

# Cultivating Killers

*Pop culture is getting away with murder*

*Michael Carneal had never fired a pistol before stealing the gun he used that day. But in the ensuing melee, he fired eight shots, hit eight people, and killed three of them. When Michael Carneal was shooting, he fired one shot at each kid.... He simply fired one shot at everything that popped up on his screen.*

— Colonel Dave Grossman,  
Expert on Violence in Society

Commenting after the April 20th shooting spree and suicide by students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold at their Littleton, Colorado high school, Hillary Clinton told an audience of public school teachers in New York, “We can no longer shut our eyes to the impact the media is having on all our children.... We’re awash in it.” And syndicated columnist Peggy Noonan added her opinion in the April 22nd *Wall Street Journal*: “The kids who did this are responsible. They did it. They killed. But they came from a place and time, and were yielded forth by a culture.”

Culture, indeed, seems to be a key factor in the violence and murder that permeate our society today, and are touching greater numbers of our youth across the nation.

There are still many unknowns in the Colorado tragedy, but one thing is certain: The Columbine tragedy has ratcheted up the anxiety and debate over America’s at-risk youth. While the last few years have witnessed horrible acts of murder by kids at schools, the determined and premeditated destruction and murder wrought by Harris and Klebold leave us particularly stunned. What inspired these kids from an



Popular video games have helped to desensitize young people to violence.

affluent suburb of Denver to such vicious carnage — accomplished with a sense of triumph and glee?

For at least two decades, experts have warned that television, movies, music, and other entertainment media are desensitizing young people to violence and death. Murder, rape, and physical assault are common fare in movies and in weekly episodes of award-winning television dramas, and some popular music genres have taken to glorifying sex, violence, murder, and even suicide. Adolescents have been immersed, in many cases without the clear understanding of their parents and other adults, in a culture of sex, death, and violence. Unless the media and entertainment industry are factored into the dialogue over this cultural crisis, there will be no reme-

dy — and Columbine and the other school killings will be merely an introduction to more violent and sensational acts of terror and murder.

Until recent times, three institutions have been responsible for socializing America’s children: the home, the church, and the school. By far the most influential of these three elements has been the home — and more specifically the parents. The values modeled by mom and dad, and instilled by them into the characters of their children, have traditionally charted the moral course of those kids. Good parenting by and large produced good kids, and bad parenting bad kids. But something has changed in the last couple of decades: An outside force has

DR. JUDITH A. REISMAN

militated against the positive influence provided by parents, church, and (not so long ago) school.

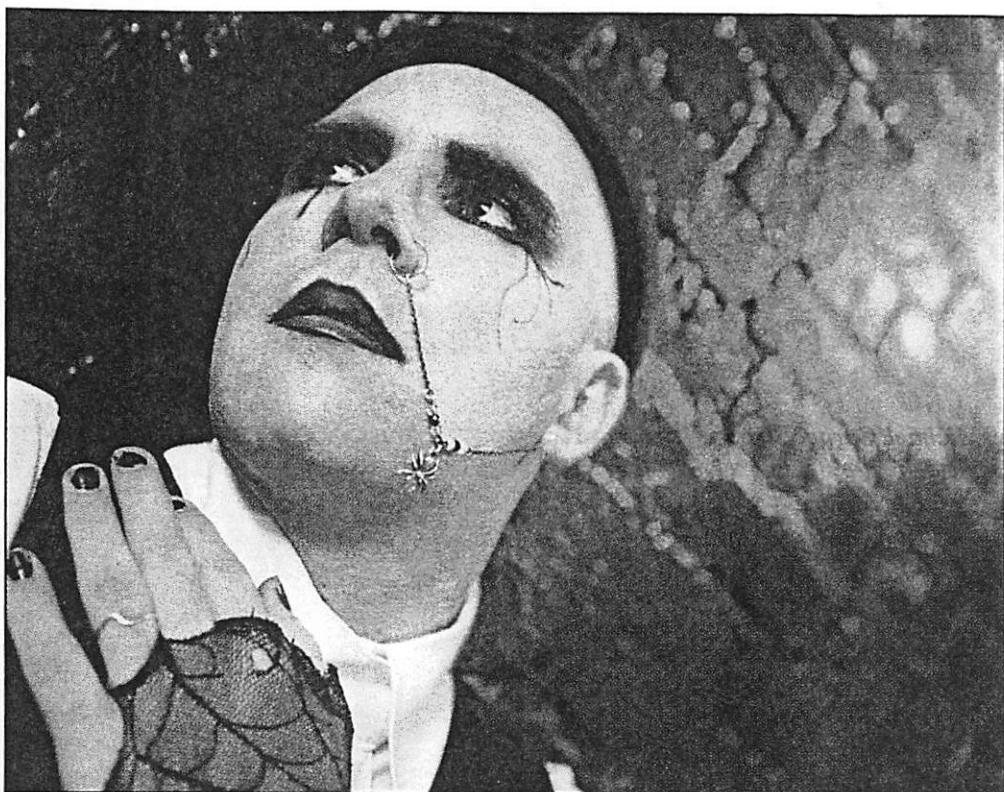
While every generation has certainly had its share of both “good” and “bad” parents, one can state with some certainty that young people have not murdered their schoolmates based on the quality of the parenting they received. Moreover, there is no evidence that “bad” parents have taught or modeled mass murder to their children. So if kids like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold did not learn to murder from their parents, what influence was present that pushed them to this madness? Clearly the mass media, with its unnatural fixation on violence and murder, must assume much of the blame.

Guns, of course, have been a constant in our nation since its founding, and the Second Amendment has ever guaranteed that the right of firearms ownership holds a place close to the hearts of free and independent Americans.

Guns have also held center stage in Hollywood fare since the very beginning of the movie industry. Shoot-'em-up cowboy films have been popular since the days of silent movies, as well as cops-and-robbers pictures. But there is a distinct difference between movies through the mid-1960s and the majority which have been made since then. Previously, the viewer always knew the difference between the good guys and the bad guys, and graphic scenes of violence (often with perverted overtones) were never permitted as they are with a vengeance today.

Today's movies are often little more than thinly veiled excuses for displays of sex, violence, and murder, depicted as graphically as possible. And such disturbing images are assaulting young children through video rental outlets, on cable and direct-dish television, as well as in popular music, computer games, and Internet sites. The end result is a polluting of the hearts, minds, and spirits of America's children — often without the knowledge of well-meaning parents.

**D**uring Hollywood's “Golden Age,” from the early 1930s through the mid-1960s, filmmakers followed the Motion Picture Code (MPC), a guide approved by America's religious leadership, which prohibited movie content



Manson's “music” has spawned a “gothic” subculture fixated on darkness, death.

which was explicitly sexual, violent, profane, or blasphemous. This was a voluntary code enforced by public pressure and moral suasion. But there were also state and local laws which protected society.

No such restrictions guide today's moviemakers and other entertainment producers, and what has resulted is a veritable sewer line of filth flowing from Hollywood and its subsidiaries into the heart of our nation's culture. Without even trying one can name a handful of popular films of recent years which have been marketed on their content of graphic sex and violence: *Natural Born Killers*, *The Basketball Diaries*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Face-off*, *The Matrix*, *Blade*, *The Terminator*, *Payback*, *Alien*, *Halloween* (and its umpteen sequels). In 1975, Earl Warren Jr. noted with obvious disapproval that for many years obscenity laws had included “bloodshed” and gratuitous “crime” as well as sexual matters. In 1957, the U.S. Supreme Court, led by his father Earl Warren Sr., overturned those laws with its revolutionary decision in *Roth v. United States*. The younger Warren was greatly relieved by this decision, remarking that illegal obscenity was “at last narrowed to matters of a sexual nature.”

Until *Roth*, American common law held that any part of a public display which disordered susceptible persons could be illegal. The law allowed that while “normal”

people might view obscene materials, including “bloodshed” and “crime,” and remain unaffected, society had an obligation to protect juveniles and other vulnerable persons from such harmful stimuli.

That crime and violence were thus controlled said a good deal about America's moral views. Addressing the impact of the law on society, Dr. Wanda Franz, president of National Right to Life, noted that the law teaches the public what is “moral,” or at least “O.K.” Since 1957, first “bloodshed and crime,” and then “sex and violence,” became acceptable fare for entertainment and media. Trusting our justice system, parents everywhere have been lulled into a false sense of security about the harmless nature of today's entertainment for their children.

The sexual revolution, begun by Alfred Kinsey in the late 1940s, paved the way for a legal revolution — a revolution which cited Kinsey's fraudulent science as proof that there was really no division between moral and immoral, right and wrong, normal and abnormal. Science became our new god, and the Judeo-Christian foundations of our culture were gradually replaced by the tenets of secular humanism. By 1962 public school prayer was banned, in 1963 Bible reading, and gradually “Thou shalt not kill” was replaced in our school classrooms with “lifeboat ethics.”

As common law's biblically based



“right and wrong” standard was legally wrested from American life, a new relative standard had to be crafted as a replacement. The attack on our culture was key to this change, and increasingly explicit sexual and violent content in movies, television, video games, and other media forms have been used to push our nation into that new, “values-free,” social and legal standard.

Over the decades since the *Roth* decision, films, television, and operant conditioning “video games” have become increasingly sexual and violent — and the market has focused its attention on children. With today’s anything-goes media mindset, respected companies are making big money on sex, Satanism, and death. For example, Seagram’s, known in the past mainly as an alcoholic beverage giant, now makes millions of dollars promoting satanic rock guru and suicide peddler Marilyn Manson, whose “music” has been linked to the Littleton massacre and other carnage by adolescents. Witness the following example of Marilyn Manson’s message of hate and rebellion, which morally rudderless teens all over America are eating up and emulating in their dress, their attitudes, and, unfortunately, their actions:

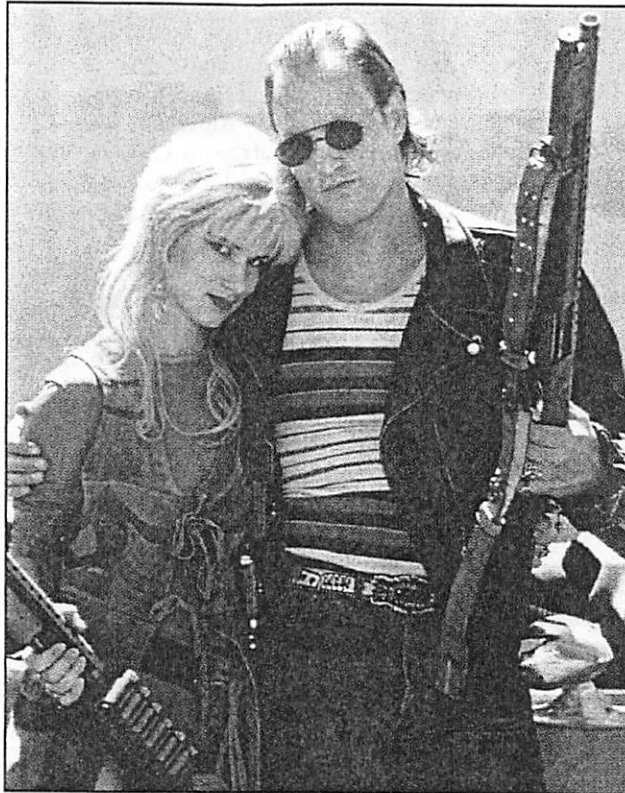
- “I am so all american, I’d sell you suicide I am totalitarian, I’ve got abortions in my eyes....”
- “Let’s just kill everyone and let your god sort them out....”
- “I’m gonna f\*\*\* you ’til somebody better comes along....”
- “The living are dead and I hope to join them too....”
- “Got no religion ... I wanna die young and sell my soul....”

On March 8, 1999, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that distributors Time Warner Inc. and director Oliver Stone could be sued by the family of a shooting victim in a crime allegedly inspired by the film *Natural Born Killers*. *Entertainment News* quoted media lawyers who swore to defend the right of “artists and directors to express their creative ideas without fear of liability.”

*Science* magazine quoted University of California neuroscientist Robert Malenka as he spoke at the National Academy of

Sciences: “Because of the advances we’ve made over the last decade ... [it is] now clear that environmental influences, from learning to medications ... modify thought and behavior by modifying brain structure and functioning.”

So how did Oliver Stone’s “creative ideas” modify thought and behavior by “modifying brain structure and functioning” of those teenagers who repeatedly viewed *Natural Born Killers*? In the



**Anti-hero worship: *Natural Born Killers* depicts murder and violence as thrilling, adventurous.**

movie, Stone depicts the murder victims as more depraved than the young killer-lovers. Using background screams of horror, pain, sex, joy, and profanity, Stone cynically intercuts color and black/white footage to subtly encourage his audience to identify with the killer anti-heroes. Viewers find themselves rooting for the couple as they murder her incestuous father, set her mother afire, and gaily shoot passersby. Finally, Stone has the couple drive off, their toddlers in tow, to live happily ever after, with no price to pay — legally, psychologically, or emotionally — for their heinous crimes.

Stone, of course, is unoriginal. His film is nothing more than standard indoctrination fare. War violence experts Dave Grossman and James Gibson note that part of the conditioning some soldiers get in training them to kill their enemies includes

exposure to films heavy with sadosexual content.

A \$130 million lawsuit filed on April 12, 1999, in Paducah, Kentucky lists among the defendants Time Warner and Polygram Filmed Entertainment, Inc., computer game makers, and Internet sex sites. On December 1, 1997, Michael Carneal, a 14-year-old student at Paducah’s Heath High School, shot and killed three girls in a group of praying classmates gathered in the school lobby. The lawsuit contends that the “video game industry,” “sex porn sites” and *Basketball Diaries*, a 1995 Polygram film, inspired Carneal’s brutal murders.

In *Basketball Diaries*, a teenager, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, shoots his Catholic school teacher and classmates as they sit defenseless before him. A preview for the movie *Coldblooded* was included with the *Basketball Diaries* video. In the preview, television teen idol Jason Priestly modeled murder for millions of impressionable and vulnerable youth. Priestly’s paternal mentor opens the short preview by saying:

“Ever killed a guy before?”

“No,” replies our hero.

“You lead a pretty boring life, don’t you,” remarks his mentor.

“You’ve never fired a gun before?”

“Never.”

But after practicing on a “pop up” firing range, Priestly asks:

“When do we do our first job?”

“Hang on tiger,” replies his mentor. “Be patient, something always comes up.”

Next, the preview cuts to a close-up of an obese man on the floor, on his knees, hands spread out before him, eyes closed, begging for his life, followed by the loud report of a gun and the unmistakable impression that the man has been killed.

Priestly’s character is thrilled to kill scores of unarmed men and women in the quick film cuts, saying, “I’ve never been good at anything before. It’s exciting!”

Sex and violence are interwoven throughout the movie. Scenes depict Priestly’s character freely shooting unarmed people, and are intercut with scenes of partial nudity and simulated physical intimacy with a willing, young girl. This portrayal of sex, crime, and violence, especially to hormonally challenged youngsters, is a powerful influence, and neurological experts

argue that such stimuli, after enough consumption, do alter a young person's brain patterns. Is it all that surprising that a vulnerable adolescent like Michael Carneal, who consumed countless hours of these kinds of images, shot to death defenseless Jessica James, Kayce Steger, and Nicole Hadley, and wounded five other praying students?

**M**edia elites insist that only the mentally disturbed would act out the toxic images which have been poured into the nation's environment 24 hours a day over the past years. This was the group, "mentally disturbed," that the obscenity laws, pre-1957, sought to protect. In 1989 the Institute of Medicine (IoM) claimed that 12 to 22 percent of American youth have a "diagnosable mental illness." So, the IoM would argue, on that evidence, between 10 million and 18 million of roughly 80 million American youths are demonstrably vulnerable to modified brain structure and function, some of whom will be inspired to act out the sexual brutality and murder modeled by mass media entertainment.

Corporations are regularly held accountable for dumping their toxic waste into our physical environment. Tobacco companies are now being held liable for the deaths of adult smokers who voluntarily used their products. But filmmakers and movie distributors like Oliver Stone and Warner have yet to be held responsible for the deadly effects their products inspire — particularly on the young. Producers of visual media which incite sex, violence, and crime must be held accountable for influencing our mental and cultural environment.

Since the Supreme Court's *Roth* decision, violent and pornographic images have improperly come under the First Amendment, which was designed by the Founding Fathers to protect thought, debate, and dialogue. In the April 26th *New York Times*, Denise Caruso noted that hundreds of scientific studies since 1972 establish the "direct correlation between exposure to media violence — now including video games — and increasing aggression."

The media have long applied desensitization, conditioning, and vicarious learning techniques to unsuspecting audiences, functionally restructuring and remolding the national mind. The '90s were declared by the U.S. Congress "The Decade of the

Brain," and what we have learned since 1900 about our executive organ must again inform laws protecting the vulnerable.

Dr. Gary Lynch, a neuroscientist at the University of California-Irvine, observes that an "event which lasts half a second within five to ten minutes has produced a structural change that is in some ways as profound as the structural changes one sees in [brain] damage." This rudimentary observation addresses the brain's processing of visual stimuli. Lynch's research is critical for any evaluation of today's toxic media. Michael Carneal typifies the profile of one molded by demonic music, violent video games, violent films, pornography, and racist ideology. America's heartless killers clearly hearken to German Nazi youth, and it is useful to recall some aspects of German National Socialist indoctrination.

Nazi youth were taught that brutalizing, even killing, was their right as supermen and that their parents' religious beliefs were irrelevant. Hitler's understanding of how to sway the masses is textbook, and can inform us about the power of the imagery forced upon us by movie-makers like Oliver Stone. Hitler's own words (as recorded in *Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion in World War II*, by Anthony Rhodes) predict other tragedies similar to those in Littleton and Paducah: "Propaganda must be addressed to the emotions and not to the intelligence, and it must concentrate on a few simple themes ... with lurid photographs of the ... sexual and physical."

Certainly current movies, television programs, music videos, and video games fit Hitler's brainwashing technique. Over a century ago scientists understood that certain images stir "emotions" from the right hemisphere of the brain, triggering visceral, red-alert responses and inevitably subverting the left-hemisphere "intelligence" tasks of reason, debate, and dialogue. If images reach the right hemisphere and compromise left hemisphere reasoning, cognition — "free speech" — is subverted by visual experience. Richard Restak, author of *The Brain* (1984) observes: "Inhibition rather than excitation is the hallmark of the healthy brain.... If all the neurons in the brain were excitatory we would be unable to do something as simple as reaching out for a glass of water."

The prefrontal cortex, our rational "command center," controls our psyche, and neurochemical research provides evi-

dence of the increasingly noxious effect of common media imagery on psyche and conduct. *Science* magazine noted, "Maintaining normal brain function ... requires a delicate balancing act: too much neuronal activity can be as bad as too little."

And educational psychologist Jane Haley, in *Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don't Think* (1990), reiterated that the human brain "is plastic," and noted that "large areas of uncommitted brain tissue can be molded ... to the demands of a particular environment."

Dr. Lynch writes that "in a matter of seconds, taking an incredibly modest signal, a word ... which is in your head as an electrical signal for no more than a few seconds, can ... leave a trace that will last for years."

What "trace" have the myriad violent and cynical films, television programs, pornographic magazines, obscene Internet sites, and occult video games left on our own future youth? David Gottlieb reported in *Scientific American* that one of the most important functions of the nervous system is to inhibit human excitation. He noted that inhibitory transmitters are so "widespread in the brain and spinal cord that they must fulfill a significant function." UCLA psychologist Dr. Margaret Kemeny cites ways in which the brain is impacted by exposure to violent, sexual, altruistic, or religious media: "Although it seems intangible, anytime we feel anything, anytime we think anything, anytime we imagine anything, there is activity in the brain that is taking place in the body at that time. That activity can then lead to a cascade of changes in the body."

Viewing obscene, violent, or sexual images does structurally alter a child's brain, mind, and memories, with brain tissue "molded" by excitatory media.

For roughly four decades, our nation's children have been guinea pigs for "entertainment" brain experiments. The deadly and grievous results are seen all around us, and were witnessed in Littleton, Paducah, and elsewhere.

Former President Theodore Roosevelt once observed: "To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society." Stripping legal protections from the vulnerable few has made all of America vulnerable. ■

*Dr. Reisman is the president of the Institute for Media Education. Her latest book is Kinsey, Crimes & Consequences (1998).*

