File name = SP/NATION

FROM: FLG
DATE: 08/12/88 5:28 P.M.
RE: Attack from the Left!?

TO: CI-villains
I gather (haven't seen it yet) that the current issue of the NATION contains an attack on GG, LG and NS (somehow MJM escaped) for our 'mean-world' and tv violence work. From what I'm told the point combines philistine anti-social science-ism with some degree of misunderstanding/misstatement of our views. We should probably reply -- briefly -- and I would encourage those who aren't about to leave for Barbados to draft a letter, which I will gladly work on when I return next weekend.
Larry
FROM: NTMAIL
DATE: 08/13/88 6:30 P.M.
RE: NATION

From: Foola@UMASS.BITNET
Subject: NATION
To: FGG@ASC.UPENN.EDU
Posted-Date: Sat, 13 Aug 88 12:23:11 EDT
Message-Id: <8808131222397AD.BECT@Mars.UCC.UMass.EDU> (UMass-Mailer 4.04)

Folks, I've seen the NATION article, and it strikes me as a People Magazine version of Rowland's 'Politics of TV Violence' book, and about ten years behind the times.

A short and sweet response is a good idea and will not be too difficult. The only problem might be that most of his criticisms of most violence research -- excepting, of course, ours -- is quite valid and right on target, so we should be careful not to come off sounding holier-than-thou. Michael

cc: gg, lg

"The Mean Machine" by Robert Pattison (August 13/20, 1988) concludes that "The question 'What does television do to us?' has yet to be asked properly, much less answered intelligently. Which makes it one of the best questions around." Too bad that Pattison was unable to either formulate the question properly or address it intelligently. His careless and flippant rambling only adds to the confusion.

Pattison's essay is a tabloid version of the obfuscation that broadcast industry flacks and media apologists have been putting out for many years.
His preference for anecdote and polemic over systematic and sustained study represents the all-too-familiar trendy retreat from reason and evidence in social and cultural policy debates.

Pattison ignores elementary distinctions in media research. He presents sensational news stories of imitative mayhem, a survey by GLAMOUR magazine, Senator Paul Simon's bill to exempt broadcasters from the threat of anti-trust prosecution if they reduce violence, the thousands of studies reviewed by the National Institute of Mental Health, and a ~~made-up~~ story of a questionnaire in a classroom as somehow related to each other and to some hidden agenda by social scientists and legislators to claim that commercial culture is not perfect and, therefore, according to Pattison, to take over control themselves. Typical of the documentation of this bizarre view is the lengthy description of a bloodcurdling crime plot,

followed by the revelation that "no social scientist will include this miniseries in his Violence Profile" because it's on PBS and "Nice people watch PBS, and by definition nice people do not confuse television with reality."

The confusion is compounded by seriously asking if there is a difference between the total symbolic environment and daily mass ritual of television and the more selectively used medium of books and even visiting museums! But the most surprising howler for an author who presumes to be a media analyst and critic of social science research is his inverted caricature of our own work -- the only one he cites by name (and the wrong name, at that). Our Cultural Indicators project has been studying television content and the pervasive consequences of long term exposure (not individual imitations) for nearly 20 years. We have developed and are continuing to test some theories about the dynamics of television and its contribution to public thinking, behavior, and policy. Pattison neither cites our formulation of his "good question" nor our attempt to answer it. More importantly, he does not seem to be aware of the fact that our approach, findings, and interpretations are very different from (and in fact challenge) the conventional assumptions about television violence that Pattison rightly (if incoherently) criticizes.

The "mean world syndrome" (not Pattison's "Index") is one of these hypotheses. It means that, instead of acting out what they see on the tube, heavy viewers of violence-laden television tend to be a bit more insecure and mistrustful than lighter viewers in comparable subgroups. Pattison both misstates the facts and misses the point when he writes that we "begin with the assumption that the medium makes the world a mean place and, not surprisingly,...end with the conclusion that the world is a mean place because of television." In fact, we have concluded no such thing. We have reached our conclusion about the slightly but pervasively higher insecurity of the heavy viewer after wide exploration of response patterns to many questions derived from the potential "lessons" of long-term exposure to television. These patterns revealed NOT that "the world is a mean place" but that the repetitive features of television exposure do make systematic and independent contributions to viewers' conceptions of social reality -- findings that Pattison either does not know or ignores in his effort to put our research in the simplistic categories that suit his purposes.

Our research demonstrates that television can function as an instrument of social control. Confusing and deflecting systematic scrutiny of that critical function can only serve to absolve of responsibility those who in fact control the medium for often narrow marketing purposes -- about which Pattison has nothing but apologetics to offer. It's bad enough to see such mush in the commercial press, but a real shocker to find it in the NATION.

August 22, 1988

The Editor
The Nation
72 Fifth Ave
New York, NY 10011

To the Editor:

"The Mean Machine?" by Robert Pattison (August 13/20, 1988) concludes that "The question 'What does television do to us?' has yet to be asked properly, much less answered intelligently. Which makes it one of the best questions around." Too bad that Pattison was unable to either formulate the question properly or address it intelligently. His careless and flippant rambling only adds to the confusion.

Pattison's essay is a tabloid version of the obfuscation that broadcast industry flacks and media apologists have been putting out for years. Ignoring elementary distinctions in media research, he mixes a sensational story of imitative mayhem, a GLAMOUR magazine survey about aggression (not violence!), Senator Paul Simon's bill to exempt broadcasters from the threat of anti-trust prosecution if they reduced TV violence, and the massive 1982 report of the National Institute of Mental Health on "Television and Behavior" (without noting its title, or that only a small portion of the report deals with violence). He interprets the latter's review of thousands of studies on a wide range of social behavior as "no more then a scholarly endorsement" of his own version of tabloid sensationalism. In Pattison's view all these things are somehow related to a "thriving industry" that "social scientists have built...around television violence" (in fact, few social scientists study TV violence anymore), and to some hidden agenda by social scientists and legislators to allege that commercial culture is not perfect and to take over control themselves. Typical of the documentation offered for this bizarre view is the lengthy description of a bloodcurdling crime plot, followed by the revelation that "no social scientist will include this miniseries in his Violence Profile" because it's on PBS and "Nice people watch PBS, and by definition nice people do not confuse television with reality."

Pattison's confusion of his fantasy of media research with its reality is evident when he seriously asks if there really is a difference between the effects of exposure to television (which is a mass ritual), and reading a book (which is a more selective activity) and even visiting a museum.

But most surprising for an author who presumes to be a media analyst and critic of social science research is his inverted caricature of our own work -- the only one he cites by name (and the wrong name, at that). Our Cultural Indicators project has been studying television content and the pervasive consequences of long term exposure (not individual imitations) for nearly 20 years. We have developed and are continuing to test theories about the dynamics of television and its contribution to public thinking, behavior, and policy. Pattison cites

neither our formulation of his "good question" nor our attempt to answer it. More importantly, he does not seem to be aware of the fact that our approach, findings, and interpretations are very different from (and in fact challenge) the conventional assumptions about television violence that Pattison rightly (if incoherently) criticizes.

The "mean world syndrome" (not Pattison's "Index") is one of these hypotheses. It means that, instead of acting out what they see on the tube, heavy viewers of violence-laden television tend to be a bit more insecure and mistrustful than otherwise demographically similar lighter viewers. Pattison both misstates the facts and misses the point when he writes that we "begin with the assumption that the medium makes the world a mean place and, not surprisingly,...end with the conclusion that the world is a mean place because of television." We have concluded no such thing. We have reached our conclusion about the slightly but pervasively higher insecurity of the heavy viewer after wide exploration of response patterns to many questions derived from the potential "lessons" of long-term exposure to television. These patterns revealed NOT that "the world is a mean place" but that the repetitive features of television exposure do make systematic contributions to viewers' conceptions of social reality -- findings that Pattison either does not know or ignores in his effort to put our research in the simplistic categories that suit his purposes.

Our research demonstrates, among many other things, that television does cultivate common conceptions of life among otherwise diverse groups of viewers and that some of these common conceptions can strengthen a sense of insecurity, dependence, and vulnerability, especially in women and minority groups. This is the essence of the "mean world syndrome" and not Pattison's feverish fantasy of some "mean machine." It means that television can and often does function as an instrument of social control. Confusing and deflecting systematic scrutiny of that central function of television can only serve to absolve of responsibility those who in fact control the medium for often narrow marketing purposes -- about which Pattison has nothing but apologetics to offer.

Sincerely,

George Gerbner
University of Pennsylvania

Michael Morgan
University of Massachusetts

Larry Gross
University of Pennsylvania

Nancy Signorielli
University of Delaware

George, I don't know if you've seen this, Carl

plined as were that good physicist's own. I could, I suppose, find grounds on which to criticize the book. The "philosophy of science" sections sometimes seem a bit confused—which is to say that they are confused in a different way than is my own philosophy of science. So many different ideas are investigated that their interrelationship is not always made entirely clear. But if it is sometimes jumbled, so is its subject, for this is a young and furiously growing endeavor and a long way, one hopes, from being frozen in amber.

The Dreams of Reason is, as the mathematicians say about the weather, "unsimulatable"; it stands as its own most efficient analogue, and as an apt monument to Heinz Pagels's warmth and vitality and extraordinary intellectual curiosity. To read it is to nourish that hope for the efficacy of rational thought and ethical values without which our futures are lost. □

The Mean Machine?

ROBERT PATTISON

Bryan Tucker is such stuff as Tipper Gore's dreams are made of. Earlier this year, as Ms. Gore was inveighing against television's "graphic violence" on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*, the tabloid *Weekly World News* was reporting that 12-year-old Bryan of Hollywood, Florida, had set himself ablaze while imitating his favorite Mötley Crüe video. "He thought it was fantasy and nothing would happen," explained the local fire inspector.

Bryan's hallucinations confirm what most Americans consider gospel: that television violence makes viewers violent. In a survey of *Glamour* readers, 88 percent of the respondents thought that violence on TV encourages aggression in children. In the Senate, Paul Simon is the champion of a perennial bill to give the entertainment industry an exemption from the antitrust laws. Under his legislation, media chieftains could combine to suppress televised mayhem. His bill is endorsed by the national Parent-Teachers' Association, the American Association of Pediatrics and the American Psychiatric Association.

Meanwhile, social scientists have built a thriving industry around televised violence. Senator Simon, an avid student of this vast literature, can find only one study that disputes the link between televised violence and real-life aggression.

The near universal outrage about TV violence masks larger questions: What is the connection between what we see on television and what we do in life? If there is a connection, is it different from the connection between reading a book or visiting a museum and the rest of our behavior? If so, is this a difference of kind or of degree?

In the popular press and academic journals alike, these complex questions are customarily reduced to the simple equation of televised violence and social malaise. The National Institute of Mental Health's conclusion that there is a "causal relationship between televised violence and later aggressive behavior" is no more than a scholarly endorsement of the *Weekly World News*'s view that Bryan Tucker was the victim of television's reality warp. The scholarly studies that substantiate this charge purport to tell us something fundamental and disturbing about television and behavior. Since 98 percent of American homes have TV sets, each of which is turned on an average of six hours a day, these claims matter, and the studies that make them ought to withstand the closest scrutiny of their methods, their premises and their motives. They ought to, but they don't.

Twenty children sit in a classroom. A stranger appears and announces, "We are going to ask you to do a number of things for us today. These things are not tests. We just want to know how you feel about some things." Then the children respond on a sheet of paper to questions like, "Are your daydreams about things and people that could never really happen, like monsters or fairies or men from outer space?"

Of course the stranger is lying. The questions *are* a test. Each answer tests aspects of the child's personality. If the child answers "A lot" to the question about monsters, he is ranked high on the "scary" scale; a "No" to the question, "Did you ever have a whole special pretend world with lots of people or animals?" earns a low score on the "intellectual" scale.

Even children—perhaps especially chil-

Robert Pattison is the author of The Triumph of Vulgarity *(Oxford University Press).*

dren—can see through these attempts at incrimination, and the results that emerge from such a survey can never be more accurate than the reductive view of human nature on which they are built.

Studies of TV's influence on behavior are equally defective in their premises. They begin with the assumption that the medium makes the world a mean place and, not surprisingly, they end with the conclusion that the world is a mean place because of television. Reputations have been built on this tautology. A leading group in communication studies—George Gerbner, Larry Gross and Nancy Signorelli of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania—support their scientific conclusions about the baleful influence of television by reference to a "Violence Profile" and a "Mean World Index," both their own inventions. The first of these simply quantifies televised mayhem on the major networks' prime-time programs. It even provides a killer:killed ratio. The second is a running survey of American dyspepsia. Taken together, the Violence Profile and the Mean World Index demonstrate that the number of corpses on *Miami Vice* is positively correlated with the number of citizens who believe that "most people are just looking out for themselves." This kind of research sets out looking for meanness and violence and not surprisingly, it finds them. Since the conclusions of such studies are inherent in their premises, the results are worthless.

Media students pay lip service to television's potential for good, but their chief delight lies in demonstrating its evil. They have yet to devise a "Kindness Profile" to count the number of hugs exchanged on *The Cosby Show* or a "Clean World Index" to measure the number of citizens who believe in the fundamental decency of the human race. The correlation of a Kindness Profile and a Clean World Index might well indicate that television has ushered in a new age of altruism, but we are never likely to hear about it from the social scientists, who begin their inquiries with two unwarranted assumptions: that television does influence behavior, and that its influence is generally bad.

On close examination, studies of television are not intended to demonstrate causal connections between media and behavior. These connections are assumed from the start. Their aim is political, as a moment's glance at Saturday night prime-time TV and its critics will demonstrate.

Take, for instance, a certain nationally televised miniseries shown this spring, which featured a dissolute drug lord who smothered an old lady, suffocated a priest, hanged an innocent nurse and liquidated one of his own associates, pumping two extra slugs into his victim's lifeless chest for good measure. This series was not squeamish in displaying its corpses, and viewers were also treated to incidents of arson, adultery, homosexual intrigue and dope-dealing, as well as a shot of a wheelchair-bound invalid hurtling to his death from the top of a rocky precipice. The hero of this lurid saga was, moreover, a rigid and inflexible cop whose emotional impotence was more chilling than the atmosphere of decadence in which he moved.

This is the kind of fare that ought to send the Mean World Index rocketing into hyperspace. But no social scientist will include this miniseries in his Violence Profile, because its hero is righteous Inspector Dalgliesh of P.D. James's *The Black Tower*, a recent offering from Public Broadcasting's *Mystery!*, a series with very strong appeal among PBS's upscale audience.

Nice people watch PBS, and by definition nice people do not confuse television with reality. It's the programs that nice people do not watch on Saturday night—the kind of programs that run opposite *Mystery!* on the commercial networks—that critics denounce for their aggression and moral bankruptcy. According to the Arbitron overnight ratings, while *The Black Tower* was taking a 5 percent share of all sets switched on in the New York market, CBS's *Tour of Duty*, NBC's *Hunter*, ABC's *Ohara* and the Fox network's *Dirty Dozen* took the bulk of the Saturday night audience, a 51 percent share among them. On *Tour of Duty*, G.I. twins from California battled each other and the North Vietnamese to make the world safe for democracy. On NBC, Hunter investigated the suspicious defenestration of a beautiful mythomaniac and exculpated a falsely accused Las Vegas lounge lizard. On ABC, detective Ohara discovered that the escaped criminal he was trailing was in fact the innocent victim of a corrupt policeman, and by 10 o'clock the felonious cop was behind bars. Meanwhile, Fox's Dirty Dozen collaborated with a tribe of middle-European gypsies to exterminate a German general.

The commercial shows featured much brandishing of weaponry and bursts of gunfire, eventuating in the death of various Fascists and other uniformed ban-

dits, but even the briefest summary of these plots cannot conceal the irreverent and carefully crafted silliness with which their violence is presented. The streak of good-natured low comedy that runs through prime-time aggression, reaching its acme in Sonny Crockett's pet alligator, Elvis, makes the scientific conception of these shows as reservoirs of meanness seem an almost sublime compliment.

Compare this genial confection of armed absurdities with the moral poverty offered up by PBS. Strictly in terms of casualties, the PBS miniseries outdid the commercial programs; nor can it claim an exemption from censure on the grounds of superior moral or aesthetic values, unless a chorus of English accents automatically elevates any television show beyond good and evil. All the characters in *The Black Tower* were cynical, malevolent or decrepit, with the exception of the villain, whose crime seems to have been that he liked to have a good time, apparently an unforgivable sin in P.D. James's Britain. At least viewers of the commercial networks would have seen valor in action or justice vindicated.

According to the prevailing standards, the wholesale slaughter of British eccentrics cannot qualify as violence, because no matter how perverse the action on *Mystery!* may be, no one believes that it is responsible for the subsequent behavior of its viewers. If televised versions of P.D. James's stories account for aggressive behavior in the aisles of Bloomingdale's, the social scientists have not noticed. In the world of media studies, it's assumed there is no relationship between the behavior of nice people and their television viewing habits. Such a relation only obtains between mass audiences and mass programming.

What the critics really object to in TV programming is not its violence but its popularity. Arguments about TV violence are usually veiled attacks on the commercialism of the entertainment industry. The media scholars pursue traditional political objectives under the guise of high-tech scholarship. And this explains why so many media studies are about the dire effects of television on children. Media studies use children as a metaphor for the rest of us. The idea is that the mind of the mass audience is essentially a child's mind: immature, irrational and impressionable.

When its claims to scientific objectivity have been exposed, the greater part of media research emerges as a political lobby campaigning on the platform that ordinary people are unfit to make sensible moral and aesthetic judgments, which ought to be left to their intellectual betters. Small wonder that media scholars display such unanimity of opinion and that senators concur so readily in their conclusions. The premise of the whole enterprise is that the power of the tube would best be wielded by academics and legislators. This may or may not be correct political theory; it is fatal to learning anything objective about television.

But the monumental fatuity of media studies unintentionally establishes a few truths. First, it demonstrates that most television criticism is only incidentally about television at all. It's really about the social or moral content of what appears on television. The critics hate cop shows because they reflect society's violence, sitcoms because they reflect society's frivolity and game shows because they reflect society's materialism. For the media critics, TV is a ubiquitous lens that magnifies every social evil. Most television scholarship is no more about television than bacteriology is about microscopes. They're both about what lies on the other side of the lens.

Second, these media studies point out the awesome difficulty of saying anything that is uniquely true of television and at the same time universal in application. "Television promotes violence." Is that true only of television? Couldn't the same statement be made about books or movies, and for the same reasons? Does television promote violence everywhere? In Mongolia just as much as in Florida? Is there any statement about television that could not be dismantled in much the same way? The question "What does television do to us?" has yet to be asked properly, much less answered intelligently. Which makes it one of the best questions around. □

FILMS.

STUART KLAWANS

Saved!

In the year 373, the Emperors Valens and Valentinian ordered the destruction of all books of magic in their domains. Since the term "magic" was broadly construed, much of the learning and literature of the Roman Empire went up in flames. No one can know what was lost to posterity then, or say what treasures the Alexandrian library might have held. Book-burnings in our own day have been less devastating in their results—Gutenberg made it harder to extirpate texts—but we still look on such events with proper revulsion, even though the damage may be more symbolic than real. The book, we feel, is the body of our history and thought.

Unfortunately, we lack a similar respect for the medium that has embodied our own century's history. Motion pictures are industrial products—technologically complex, economically profitable, popular beyond the dreams of Dickens himself—so we never think of them with the reverence we afford books, and rarely imagine that they could be endangered. Yet more than half of the films made before 1950 have vanished. In fact, *every* film from that period will inevitably self-destruct unless someone takes the trouble to save it.

During the movies' first half-century, all films were made on a nitrate-based stock, which yielded beautiful, shimmering images. The stock also reacted chemically with air, producing nitric acid. In other words, the films ate themselves. It wasn't until the late 1940s that researchers invented the stable, triacetate stock that is now universally in use; and by then, much of the damage had been done. Thousands of films had been lost: features, short subjects, newsreels, actualities footage, an Alexandrian library's worth of historical documents and works of the imagination. Today, almost forty years after the invention of safety stock, the situation is not much better. While films literally turn to dust, the world's archives struggle to come up with the money to rescue what they can. The simplest preservation job, transferring a black-and-white feature from nitrate to safety stock, costs $10,000 to $12,000. If the film has to be restored in