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## **Violence on Television: Forming the *Jackass***

Violent representations run riot on our television screens. These aggressive scenes are perceived by many to have a detrimental effect upon the world. But, do they? Potter suggests that “the media continually and profoundly affect everyone, and when the messages are violent, people are at risk for a variety of negative effects” (2003, p 31). On the other hand, “audiences have also demonstrated some ability to resist the power of media representations and even to deconstruct various versions of violent reality,” (Barak 1991, p 192). This debate is widespread within today’s society, with many television shows said to influence viewers. Looking specifically at MTV’s controversial *Jackass* programme, this project report will attempt to gauge the effects of television violence. Analysing consequences, we will examine the messages that are inherent in media texts.

An issue that has captivated both audiences and analysts of the media, violence includes “actions that inflict, threaten, or cause injury” (Jackman 2002). More specifically, *television* violence is “the overt expression of physical force against self or other, compelling action against one’s will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing” (Gerbner 1972, p 31). With an average of 6.2 violent acts

or threats committed on our screens each hour, the issues surrounding aggressive behaviour and its possible influence have become widespread in our society (Fowles 1999, p 4). Theorists believe that actions portrayed in entertainment television can often trigger imitation, thus spreading a substantial amount of violence through the society.

In 1999, the WB cable network cut the finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, because it was set to include mass bloodshed. The hit television show, renowned for its stylised violence, was taken off the air because it was reminiscent of the Columbine High School shootings. Did the network assume that the episode would trigger violent actions amongst *Buffy*'s culture of fans? The Parents Television Council (PTC) believes that this was a possibility. *Buffy* has been deemed inappropriate for adolescents, and the violence is said to be “not only frequent, but also graphic, earning a red light” (PTC, online). In their analysis, the PTC draws a “correlation between what the entertainment industry produces and what kids learn from it” (Bergeron, online). Therefore, when the media portray violent acts, the learning processes of youth are inevitably influenced. What this essay seeks to find is whether it will be positive or negative learning.

A National Television Violence study has found that, “exposure to television violence contributes to a range of ... harmful effects on many viewers” (1997, p 6). Could our chosen case study reflect this comment? *Jackass* is a programme that attracts young viewers with its bizarre and unconventional set of stunts. With a fan-base renowned for copying the stars' outlandish behaviour, the show is often at the centre of media attention. If “the ‘triggering’ of impulsive acts of aggression” occurs across a number

of media forms, then *Jackass* can be included (Josephson, online). However, imitation of this show has even ended in death.

In 2001, 13-year-old Jason Lind received third degree burns and was placed in a critical condition after mimicking a stunt from *Jackass*. While there is always the risk that aggressively-oriented television will have a bad influence on society, it is examples like this that allow us to study the issue more thoroughly. In the episode that inspired Lind, *Jackass* host Johnny Knoxville dressed in a fire-resistant suit and hung meat from his body. After this, Knoxville mounted a barbecue and allowed his cast mates to spark him with lighter fluid. Because the stars of *Jackass* are so widely accepted by their youthful audience, stunts such as these generate a lot of popularity. The crew from *Jackass* have become role models for their predominantly adolescent audience. Correspondingly, Potter believes that the risk of copycat behaviour is increased when idols commit mediated violence (2003, p 60). This seems to have been the case when Jason Lind volunteered to have his feet and legs doused in gasoline after viewing the highly controversial episode. Many believe that the actions Lind saw on television triggered him to act dangerously.

Potter sees this behaviour as an “immediate effect” of violent television. These “are those that happen during exposure or within a very short period of time afterwards” (Potter 2003, p 33). This reflects Lind’s case. The 13-year-old repeated what he saw on television and his actions ended with horrific results. According to Potter, “exposure to media violence can reduce viewers’ normal inhibitions that prevent them from behaving in a violent manner” (2003, p 34). The audience are attracted to the violent act and therefore more likely to commit it. If such a claim is true, then we can

see how television may have a plethora of negative effects for society. However, is this true? Because, it is often the *media* who report these violent tales negatively.

Children learn through observation, and today there is a saturation of images for children to absorb via the television set. Siegel states that, “a great deal of human social life, and behaviour, is ... learned through observation and imitation” (1974, p 130). Children gain their knowledge by examining the actions of their elders, with this often being some of their only opportunities to interpret the world. If children consume up to 40 hours of television per week, then we can begin to wonder how much television influences their social learning (*Oprah* 2002). If the television being watched is overtly violent, is there the chance that the children will always repeat this dangerous behaviour? It is argued that, “children understand [television] presentations as authentic and credible and assume that the world is really the way it appears there” (Siegel 1974, p 130). In this case, we can see a definite risk of violent imitation. Because, “it is natural for [youth] to take the behaviour they observe on television as a model for their own” (Siegel 1974, p 130).

In April of 2004, Joe Armstrong’s friends filmed him leaping over a fire while petrol was being thrown on it. Armstrong is now in hospital with 15 per cent burns. This is yet another injury caused by the imitation of *Jackass*. This suggests that Armstrong, a 10-year-old, was taken in by the realistic violence on the show and encouraged to participate in it himself. As Liebert says, “there is a clear and reliable relationship between the amount of violence which a child sees on entertainment television and the degree to which he is aggressive in his attitudes and behaviour” (1974, p 120). This finding is highly important, because it follows on from our previous point that

children use television as an educational tool. If they are taught to act violently, then it may have a dangerous effect on their lives.

Civil Litigator Jack Thompson seems to agree, voicing his negative thoughts about *Jackass* in an interview for CNN. Thompson argues that many parents do not understand the dangers of television violence, suggesting, “people of tender years, children, tend to copycat what they see. In fact,” he says, “they’re designed to be that way. That’s the way they learn” (*CNN Talkback* 2001). However, it is also a fact that children learn from questioning things.

Recently, research has concluded that children are not “passive recipients of television messages, but [they are] active interpreters and processors of meaning” (Buckingham 1998, p 137). Contrary to popular belief, the viewer is able to watch a programme, deconstruct what they are seeing, and decide for themselves what is right or wrong. While the media definitely maintains a “manipulative aspect”, the society will empower themselves by guiding their own behaviour (Hall 1994, p 459). So, when 10-year-old Joe Armstrong was critically injured, it may not have been the fault of *Jackass*. As Barak implies, “there is some kind of *correlation* between mediated violence and societal violence; none have proven a *cause-and-effect* relationship between the two” (1991, p 176). Rather, there are many social influences that can lead people down a violent path.

If this is the case, then it may be interesting to look for a reason why television is automatically blamed for the violence that occurs within society. The media are seen to construct our representations of the world, but can this be related to our case study? Karen A. Cerulo looks at “the ‘telling of’ and the ‘reaction to’ violence” (1998, p 3). She explores how the “sequencing of such factors—the specific formats that organise

what media audiences see, hear, or read in connection to a violent event—powerfully influence the ways in which individuals identify violence” (Cerulo 1998, p 5). Cerulo notes that there are four sequencing methods that are used depending on the type of violence being portrayed:

### ***Victim Sequence***

The essay will look at this sequence with more depth shortly. Briefly, however, victim sequences allow the audience to enter the story from the victim’s standpoint. Cerulo states that, “all stories for heinous or deviant violence” seem to unfold in this way (1998, p 40).

### ***Performer Sequence***

This method of framing a story emphasises the information about the violent actor. With “facts regarding her/his intentions, feeling, and behaviours” appearing early in the piece, “performer sequences direct audience members to step ‘into the shoes’ of the violent actor” (Cerulo 1998, p 42-3). Often, these sequences portray normal violence: acts that are “acceptable under the law” (Cerulo 1998, p 43).

### ***Contextual Sequence***

This format will “prioritise the data on a act’s setting or circumstance”, focusing on the context, rather than the victim or perpetrator. Cerulo states that, “in doing so, contextual sequences offer reasons and explanations for otherwise unacceptable violence” (1998, p 47).

## ***Doublecasting Sequence***

Interestingly, in doublecasting sequences, “contextual information simultaneously casts the central ‘subject’ of the story as both victim and perpetrator” (Cerulo 1998, p 50). In adopting this method, “narrators encourage their audience to consider multiple dimensions of the violence in question” (Cerulo 1998, p 50). Accordingly, the doublecasting sequence often portrays ambiguous violence.

Understanding this, it may be interesting to explore the many articles collected on the violence of *Jackass*.

In terms of Cerulo’s analysis, it is crucial to define the type of violence that occurs as a result of the *Jackass* programme. Often committed on the self, the aggressive behaviour could quite possibly be called a “controllable disaster” (Cerulo 1998, p 49). This *ambiguous* violence also caters for questionable shootings and suicides (Cerulo 1998, p 49). Whilst reading media reports on ambiguous violence, “individuals can experience mixed feelings in reacting to such events” (Cerulo 1998, p 47). This is much like our case study, where the audience are likely to feel sympathy as they also question why the youth committed the act to begin with. As mentioned previously, ambiguous violence is often framed with the contextual or doublecasting sequence.

However, it is interesting to note that a staggering 100 per cent of our collected articles were written with the victim sequence. *Victim sequences* “prioritise the characteristics of those whom violence strikes” (Cerulo 1998, p 40). Cerulo argues that, “via such sequences storytellers can establish an early link between victims of violence and the heinous nature of the acts that befall them” (1998, p 40).

For example,

An 18-year-old Norwegian entertainer *Victim*  
has been killed after deliberately lying down *Act*  
in a lane on a highway south of Oslo *Context*  
in a deadly game known as “jackass.” *Performer*

Or,

An 18-year-old was in a critical condition *Victim*  
after jumping from a five-storey building in an apparent *Act*  
imitation of a stunt  
from the television show *Jackass*. *Performer*

This finding is interesting. In Cerulo’s analysis, no articles concerning ambiguous violence were sequenced to prioritise the victim. However, in our case, there are many. This is notable, because it suggests that television is a danger: a fixture that causes injury to its victims. In the victim sequence, “readers and viewers become acquainted with a violent event through the ‘eyes’ of the injured” (Cerulo 1998, p 40). We are led to feel sorry for the injured party and have negative thoughts about the programme that led him/her there. This method of sequencing definitely informs the society that television is a bad influence. However, as Barak argues, “while the mass media does provide a context as well as a conduit for both simulated and nonsimulated violence it does not unleash, stimulate, or teach violence and aggression per se” (1991, p 176). Therefore, it seems that the media are encouraging us to look at



*Jackass* as a bad influence, because it does not live up to the morals and values of society.

To look at these ideas more thoroughly, I thought it would be interesting to conduct an activity. In this, we would see how members of the public respond to a range of *Jackass*-related media articles and the meanings taken from them. I used a small focus group, making sure we maintained a balance of genders. Before the activity, Rhys, a 25-year-old builder, had neutral opinions of the show. Adam, a 20-year-old part-time worker was a fan. Another participant, 20-year-old Kristin, was against the show. And, finally, 17-year-old Kate had never seen an episode of *Jackass*. This group was chosen, because it is interesting to find out what youth think about their portrayals in the media. Initially, the respondents were reluctant to answer some of the questions. However, they soon began to offer their opinions more freely.

As the participants looked at the ten introductions, it became obvious what types of things were being conveyed about the television show (Appendix 1). For example, Kristin suggests that, “*Jackass* is negative and it makes kids go out and commit crimes.” She then went on to state, “I feel really sorry for these people.” Kristin’s feelings support Cerulo’s theory. It is stated that, “the victim provides the porthole through which readers enter the story” (Cerulo 1998, p 42). This means, “victim formats can create a special milieu” by “directing the voice of each report [to prioritise] the dark side of violence” (Cerulo 1998, p 42). If this is the case, the audience is encouraged to relate television to this dark side. Because it is such a strong issue in today’s society, the readers are prompted to view violent representations on television as unhealthy for the mind. As interviewee Adam says, “I

think the media is trying to find blame ... and in these examples, the blame is focused on the TV series, *Jackass*.”

However, Cerulo’s theory is tested further when one of the introductions is re-written to focus responsibility in a different direction. Our previous example about Joe Armstrong being filmed while jumping over a wall of flames was reworked to suggest that the television show was not to blame (Appendix 1). Rather, it was more likely Armstrong’s fault, because of *Jackass*’ repeated efforts to censor the show to young viewers. This time, the responses were somewhat different. Kristin said, “well, I guess it seems like the boy’s fault this time. He seems to want some kind of attention. No, I don’t think it’s the show’s fault this time.” This is very interesting, because it emphasises the fact that the media often attempt to construct our opinions of the world. All four of the participants had similar opinions on the re-write. As Novak states, the media “builds up incrementally a psychic structure of expectations” (1991, p 4-5). It teaches us “how to think”, structuring “a viewer’s way of perceiving, of making connections, and of following a storyline” (Novak 1991, p 4-5). This means that the society, influenced thoroughly by the media, are led to accept the dominating beliefs of the social sphere. Like Cerulo argues, in the broadcasting of violent stories, the media can influence “public images of right and wrong” (1998, p 141). In this, there is “the routine formatting of violent accounts [that] may be constructing social opinion rather than reflecting it” (Cerulo 1998, p 141).

Cerulo’s analysis on the effects of sequencing suggests that the narrators of media texts intend to construct readers’ reactions. Her findings illustrate that narrators of media texts intend to construct readers’ reactions. These findings suggest that, often, “different sequences can lead subjects to different conclusions as they decipher and

react to violence” (Cerulo 1998, p 118). This is important, because it shows how narrators order “violent stories in ways that meet the expectations of their audiences” (Cerulo 1998, p 119). This means that, narrators “steer audience reactions to violence”, linking it with what they perceive as “audience morality” (Cerulo 1998, p 121). In this, we see how the media structures the social view on what is seen as valuable and what is looked upon as demoralising. For example, because the audience are introduced to our critically injured Joe Armstrong they see the horrific event through his eyes. In this case, *Jackass* is seen as immoral. As Cerulo suggests, “narrative beginnings carefully position individuals giving them a specified view on the action. In this way entry points can set the tone for subjects evaluative conclusions” (1998, p 127). Here, we can see how audiences experience violent accounts in very specific ways. Because of this, people are often influenced to accept the society’s predominate morals. In this case, television violence is seen as bad.

The issues surrounding violence in television often spark debates throughout society. With many believing that mediated violence has a profound effect upon the world, certain programmes are often blamed for criminal acts in reality. Theorists suggest that youth imitate what they see on the screen, and this often ends with dire effects. This idea reflects our case study on *Jackass*, where children and adults copy stunts and injure themselves. However, is this the case? Is the television show to blame? Violence in society cannot be blamed solely on television. This is because the viewers are active. They maintain the ability to deconstruct images and independently respond.

If this is the case, then why is television automatically blamed for the hostility of the world? When the media report events, we find that they are sequenced in a way that

leads the society to certain conclusions. These conclusions often cast programmes such as *Jackass* in a negative light, suggesting that the show is a performer of violent crimes. In this, we can see the perpetuation of the idea that aggression on television is always negative. The way that the media sequences events makes us look towards television a perpetrator, even though there is evidence to the contrary.

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