TV's real message is sexploitation

By ELIZABETH KRISTOL

In the last seven weeks, I have witnessed five women being beaten and raped. In the last couple of years, I have seen a dozen or more similar incidents. I don't live in a particularly bad neighborhood, I just watch a lot of television.

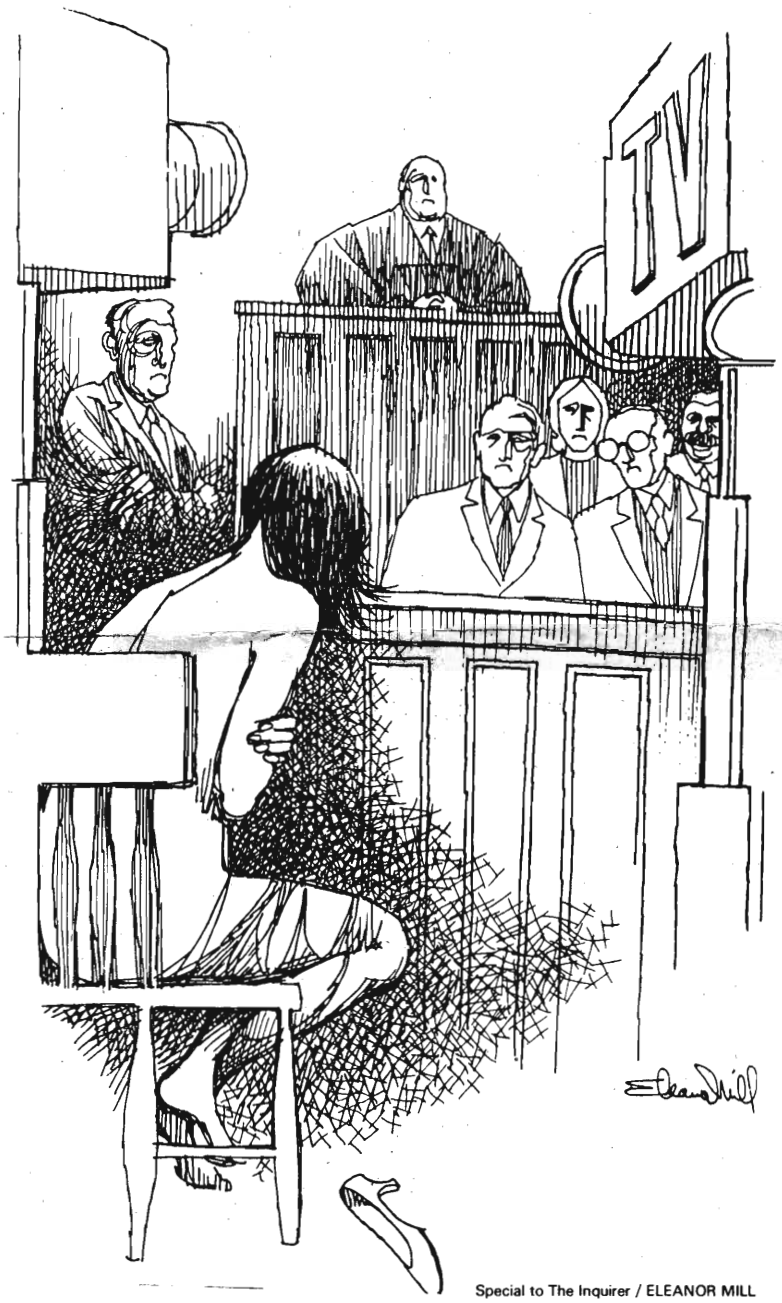
Sexploitation on television is nothing new. Nor are TV serial and after-school specials that deal with difficult subjects like rape and domestic violence. In an unfortunate turn of events, these have become a staple of the made-for-TV movie (*The Burning Bed*, starring Farrah Fawcett, has become a classic of this type). These movies are often promoted as representing the interests of women, and many networks follow the broadcast with phone numbers of social service agencies, hot lines and counseling groups. Public-interest packaging aside, these movies are easily recognized for the ratings-chasing TV fare they are.

There is nothing wrong with trying to boost ratings, and it is certainly no sin to insult viewers' intelligence; it is quite another matter to bombard them with degrading and exploitative material.

There are two convincing pieces of evidence that the makers of these movies haven't the slightest interest in dealing with issues, and have a very large interest in titillation:

- The victim is always gorgeous. Since, in truth, many homely women are sexually assaulted, and most abused wives do not resemble Farrah Fawcett, one must assume the producers feel it will be more "pleasing" to watch a beautiful woman be beaten or raped.
- The actual assault scene is usually slowly and graphically — I am tempted to say lovingly — depicted, even though these crude details have absolutely no bearing on the larger issues that are allegedly being addressed.

What are these larger issues? *Cry for Help: The Tracey Thurman Story* (Oct. 2, NBC) professed to concern itself with the inadequacies of the police and legal system in dealing with domestic violence cases. *Settle the Score* (Oct. 30, NBC) professed to expose the narrow-mindedness of rural America. *When He's Not a Stranger* (Nov. 6, CBS) professed to examine the difficulties in prosecuting cases of acquaintance rape. *Cross of Fire* (Nov. 5-6, NBC) professed to describe the rise and fall of the Ku Klux Klan. *Cast the First Stone* (Nov. 13, NBC) professed to show how organized religion fosters sexual intolerance.



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What were the most memorable aspects of these movies? *Cry for Help* showed numerous graphic assaults, culminating in a scene in which the ex-husband stabs his former wife, slits her throat, and kicks her savagely as she lies bleeding on the ground.

Settle the Score, in which a woman is raped by — extra sexploitation points here — her brother, showed numerous flashbacks to the victim's struggle, with close-ups of her flailing hands, bound at the wrists with thick rope (the justification for this repetition presumably being that raped victims continually relive the horror).

When He's Not a Stranger showed a college football hero pin an attractive co-ed to the bed; a close-up revealed him pulling down her panties and beginning to unzip his trousers. Depicting such minor technical details can hardly serve an educational function, except perhaps for children who may be watching (9 p.m. isn't that late.)

The two-part *Cross of Fire* used the Klan as a vague backdrop for a psychopath's repeated sexual assaults on a naive and virtuous heroine. No details were spared: Viewers learned exactly how much the victim bled on the bathroom floor and precisely where on her body she was bitten (as one would expect from a movie of this sort, pretty much everywhere).

Cast the First Stone derived its salaciousness not from a graphic depiction of the rape, but in the viewer's knowledge of the irrefutable purity of the victim: She had recently left a convent and was a self-proclaimed virgin, who unfortunately had a habit of picking up hitchhikers.

What compounds the inherent offensiveness of these movies is the veneer of public respectability they have managed to achieve in the media — as if to depict brutality in a realistic manner is, in and of itself, a public good.

There are real social and legal issues surrounding the abuse of women. These issues are dealt with, competently and responsibly, in women's magazines. The tremendous range of magazines ensures that articles on these subjects are read by women of all ages, races and economic groups. As opposed to TV, these articles are reaching those who have a genuine need to know — as opposed to a prurient desire to watch.

To posit, for a fleeting moment, that any of these movies bears a useful public message, just what would that message be? That it is wrong to rape, brutalize or commit incest. Is such a message really edifying? Are there really competing forces out there who are arguing the virtues of such behavior?

Only in Hollywood, it would seem.

Elizabeth Kristol is a free-lance writer. She wrote this for the Washington Post.