



VIEW MASTERS

The audience's power over media's message

by Nick Gillespie

Sad but true story: When I was in the fourth grade, some well-meaning teachers arranged a special viewing of the movie *Charly*, which had been released a few years earlier. Based on the novella *Flowers for Algernon*, the film tells the story of a mildly retarded man named Charly Gordon who, through an experimental surgical procedure, becomes a prodigious intellect. The beneficial effects, however, turn out to be temporary and Charly eventually reverts back to his original level of intelligence—tragically conscious of the enfeebling of his own mind. It's a good story, well told and well acted (Cliff Robertson won an Academy Award for the title role).

Although my teachers had no reason to believe we were a particularly mean-spirited crew to begin with, they figured, I assume, that the movie would inculcate a sense of sympathy so that we would be more sensitive to mentally impaired individuals. We walked away from the theater having learned quite a different lesson, though.

During the film, whenever Charly's co-workers (who *are* a mean-spirited crew) make a mistake, they inevitably quip, "I pulled a Charly Gordon." The day after we saw the movie, a student knocked over a display in the back of a classroom and, as the teacher began to upbraid him, he turned his palms outward and shrugged. "I pulled a Charly Gordon," he explained as the class erupted into laughter. By the end of the day, the phrase had become a ubiquitous defense for any and all manner of goof-up, mistake, or academic error. And for weeks after, kids—boys and girls, teachers' pets and class cut-ups—hurled the epithet *Charly Gordon* as an all-purpose in-

vective. Every time the teachers heard the phrase, you could see them grit their teeth and shake their heads—they had no one to blame but themselves.

Besides the self-evident truth that children like to disappoint their elders, there's a larger point to this story, one that bears on the recent and seemingly endless attempts to police popular culture: *The audience has a mind of its own*. Individuals sitting in a theater, or watching television, or listening to a CD don't always see and hear things the way they're "supposed" to.

Consider TV, for instance. "People talk at it, through it, and around it," observes Constance Penley, a professor of film and women's studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who has extensively studied "fan" communities. The one thing they *don't* do is merely absorb it, notes Penley, one of a growing number of scholars who stress the audience's role in constructing meaning and value in popular culture. Such media analysts say that consumers of popular culture are not that different from consumers of, say, food and clothing—that is, they are engaged, knowledgeable, discriminating, and self-interested.

That would be news to most participants in the public debate over depictions of sex and violence in movies, TV, and music. Liberals and conservatives are as tight as Beavis and Butt-head in agreeing that consumers of popular culture—the very people who make it popular—are little more than tools of the trade. Joe Sixpack and Sally Baglunch—you and I—aren't characters in this script. Just like TV sets or radios, we are dumb receivers that simply transmit whatever is broadcast to us. We do not look at movie screens; we *are* movie screens, and Hollywood merely projects morality—good, bad, or indifferent—onto us.

"We have reached the point where our popular culture threatens to undermine our character as a nation," Bob Dole thundered last summer in denouncing "nightmares of depravity" and calling for movies that promote "family values." "Bob Dole is a dope," responded actor-director Rob Reiner, a self-described liberal activist. Fair enough, but it apparently takes one to know one: "Hollywood should not be making



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exploitive violent and exploitive sex films. I think we have a responsibility [to viewers] not to poison their souls," continued Reiner, who rose to prominence playing the role of Meathead on *All in the Family*.

Token antagonism, then, belies fundamental agreement: Pop culture can undermine (or, implicitly, ennoble) our character; movies can poison (or save) our souls. There is no sense that the ticket-buying public might have a say in the matter, that we might be responsible for our own damnation. Indeed, one of the most striking characteristics of the continuing public discussion regarding popular culture is the eerie sense of solidarity between feuding politicians and players. Scratch the surface and everyone from Bill Clinton to Charlton Heston, Newt Gingrich to Chevy Chase, Janet Reno to Sally Field, agrees: Movies, music, and TV should be the moral equivalent of a high colonic, Sunday school every damn day of the week.

This isn't to suggest that popular culture has no effect on how we think, feel, or act, that we exist somehow forever and apart from what we watch and listen to. But the interplay between pop and its audience is far more complicated than most of its critics acknowledge. It's not just that people such as Bob Dole, who admitted that he hadn't even seen the movies he criticized, and William Bennett, who has most recently lambasted daytime talk shows, don't have a solid working knowledge of popular culture. Even more important, they don't understand the *experience* of interacting with pop culture, of how individuals react, respond, and revise what they see and hear.

Of course, it is hardly surprising that denizens of Washington and Tinseltown frame the debate so that all interpretive power resides with would-be government regulators and entertainment industry types. Clearly, it makes sense for them to conceptualize popular culture as a top-down affair, one best dealt with by broadcasters and bureaucrats. This consensus, however, has implications far beyond the well-worn notion that entertainment should be properly didactic.

Because it assumes that the viewer, the listener, or the audience member is a passive receiver of popular culture, this consensus must inevitably result in calls for regulation by the government (such as the V-chip, which is part of both the House and Senate telecommunications bills) or paternalism by producers ("More and more we're tending toward all-audience films...that have civic values in them," Motion Picture Association of America head Jack Valenti told the *Los Angeles Times*). The viewer simply can't be trusted to handle difficult, sensitive, ironic material—or to bring his own interpretation to bear on what he sees.

Hence the focus on "context," which inevitably refers to

the narrative context of a given work. Pop culture regulators assume that if sex and violence are shown within a "moral" framework, the viewer will absorb that framework and, presumably, act accordingly.

In a symposium on media violence in *Time* magazine, Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) noted, "Violence without context and sex without attachment come into our homes too frequently in ways that we cannot control unless we are monitoring the television constantly." Bradley didn't, however, discuss the contexts and attachments *into* which shows are broadcast. This includes not only how we view TV but, for example, family structure. Now more than ever, technologies such as VCRs and remote controls allow individuals to create their own viewing contexts:

We channel-surf, flicking between dozens of stations, switching between a ball game and a performance of *Oedipus Rex*. We fast-forward through commercials and coming attractions, or stop the tape altogether. Simultaneously, paradoxically, we are both bombarded with more and more media signals and have more and more control over what we watch and when we watch it.

What is on the screen or on the stereo is not irrelevant, of course. But it matters far less than one might suppose. Individuals interpret and reconstruct what they see and hear the way they want to. In a classroom, interpretations can be graded as better or worse, depending on the instructor's criteria. But there is no analogous oversight in the real world and people are free to spin out their own interpretations and cross-references. *Reductio ad absurdum*: Mark David Chapman read *The Catcher in the Rye* as legitimizing his murder of John Lennon. Clearly, this is not an A+ interpretation of the novel, but it is an interpretation nonetheless. And it points to a simple truth: The most relevant interpretive context is not the producer's but the consumer's.

A similar fixation on and extremely limited definition of context infuses the recently released *UCLA Television Monitoring Report*. The study, underwritten by the broadcast networks after Sen. Paul Simon (D-Ill.) threatened them with governmental action in 1993, charts "violence" in the 1994–95 TV season, including prime-time series, made-for-TV movies and miniseries, theatrical films shown on TV, on-air promotions for network shows, and Saturday morning children's programming. The authors go to great pains to distinguish between "appropriate" and "inappropriate" violence, stressing, "Context is the key to the determination of whether or not the use of violence is appropriate." In determining whether violence is objectionable, they rely on a series of questions—"Is the violence integral to the story?," "Is the violence glorified?," "Is the violence intentional or reactionary?," etc.—that speaks only to authorial intentions. While such distinctions may allow for a moral (and aesthetic) judgment of a particular program, they don't speak to the viewer's experi-



ence. If a viewer, for instance, tunes into or out of a show midway through, he may have no idea of whether violence is integral to the story.

When viewers are mentioned in the UCLA study, they are typically characterized as unwitting dupes. In a discussion of "Misleading Titles," for instance, the report focuses on two made-for-TV movies, *Falling For You* and *Gramps*. *Falling For You* featured a serial killer with a taste for defecation, while *Gramps* told the story of "an outwardly charming but psychotic grandfather" who murders his daughter-in-law and tries to kill a number of children.

"Ironically, while some films with violent titles were relatively non-violent, two of the most violent television movies of the season had seriously misleading titles promising innocent family fare," says the report. "*Falling for You* and *Gramps* promised content very different from what was delivered. This is a particular problem given the fact that these shows lacked advisories. Had there been advisories, viewers would have learned that the misleadingly titled movies...contained intense acts of violence. Starring likable celebrities Jenny Garth and Andy Griffith and lacking advisories, these stories appear to be about falling in love and a kindly old grandfather."

One wonders what the authors would make of, say, *Of Mice and Men* ("Contrary to the title, rodents were of minimal importance to the plot, which contained a good deal of sex and violence...") or *The Neverending Story* ("Oddly, the film's running time was only two hours and 10 minutes..."). They dismiss out of hand the idea that viewers would understand, let alone enjoy, the irony inherent in titles like *Falling For You* and *Gramps*. Would it be better if *Gramps* had been called something like *My Old Man Is An Outwardly Charming But Psychotic Grandfather*? (Curiously, the authors criticize "ominous and threatening titles that imply the show will be violent," such as *Bonanza: Under Attack*, *Deadline for Murder*, *Dangerous Intentions*, and *With Hostile Intent*, even when such titles are accurate.)

The authors imply viewers lack virtually any critical faculties or knowledge independent of what program producers feed them. For starters, they assume we determine what we watch based solely—or largely, at least—on titles. In fact, that decision is based on a variety of information—promos, capsule summaries, reviews—some within industry control, some not. And when a performer steps out of character, that very fact is usually stressed in the publicity build-up as a marketing point. Similarly, although certain stars are identified with certain types of characters (Andy Griffith=Sheriff Andy Taylor=Matlock=Good Family Fun), few people respond with Pavlovian certainty to any given actor or actress's efforts—the nature of the particular product matters greatly.

Critics usually charge that pop culture, in seeking the broadest audience possible, appeals to the lowest common denominator and thereby cheapens and coarsens society. Most critics take the argument a step further and claim that, even as pop culture gives the people what they want, it destroys consumers' critical faculties, effectively infantilizing them.

The notion of TV viewers and consumers of pop culture as intellectual couch potatoes closely parallels longstanding conventional scholarly analyses of how popular culture works. As with the political consensus, the intellectual indictment crosses traditional right/left boundaries. Critics usually charge that pop culture, in seeking the broadest audience possible, appeals to the lowest common denominator and thereby cheapens and coarsens society. Most critics take the argument a step further and claim that, even as pop culture gives the people what they want, it destroys consumers' critical faculties, effectively infantilizing them.

Consider, for instance, conservative Allan Bloom's commentary on rock music. In *The Closing of the*

American Mind (1987), Bloom writes, "[R]ock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire—not love, not eros, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored....My concern here is not with the moral effects of this music—whether it leads to sex, violence, or drugs. The issue here is its effect on education, and I believe it ruins the imagination of young people and makes it very difficult for them to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education."

Television can lay claim to the status of most-favored punching bag and academic attacks on the small screen are representative of broader indictments of pop culture. Watching the idiot box, goes the argument, turns viewers into idiots. As their titles suggest, books such as *The Plug-In Drug*, *Media: The Second God*, *The Glass Teat* (and its sequel, *The Other Glass Teat*), and *Telegarbage* attempt to detail just how horrible and intellectually enervating the medium actually is.

Boxed In: The Culture of TV (1988), by Mark Crispin Miller, a left-leaning media critic and professor at Johns Hopkins University, provides a good example. "Those who have grown up watching television are not, because of all that gaping, now automatically adept at visual interpretation. That spectatorial 'experience' is passive, mesmeric, indiscriminating, and therefore not conducive to the refinement of the critical faculties," writes Miller.

From politicians and intellectuals alike, mass culture stands charged with and convicted of sexing us up, predisposing us toward violence, and dumbing us down.

But if we are neither robotic stooges programmed by the shows we watch nor trained dogs drooling every time certain bells are rung, just how do we interact with popular culture? Not surprisingly, most regulation-minded pols and intellectual critics discuss pop in terms that mirror what they know best: A podium from which a leader or professor lectures to audiences who (they assume) pay rapt attention to every uttered pearl of wisdom. But the operative principle in popular culture (as in the best politics

Newer models of the consumption of popular culture have a lot in common with a show such as Comedy Central's *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*, in which wise-cracking characters watch B movies and provide running commentary. The characters in *MST3K* represent what's known in literary studies as "resisting readers." They don't merely soak up what they see, they actively process information, spin it to their own purposes, and critique it. The same goes for Beavis and Butt-head, the animated whipping boys of would-be censors. Even they don't watch videos the way they're "supposed" to.

Such critical engagement with pop culture texts is perhaps most clearly visible in the various fan “communities” that spring up around TV shows, film stars, and bands. “Fan critics pull characters and narrative issues from the margins; they focus on details that are excessive or peripheral to the primary plots but gain significance within the fans’ own conceptions,” writes Henry Jenkins, a professor of literature at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (1992).

Central to Jenkins's "reading" of fan activity are notions of rereading and appropriation. Among other fan-generated artifacts, Jenkins describes fans who create music videos by splicing together shots from their favorite shows in new sequences and adding a soundtrack. Sometimes, the process is quite simple and

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age,' California Crew constructs a compelling and coherent crossover," writes Jenkins.

Other fan-generated texts are decidedly more outrageous. In an essay included in *Technoculture*, a 1991 collection she co-edited, Constance Penley, the UC-Santa Barbara professor, analyzed the phenomenon of *Star Trek* “K/S” or “slash” fandom. “Slash” revolves around the creation of fan-generated homosexual pornography involving the characters of Capt. Kirk and Mr. Spock. (The term *slash* refers to the slash between K and S and serves as a code to those purchasing fanzines through the mail.)

While slash fandom—largely made up of heterosexual women—may strike even diehard Trekkies as strange, Penley convincingly argues that the phenomenon demonstrates how people interact with popular culture “texts.” Slash fans, says Penley, also use *Star Trek* as a way of creating a community of like-minded people. More important, writes Penley, “Slash fans do more than ‘make do’; they make. Not only have they remade the *Star Trek* fictional universe to their own desiring ends, they have achieved it by enthusiastically mimicking the technologies of mass-market cultural production, and by constantly debating their own relation, as women, to those technologies.”

Although Penley refrains from generalizing from the activity of slash fans—for one thing, they actually produce literal texts of their own—she says that “slash is suggestive of various ways people react to mass or popular culture.” And, especially in light of the current debate over popular culture, says Penley, it is important to realize all viewers or consumers have “agency”: They *process* what they see or hear—they do not merely lap it up. On the other hand, Penley says, “Politicians, producers, and advertisers want to believe that everything they say is accepted as intended.”

MIT's Jenkins agrees that producers and regulators of popular culture share a common goal: control of an audience that is inherently beyond control. Although they obviously benefit from



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pleasing consumers, producers of popular culture have an ambivalent relationship with their audience, says Jenkins. That's because fans don't merely accept what they are given—they actively appropriate or reshape things to their own liking. Such activity can take any number of forms, from letter-writing campaigns, to producing "unauthorized" novels, stories, and song cycles, to recutting videotaped footage into "new" episodes. In an age where photocopying, audio sampling, videotaping, and computer technology make it ever easier for fans to cut and paste their own versions of pop culture, it is increasingly difficult for original producers to control all representations of their product, says Jenkins, who notes that *Star Trek* distributor Viacom has cracked down on fan clubs in Australia over fan-generated materials.

Moral regulators face a more daunting task. "A top-down conception of culture goes back to the very roots of the concept of *culture*," says Jenkins. "Educational, intellectual, or political elites assume that the mass has no taste or culture of its own, that culture can be used by elites to refine the tastes of the mass." As a result, says Jenkins, reformers have an uneasy relationship to popular culture: They like it because it can be used to push certain types of "good" beliefs. But that also means that pop can be used to present competing messages. "For the Clintons and the Doles," says Jenkins, "it's an either/or proposition. Either movies, TV, and music teach good behavior or else they're teaching bad behavior."

But that dichotomy runs up a blind alley, says Jenkins. There is simply no way to effectively police popular culture because that would mean controlling every individual exposed to it. "Culture is something we all participate in," says Jenkins. "We're all in dialogue with the cultural materials that come out there."

The dialogue Jenkins mentions extends beyond media-related culture as well. Consider two examples that range far beyond the unholy trinity of TV, movies, and music, and that point out just as strongly the fallacy of reining in pop culture: pogs and the use of "blunt" cigars for smoking pot.

Pogs, hailed and bemoaned as "the marbles of the '90s," are colorfully decorated, silver-dollar-sized cardboard circles that kids play with. Costing anywhere from a dime up to a couple of dollars, pogs are currently a multimillion-dollar-a-year industry, complete with "official" world championships and trademark disputes galore. A number of schools across the country have banned pogs, which they blame for inciting fights, theft, student inattentiveness, and generally bad behavior.

In a game of pogs, kids stack a number of the circles and then "slam" them with a heavy plastic or metal piece, the winner keeping any pogs that have flipped over. The craze started a few years


ago on Oahu, when an elementary school teacher showed her students a Depression-era game played with milk bottle caps. The current incarnation of the game gets its name from the lids of a local juice drink called POG, which stands for passion fruit-orange-guava juice. The game of pogs migrated from Hawaii to the West Coast and then headed eastward. Along the way, a California businessman bought the POG trademark and various companies started making intricately designed pogs bearing images of celebrities.

The POG phenomenon is an unpredictable mix of ground up and top-down forces, of accident and design, impossible to predict and, according to most industry observers, already in decline. Teachers can breathe easy—

until the next fad shows up on the playground.

The use of "blunt" cigars, particularly the brand Phillies Blunts, is an example of pop culture appropriation. A few years ago—like many pop phenomena, the origins are hazy—teenage boys started buying blunts—cheap, medium thickness cigars—cutting them open, hollowing them out, and replacing most of the tobacco with marijuana (girls apparently enjoy Tiparillos). After the rap groups Cypress Hill and Beastie Boys started sporting Phillies Blunts T-shirts and hats in concert, wearing Phillies Blunts paraphernalia became something of a fashion statement as well.

The makers of Phillies Blunts, Hav-A-Tampa Inc., have seen sales jump, an increase largely attributed to the unintended and unauthorized use of the product. Some tobacco stores have stopped selling the brand because of its new connotations, but the trend continues. It will no doubt pass out of favor at some point, only to be replaced by another equally unforeseeable object.

As with all market-based exchanges, knowledge, value, and power in popular culture are dispersed. And reining in popular culture—or, more precisely, the meaning of a particular piece of pop culture—is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. It's messy, difficult, and doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Regulators and paternalists are in the difficult position of stanching the dynamic flow of culture. They can outlaw "gratuitous" violence in movies, censor inflammatory lyrics in rock and rap, plant a V-chip in every television in the country. But they will still be frustrated in their attempts to keep pop culture—and its creators—in line. In that sense, they are like Canute attempting to hold back the waves, Gatsby striving to relive the past, or perhaps more appropriately, the castaways forever trying to get off *Gilligan's Island*: It just can't be done. 

Nick Gillespie (ngilles123@aol.com) is a senior editor of REASON.

Tobacco Row

By Michael McMenamin

A "don't ask, don't tell" policy for journalists

IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS, WHO has done the most harm to First Amendment freedoms? This is a sophisticated test, so pay attention. Was it:

- (a) the tobacco industry
- (b) Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary
- (c) U.S. District Court Judge John Feikens
- (d) CBS's *60 Minutes*
- (e) all of the above

No, it's not (e). That kind of guess may fly on the SAT but not here.

The tobacco industry? Not really, unless you believe the First Amendment, properly applied, means no one has a protectable interest in their reputation. The tobacco industry obviously spends more in legal fees each year than their reputation is worth, but, small thing that it is, they treasure it and they are welcome to it.

Hazel O'Leary? Get serious. A run-of-the-mill Clinton appointee who has so far managed to avoid having her own special prosecutor, she is notable only for the frequent trips she takes out of Washington at taxpayer expense, including a number of foreign junkets. What normal American can blame her for wanting to get out of town? While it's true she spent \$45,000 of your money to compile what some call a Nixon-like "enemies list" of unfriendly reporters, that kind of money is barely a blink of the eye in Washington. Admit it, were you really shocked to learn that a public official kept lists of friendly and hostile reporters?

Judge John Feikens is the wrong answer also, but picking him shows your sophistication in this area and, accordingly,



you get extra credit if you knew he is the judge who issued the patently unconstitutional prior restraint against *Business Week* and its story on Procter & Gamble's lawsuit against Bankers Trust. Indeed, but for the crew at *60 Minutes*, Feikens would have been the correct answer. A Nixon appointee who barred *Business Week* from publishing a story with documents legally obtained by its journalists, he never once cited the landmark Pentagon Papers case in his decision, thus enshrining forever the principle that avoiding embarrassment to a leading financial institution will trump the First Amendment where national security will not.

SO, THAT LEAVES ONLY ONE CHOICE: *60 Minutes*, the oldest and most respected investigative journalism broadcast. Still, it's possible to blame Feikens's ruling for *60 Minutes* being the correct answer. That's because New York media types and their lawyers were talking about little else in early November. Feikens threw out a heretofore inviolate rule: no prior restraints on publication. Period. Hence, it fell to *60 Minutes*'s legendary Mike Wallace to come to the rescue of the First Amendment as the *Business Week* lawyers and as his own CBS lawyers had not. Unfortunately, instead of protecting freedom of the press, the heedless, hubris-

ridden Wallace has done it great harm.

A brief history: *60 Minutes* prepared a story on the tobacco industry. One of their confidential sources was a former Brown & Williamson Corp. vice president, Jeffrey Wigand. In the story, which never aired, Wigand accused his former employer of using an additive in pipe tobacco that causes cancer in laboratory animals and of dropping plans to develop a new, safer cigarette. Wigand was, as you

might expect, a disgruntled former employee. He had been fired by Brown & Williamson in 1993, and pursuant to a post-employment settlement agreement that restored his severance package and health care benefits, he agreed to what his lawyer terms "a Draconian confidentiality agreement."

When that agreement was reviewed by CBS lawyers, they recommended against airing the Wigand portion of the story because they believed Wigand would be violating his confidentiality agreement, and CBS might be sued by Brown & Williamson for interfering with its agreement with Wigand and inducing him to breach it. CBS executives, including CBS news president Eric Ober, followed their lawyers' advice.

So far, so good. As a libel lawyer who has advised both print and broadcast media prior to publication, I can assure you this was no big deal. It happens all the time. Sometimes the client takes your advice. Sometimes it doesn't. What happened next, however, will have a lasting and chilling effect on journalism and the First Amendment, especially business journalism.

Don Hewitt, executive producer of *60 Minutes*, and Mike Wallace, principal correspondent on the tobacco story, went public with their complaints about the