

Rogers 1

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English 122-83

Essay 3

8 April 1999

Violence in the Media

Mickey and Mallory, two characters in Oliver Stone's film Natural Born Killers, travel across the Southwest, killing a total of fifty-two people. After watching this movie, two teenagers went on a crime spree of their own and killed one person and wounded another, paralyzing her for the rest of her life. At their trial, their defense was that watching Natural Born Killers had made them commit their crimes and that Hollywood, along with the director of the movie, Oliver Stone, was to blame. As creative as this defense is, it is hard to accept. The power of the media to shape lives may be great, but no amount of violence on the screen can eliminate a person's responsibility for his or her actions, especially when it comes to murder.

According to John Grisham, Oliver Stone's Natural Born Killers "inspired" two teenagers "to commit murder" (5). Grisham goes on to say that since the movie was released, several murders have been committed by troubled young people who claimed they were "under the influence" of Mickey and Mallory (5). This type of defense keeps reappearing as the violence in our everyday lives increases: "I am not to blame," says the perpetrator. "That movie (or television show) made me do it."

The idea that violence in the media causes violent behavior is not supported by the facts. When we look at Ben and Sarah, the two teenagers who supposedly imitated Mickey and Mallory, it is clear that factors other than

Introduction

Thesis statement

Paragraph combines quotation and paraphrase from Grisham article with Allison's own observations

Paragraph combines clearly documented paraphrases of Stone and Siano articles with Allison's own conclusions

Rogers 2

Natural Born Killers could have influenced their decision to commit murder. Both young adults had long histories of drug and alcohol abuse as well as psychiatric treatment (Stone 39). In addition, no clear experimental link between violent movies and television shows and aggressive behavior has been discovered. Many studies have shown that after watching violent television shows, children tend to act aggressively, but after about a week they return to their normal pattern of behavior (Siano 22).

What, then, are we supposed to make of crimes that seem to be inspired by the media? As Siano points out, a body of anecdotal evidence supports the link between these "copycat crimes" and media violence (24). Two problems exist with this type of "evidence," however. The first problem is that in most cases, the movie or television show is never definitely linked to the crime. For example, after the movie The Money Train was released, a clerk in a New York City subway token booth was set on fire in much the same way a subway token clerk was in the movie. Naturally, it appeared as if the movie had inspired the crime. But at the time of the crime, several newspapers reported that the violent act shown in the movie was not unusual and had in fact occurred at least twice in the year before the movie's release. So the question remains: Did the movie cause the violence, or did it simply reflect a kind of violent behavior that was already present in society? The truth is that we cannot answer this question.

The second problem with anecdotal evidence is that it is not representative. Crimes that are inspired by the media--killers imitating Freddy Krueger, for example--are unusual. As

Phrase "As Siano points out" introduces Allison's summary of source's ideas

No documentation necessary for common knowledge

Rogers 3

Siano says, most people who watch violent movies do not go out and commit crimes (24). Only a few people will have extreme reactions, and because they are mentally unbalanced, we cannot predict what will set them off. It could be a movie like Natural Born Killers, but it could also be a Bugs Bunny cartoon or a Three Stooges movie. The point is that society not limit the right of the majority to watch the movies and television shows they want to see just because a few unbalanced individuals may go out and commit crimes.

Even if the link between media violence and violent behavior is not clear, most people agree that young children are easily influenced by what they see. One study has shown that

children who watch violent television shows behave differently from those who watch nonviolent television shows (American Psychological Association). For this reason, young children should be protected. First, parents need to understand their responsibility for monitoring what their children watch on television. This monitoring needs to begin at home, where it is the parents' job to give their children a sense of what is real and what is not. Second, as the American Psychological Association suggests, parents should take the time to watch shows along with their children and discuss the content with them. Finally, if parents cannot watch television with their children, they can at least buy devices that will prevent children from watching violent programs.

The media have already taken steps to protect children. For example, rating systems now in place can help. These give parents the ability to judge the content of movies before chil-

The two paragraphs on this page combine paraphrases from an article with Allison's own observations

Rogers 4

dren go to see them and to evaluate television shows before they are turned on. Clearly, however, more needs to be done to protect young children. For one thing, these rating systems must be enforced. If an R movie is being shown at a theater, for example, the management must require proof of age. In addition, any movie or television show containing violence should not be shown on stations whose audience is primarily children, such as Nickelodeon or the Disney Channel, even at night. The time of day should not matter. When you think of Nickelodeon or Disney, The Brady Bunch and Mickey Mouse should come to mind, not Dirty Harry (American Psychological Association).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that violence is learned and that violent media images encourage violent behavior. It is not clear, however, that violent movies and television shows will actually cause a person to commit a crime. Placing the blame on the media is just an easy way to sidestep the hard questions, such as what is causing so much violence in our society and what can we do about it. If we prohibit violent programs, we will only deprive many people of their right to view the programs of their choice, and we will prevent artists from expressing themselves freely. In the process, these restrictions will also deprive society of a good deal of worthwhile entertainment.

This paragraph needs no documentation because it represents Allison's own ideas

Rogers 5

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