

Seen But Not Heard:

Pop Culture Scapegoats and the Media Discourse Hierarchy

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- 1 There are certain discourses operating in contemporary western culture that are granted tremendous power and authority to speak about those issues that cut across the racial, class, and gender boundaries of a culture. Life, death and politics are all central and legitimate categories for the discourses generated by media institutions. As we slide from the 'factual' realm (which the news media is taken to represent) into the fictional, the authority to speak of these categories steadily declines. Certain films and television dramas have this legitimacy, provided that they retain a certain verisimilitude that is seen as factual. A bit further down this scale are sitcoms. Sitcoms are often criticised when they attempt to shift the comedic tone into a moralising one -- or as in the case of [Ally McBeal](#), attempts at covering serious topics are trivialised by media hype about the lead character's skirt length.
- 2 At the very bottom of this discursive scale come adventure stories -- fantasy and action films and television shows, frequently targeted and marketed to teenagers and young adults. Regardless of content, these texts are the focus of continual derision and contempt for the representational strategies that they employ to address the issues named above.
- 3 Despite this contempt, these subordinate texts and discourses are paradoxically also granted a good deal of causative power. Moral outrage invariably turns to violent and fantastic media as a cause whenever horrific violence is committed in real life. The most clear and shocking example of course have been the recent [high school shootings in Littleton](#), Colorado, and what follows is a brief case study of the discursive hierarchy in operation in North American media cultures.
- 4 The news media, in [covering the shootings](#), had what appeared to be utterly free and unquestioned access to investigate, examine, and even influence the situation as it happened. Reporters were on the scene, as usual, asking painfully obvious questions of the traumatised teachers and students. It was not until some time later that slightly bemused mutterings were heard from the police forces that, for instance, a local television station had somewhat overstepped its poorly defined boundaries when it broadcast the frantic telephone calls of a student trapped in the school while the killers were still at large.
- 5 Following the factual reports, the desperate search for causation began. And the usual suspects were rounded up with considerable haste. The killers played [Doom](#) and other video games to improve their sharp-shooting abilities. The Gothic-industrial music of [Marilyn Manson](#) and [KMFDM](#) filled them with hatred for all humanity. Surfing the 'net had sapped their social skills. Wearing black trench coats had overheated their brains and made them want to be more like Keanu Reeves in [The Matrix](#).
- 6 Or perhaps not. Interviews with survivors and evidence gathered by police seemed to suggest that the motivational triggers were to be found in the two killers' social environment. The boys' diaries revealed their rage at the alienation and bullying they suffered at the hands of the school's elite jock culture. And yet such findings are almost completely ignored in the discourses of gossip and current affairs analysis. It's as if space to interpret and interrogate the evidence isn't available in the discourses used to represent this event.
- 7 In a move clearly inspired by the cascading moral panic, the [Warner Brothers](#) network in the US removed several episodes of their hit show, [Buffy the Vampire Slayer](#) from the schedules. The network made the claim that the episodes, depicting armed teenagers fighting demons on a high school campus, were pulled because of sensitivity to the grief of the bereaved families. I find it suggestive that, while the Buffy episodes were pulled outright, a police drama on the same network is merely being placed under greater executive scrutiny.
- 8 It's obviously inadequate from a cultural studies perspective to locate the reasons for these events purely in the discourse of moral panic in the USA. It's time, then, to take a closer look at the processes and conditions that structure the media hierarchy.
- 9 Network news programmes employ a range of signification systems designed to embody certain values; authority, credibility and responsibility. These systems are frequently expressed in the production values of the programmes, and the businesslike, middle class (and middle-aged), appearance of the presenters. Any correspondence of these values with the actual production practices employed by the programmes is increasingly accidental in a market driven and structured by insatiable demands for entertainment over knowledge. This of course was clearly seen in the thirst for spectacle that accompanied the initial reports from the Columbine massacre.
- 10 Popular drama shows that are based on a science fictional or fantasy premise, and are geared towards teenagers and young adults, typically have no access to those signifiers of high status. The concerns that they deal with are marginalised and representations of them in the wider media focus on their violent content and supposed ludicrousness of the situations depicted. And so a TV show which shows violence but is always careful to also depict the emotional consequences of violence, is trivialised and scapegoated because it employs a different discourse of realism than a news

broadcast operating almost purely in the register of spectacle (self-important moralising aside).

¹¹ Clearly the triggers for violence, especially of the kind that prompted this media panic, are many and interact in complex ways. What is not clear is that the popular culture texts discussed are in any way prominent as triggers. The fact that they are represented as such in the news media and the discourses of common-sense indicates a tremendous anxiety at work. This anxiety seems to frequently congeal around fantasy texts. Images of the fantastic disrupts the hierarchy of realist discourses that order and regulate the media and must be continually subjected to disavowal and dismissal. Perhaps, then, real violence can only be seen in these terms as a pretext for this process.

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