

psychological scars. The Motion Picture Association of America is seeking to address the problem of violence in films with the new PG-13 rating. Why aren't the premium cable channels also seeking to protect our children?

There is another aspect of the horror film, less obvious but just as pernicious. A typical image of these films is a woman crouching in abject terror, literally whimpering with fear as a killer stalks her. This says much about woman-as-victim, and in general I am certain that horror films are far more damaging representations of the female role in society than are porn films. In addition, pornography is ghettoized in certain sectors of the marketplace; one must actively and intentionally seek it out. Our imaginary child has done none of this — he simply flicked a switch in order to be assaulted with images more awful than those of the torture chambers of Torquemada.

It is hard to think of a TV executive so insulated, so removed from the imperatives of ordinary existence as to consider violent films suitable fare for children. Yes, there are disclaimers prominently displayed at the beginning of these programs but they do little to control who actually watches the show. Lock boxes, which effectively act like a lock on the liquor cabinet, should be a requisite feature in any home with cable and small children. But until they gain wider currency, programming is the only way this society has of keeping unsuitable material from children.

As a First Amendment absolutist, I cannot advocate any controls placed on cable TV or any punishment meted out to HBO for its irresponsibility. But what must be done is apparent: Change scheduling patterns so that unsuitable programs are simply unavailable to children at the times they are watching TV. I have no quibble at all with adults who feel they need to watch shows such as this, but the least they could do is wait until late at night.

I can hear the executives of HBO sneering already — something about the pot calling the kettle black. If you cannot attack the argument, you attack the arguer. "Midnight Blue," my own cable TV show, is clearly unsuitable for children, but it is not intended for them and is scheduled, as its name implies, after midnight. And perhaps it is a bit ironic for a man in my position attempting to dictate morals to HBO, Time-Life and the house that Luce built. But clearly, if we are to protect our children, something must be done.

Al Goldstein's "Midnight Blue" has been on cable television since 1975.
