

RE: Expert comment about censorship

From: [REDACTED] Hayward [REDACTED]
Sent: 19 May 2011 17:32:00
To: tom.sturrock@tntmagazine.com

Dear Mr. Sturrock,

Thank you for your message. I'm sending some thoughts on the subject. This is a personal view but I think our supporters would agree with most of it.

When something like the beheading in Tenerife happens, some people do not want to think that it was caused by human beings. They want some outside influence to have been at work. Five hundred years ago it would have been the devil, today it's the television or the computer. In this way people who knew the killer can persuade themselves that they had no responsibility for what he thought, felt and did. People who did not know him can persuade themselves that such a thing could never happen to them; they have not raised the devil nor watched violent fantasies on a screen.

The new explanation is just as superstitious and self-deceiving as the old. Most people in our time do not believe in the devil but some of them do believe that a machine can have evil intentions in and of itself. Inside many adult pro-censorship campaigners are small children, aged about six, who think that Nasty Things can crawl out of the TV or the computer and Get them. Unfortunately for us all the boogeyman exists only in their own minds and cannot be tamed by legislation.

The claim that watching violent fiction makes people behave violently in the real world is essential to the pro-censorship case and it is false. Unstable individuals went out and killed strangers in the street before film was invented. (How many violent movies had Jack the Ripper seen? None.) There is no cause and effect connection between people's choice of entertainment and how they behave towards real people in the real world. In fact, the connection is the other way round. People choose the films they watch, the computer games they play, because of the kind of people they already are. Personality determines choice, not choice personality, and personality has already begun to form before a baby can make sense of a picture. First-hand experience, not somebody else's imaginings, always comes first and lasts longer.

Soap opera storylines avoid successful suicides because the people who make and show them know that when people die in the same way as the screen character after the episode has been shown they will be blamed. The fact that the real-life suicides were already suffering from depression, had made previous attempts and may not even have watched that soap will be ignored. In the same way, the Tenerife headsman was known to have serious mental health problems but supporters of censorship are not bothered by that. They are not interested in preventing people being killed, they are interested in preventing images of killing appearing on screen. Of course mental illness may blur the line between fantasy and reality but that does not mean that the entire population should be treated as though it could not tell the difference. That is what the would-be censors want to do.

People who claim that they were influenced by violent fiction to the point of violence in the real world are either mentally impaired or lying. People who make that claim on someone else's behalf are either promoting their own agenda, getting paid for it (in court, for example) or both. That agenda is censorship. Supporters of censorship are willing to exploit real-life murders, rapes and suicides for their own ends; they are trying to protect themselves from something unreal.

Most people outgrow the boogeyman. Most people know the difference between fact and fiction and should not be treated as though they did not. Even if it could be proved that a small number of already damaged individuals could be influenced by violent fiction - and often it cannot even be proved that a particular individual had seen a particular film - what about the rest of us? We should be free to choose. Censorship is wrong because it restricts our freedom to explore, to imagine, even to think. It is not only wrong, it is futile. Even the most repressed societies could not and cannot control what people think. Even in those societies events like the one in Tenerife can still take place because in practice people's choice of films to watch does not decide what they do. When such events happen there will be an urge to blame something other than those involved. Pro-censorship campaigners will exploit the event and the urge for their own purpose. They will never be satisfied, because the enemy they are attacking is inside their own minds. They have no right to inflict their fears on everyone else.

If there is anything here that you want to discuss please e-mail again. This will be more efficient than trying to reach me by phone

- I'm supposing that you have a deadline and at the weekend there may be nobody available.

Yours,
Mary Hayward
(Hon.Secretary, CAC)