



# The Watchful Eye

Newsletter of the Sexualization of Youth Project

Montgomery County (MD) NOW



## Violation as Public Entertainment

By Mary Bailey

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Introductory note: When reading the following review of “Mayhem” by Sissela Bok (1998), please replace “mayhem” or “violence” with the phrase “sexualization of girls/youth” wherever you think it applies. While not a perfect fit, it’s pretty close, especially in Bok’s analysis of media violence, free speech and the press.

### Four Negative Effects

The esteemed philosopher and ethicist Sissela Bok has addressed one of the serious cultural problems of our time, one she defines in the subtitle as “Violence as Public Entertainment.” The book covers the four negative effects scientists have correlated with viewing violent entertainment: increased aggression, fear, desensitization, and appetite.

Most riveting is Bok’s discussion of the psychological aspects involved. Admittedly, today’s violent entertainment does not reach the depths once plumbed in public hangings or ancient Roman games, but its vicious scenes still evoke in audiences a similar deep and visceral thrill. We cannot dismiss such depictions as just make-believe, she says, because the imagination knows no barrier between the real and the not real.

It is a disturbing truth that people can be thrilled by watching mayhem, Bok says. But it must also be noted that the thrill comes at the expense of pity. How does one arrive at such pitilessness? You would think that human empathy would recoil at the sight of others being beaten and tortured. And so it does, in small children and people who have not been exposed to violence or who resist watching violent shows.

Bok offers explanations. For some people, violent entertainment provides excitement and a sense of power from watching the infliction of pain. There is no place in such entertainment for the empathy one experiences when viewing war news on TV, for instance, or reading an Agatha Christie murder mystery. Instead, death is treated humorously (“Pulp Fiction”) and fear and pain with deadly earnestness (“A Nightmare on Elm Street,” “Scream”). For others, absorbing violence’s power and terror and excitement is a way to toughen themselves, to learn to “take” what they see without flinching. Still others want to deaden feelings of empathy in order to stimulate certain sensory appetites.

### Getting a Handle on the Problem

Disturbing as these insights are, it is difficult for us to get a handle on the problem of violent entertainment. For one thing, it is argued that absolute proof of harm is lacking. Furthermore, attempts to prove harm are beside the point, since reining in violent shows is censorship and runs counter to the First Amendment. Finally, it is said that the time for debate has past because the issue has been rendered moot by the uncontrollable nature of modern technology.

But, says Bok, the above arguments set too high a threshold. Demanding that critics of violent entertainment pinpoint exactly how such programming affects people is unrealistic. How can we ever delve into the past and trace the specific shows that contributed to a particular person’s aggressive behavior? We don’t demand such absolutism from efforts to curtail smoking, although tobacco companies would love it if we did.

As for censorship, Bok writes that framing the issue “as solely about censorship is not only inaccurate but damaging to the very values the First Amendment seeks to protect.” It also makes it easier to dismiss protections established by liberal democracies such as Canada, Norway, and Sweden just because “they don’t have the First Amendment.” Most important, it is not too late for debate. Such an attitude prematurely closes creative new responses to violence as public entertainment.

The fundamentalist and the First Amendment absolutist are similar, Bok says. One thinks ridding the culture of media violence overrides any constitutional claims, while the other sees “no sacrifice too great” in defense of the First Amendment. “In both cases,” she writes, “advocates hold their views as established articles of faith, whether

religious or political, and as established beyond question in determinative texts such as the Bible and the U.S. Constitution.”

### **The Role of the Press**

Refusal to debate the question of media violence [or the sexualization of youth] in a serious, scientific and ethical way has resulted in a turning away from the issue and even paralysis on the part of the general public. Holding aloof is especially prevalent in the press, Bok says.

The press uses the First Amendment as a way to avoid criticism of any kind of media, including violence as entertainment. We must keep in mind that the media are giant conglomerates now. [Even The Washington Post Company owns broadcasting and cable TV as well as other publishing outlets.] Therefore, from the highest ranks on down, there is a tendency on the part of the press to cover the effects of media violence in a cursory, superficial way, and to avoid reporting revenues it has gained from airing violent programs and ads.

The media sometimes distort the meaning of the First Amendment as, for instance, when the president of the Network Television Association objected to a national “Turn Off the TV Day” in 1992, calling the boycott “an infringement of the networks’ First Amendment Rights.” Of course, that isn’t true, but many people believe it or live in an environment that assumes it is the truth. By calling protests against media violence a form of censorship, Bok says, the NTA president (and others like him) “inhibits debate and thus invades the very principle for which [the First Amendment] stands.”

Many of us feel helpless to pierce the media’s armor against criticism. After all, they control the nation’s discourse on social issues. So we tell ourselves that we have to live with it. That has been the media’s greatest victory: discouraging us from trying to open a national conversation in a meaningful way. And we know whereof we speak. Have we not written letters, held marches, conducted conferences? Nothing seems to work. Instead, we face a two-headed monster: either to continue living with the media’s race to the bottom, or witness the faulty reasoning of the extreme right calling it to a halt.

### **Need for Civic Dialogue**

Bok’s solution isn’t an easy one, but it may be the only way out of the dilemma. She believes we must insist that the nation fully *recognize* the problem of violent entertainment. We must *debate* the issue before the public, taking into account all the evidence and counter-evidence. Then an informed citizenry must *choose* the most viable solution, and *implement* the solution decided upon. Each of these four steps, she cautions, must be deliberate and complete in order to forestall another premature, uncritical closure. Next time, Bok says, discussion must not be cut off. A civic dialogue such as the one she envisions will raise people’s awareness of the problem of promoting violence and sexualization as public entertainment. From there, fresh answers should come.

*Another version of this article appeared in the Nov-Dec 2005 issue of “From NOW On.”*

### **Isn’t That the Way People Make Love?**

“Who killed him?” asked the four-year-old girl when her parents told her of the death of her playmate’s father. The parents were prepared to discuss the many concerns that a child might have about death of a parent, but not the question she asked. After explaining that her playmate’s father had died of a disease, they asked why she thought that someone had killed him. “Isn’t that the way people die?” the girl asked. “That’s the way people die on TV.” – Ronald G. Slaby, “Combating Television Violence,” cited by Bok.