

WR121

Stephen Meck

Author's Note: I'm a 42 year old currently in the process of re-educating myself in preparation for a career change. I'm enrolled at MHCC in the fisheries program. My ultimate goal is to continue with my education at PSU and obtain a 4 year degree in Biology. For this essay, my main goal was to take various readings and class assignments and use them to illustrate a point – namely, that violence in the media is simply a reflection of ourselves. Violence in and of itself is a normal part of life; the values and judgments that we assign to it are where the problems lie.

Which Came First: Violence or the Media?

There has been a great deal of attention paid to the media's role in portraying and promoting violence in our culture. While it is normal for people to try to figure out what is at the root of various problems that plague us as a society, assigning blame is often more harmful than helpful and generally doesn't address the real underlying problems (which may be the point, in the end). Amongst the various media that have come under scrutiny, one I have long been a fan of are comic books (a.k.a. "graphic novels" for those who wish to be vogue, and/or give them more credibility). Amid the glut of available titles, one of my favorites has always been *The Batman*. It must be clear from the start that I'm *not* referring to the campy television show from the 1960's starring Adam West and Burt Ward. No, the individual I'm referring to is the Dark Knight. There is nothing funny about The Batman in his graphic novel form – in his latest incarnation he is a dark, brooding soul who questions everything about humanity and his own dysfunctional relationship to it. He eerily reflected my own insecurities while growing up, my constant questioning and doubting of the world around me. In doing so, *The Batman* allowed me to acknowledge and accept that we are all a little insane inside, that violence is a part of our nature and his exploits satisfied a need to experience this violence in a setting that would allow me mastery of it.

In the essay "Why We Crave Horror Movies," author Stephen King gets to his main point immediately by opening with, "I think that we're all mentally ill; those of us outside the asylum only hide it a little better – and maybe not all that much better, after all" (471). The thought that we may not be perfect beings, that we are flawed in some way, is at the very least stressful to most people. We constantly compare ourselves to

everyone around us and constantly reinvent ourselves in relation to where we think we fall on that sliding scale. Interestingly, this is considered “normal” behavior and is well-documented in various psychological sciences. If we feel pretty good about how things are going, the system works okay. I say this with some trepidation because any system where you are constantly trying to convince yourself of your own self-worth by contrasting yourself to someone else’s idea of what constitutes “normal” will undoubtedly leave you feeling forever unsatisfied and more than just a little insane. So, what to do? Well, how about reading about another person who had such a bad experience as a child (witnessing both of his parents brutally murdered in a robbery gone awry) that he grew up and became a costumed superhero dedicated to bringing justice to an indifferent humanity that didn’t seem to know the meaning of the word? If that doesn’t make you feel a little better about yourself and how you relate to the world around you, not much else will. The Batman has *serious* issues, and he knows it. His is a tortured existence; he is a vigilante out to uphold the law (and his ideology of right and wrong) but is more often than not at odds with the police force, who have a similar agenda. He realizes that he is not well mentally, that he is just a stone’s throw away from madness on any given day. This knowledge only serves to foster a deepening cynicism about the world around him and reinforces a continual erosion of his already questionable values. I always felt better after reading about his life and agonizing personal trials. In comparison, my life was a piece of cake. As a child growing up, it was a wonderful catharsis.

The process of growing up, taken by itself, is not an easy task. There are many powerful emotions vying for expression, violent thoughts being just one in a long line. Where did these thoughts come from? Television? Oh, but if life were that simple! It would be such an easy fix for society to end violent behavior tomorrow. Unfortunately, violence has been a part of human nature since time immemorial. The argument that the media causes people to become violent is ridiculous . . . people were violent long before our modern media machines became established, and if the media were somehow to disappear tomorrow people would continue to be violent well into the foreseeable future. In the essay “Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?” controversial rock singer Marilyn Manson states, “It is sad to think that the first few people on earth needed no books, movies, games or music to inspire cold-blooded murder. The day that Cain bashed his brother

Abel's brains in, the only motivation he needed was his own human disposition to violence" (443). He further goes on to say that if you want to find out who's to blame for the shooting massacre at Columbine High School, you needn't do anything more than pick up a rock and throw it – it's sure to hit someone who's guilty. His point sounds remarkably like Jesus' statement to the people of a village who were preparing to stone a woman for committing adultery, namely "Let he who is without sin, cast the first stone." The simple truth of the matter is we are ALL guilty of violence in one form or another, every last one of us. And unlike The Batman, we often don't even need an excuse to resort to violence. I can't tell you how many ants I cooked with a magnifying glass while I was growing up. If you had asked me why I did this as a child, I would have drawn a blank. I had no program, movie, video game or even comic book to guide me. The thoughts and motivation were already present. The fact is, there's no one to point the finger at, no blame to assign. Just take a look in the mirror if you need to have a face to associate it with. Again, this thought is stressful to most people. Violence generally has been given a negative connotation. But even that view is suspect – violence is malleable, and often serves a vital function.

The bad "rap" that violence has garnered over the years is largely unjustified. As with many things in life, it serves a purpose. For example, it would be hard to procure meat (food) without resorting to violence. Maintaining "order" in civilized society often requires violent behavior or at least the threat of force. Nature abounds with examples of violence; there is the "violent" storm, the competition between siblings for scraps of food or the sometimes bloody and debilitating sparring between males of various species for the attention of a female. It is a natural part of life. In "Killing Monsters," essayist Gerard Jones puts it in another way. He states, "At its most fundamental level, what I call creative violence – head-bonking cartoons, bloody videogames, playground karate, toy guns – gives children a tool to master their rage. Children will feel rage" (452). He goes on further to point out that the world is "uncontrollable and incomprehensible; mastering it is a terrifying, enraging task" (452). Having been a child once, I'd have to agree with him. I was all of the above, with the added bonus of being small, weak and unable to feed myself without the food being provided through money I didn't earn. I knew that one day things would be different, but I also knew that that day was a long ways off. The Batman

and others like him gave me an out, at least in my mind's eye. I could easily imagine that I was powerful and brave and that others feared me, precisely the opposite of the outside world. This rage I felt at being inadequate was a shot of energy, and I focused that energy towards changing my outside reality. And it worked to some degree – the confidence gained translated well to the outside world and allowed me to face the plethora of crises that life seemed intent on providing. The need (or as Stephen King put it, the “alligators inside”) had been satisfied.

What many people conveniently seem to forget is that “the media,” that nameless and faceless entity that we are forever exposed to and criticizing, is nothing more than a reflection of ourselves. It's handy to blame it for our woes, perhaps allowing us to forget for a time who is ultimately responsible. However, we need to remember that it is we who decide through a ratings system what will be viewed, and through readership what will be read. The prevalence of violence in our media suggests that we are a violent species. Having accepted that fact, it'd be far more productive to gather the energy we are currently wasting on pointing fingers and instead direct it towards educating our children (and ultimately ourselves) on how to harness that rage and channel it to constructive use. It's always going to be there – why not accept it? We'd all be a little more sane.

Works Cited

Jones, Gerald. “Killing Monsters.” Convergences. Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Bedford, 2002. 450-453.

King, Stephen. “Why We Crave Horror Movies.” Convergences. Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Bedford, 2002. 470-473.

Manson, Marilyn. “Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?” Convergences. Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Bedford, 2002. 443-445.

Instructor's Note: *It's easy to point fingers at violence in the media; it's much harder to admit our own need for or attraction to violence. Yet that's what Stephen Meck does—he suggests that violence is part of human nature, maybe even a necessary part. And he does this through the lenses of three source essays and his own interest in the graphic novel (comic book), The Batman. While the argument is complex, it's also clear and thought-provoking. Stephen juggles quotes from sources, conflicting viewpoints, specific examples and his own writing goals without dropping a ball. –Beth Sammons*