

## **Amusing America's Young Men Columbine High and the Entertainment Industry**

James A. Herrick

The shock of the Columbine High shootings is starting to wear off, and the inevitable questions are now being asked: How could this happen? What are we doing wrong, and what can we do about it? Blame is placed on inattentive parents, preoccupied school administrators, taunting students, a violent culture, and morally irresponsible owners of the mass media. Ultimately, of course, an individual's moral decision-making lies with the individual, and so the blame for these latest shootings rests squarely on the two young men who so carefully and coldly planned their final act of revenge for hurts received.

But, when considering their youth, the answer that these two boys are solely to blame for their unthinkable acts strikes me as factually and morally insufficient. There simply must have been external sources of the murderous impulses that drove these young men, violent forces relentlessly at work on them in the world they once inhabited and that we still do—the world of late twentieth century American culture.

As the father of two teenage sons I am appalled and outraged at what our culture offers young men as models of masculinity, as entertainment, and, ultimately, as nourishment for their souls. Driven by the bottom line and justifying its unconscionable products under the unassailable principles of freedom of speech and artistic expression, our euphemistically labeled “entertainment industry” garners staggering wealth from its most profitable and unexamined invention—the so-called “youth culture.” Increasingly this industry offers its least self-assured and thus most vulnerable clients—young men—a steady diet of violence as sport, murder as amusement, and hatred as lyric.

Examples are too readily at hand to seem even to need to be enumerated. Any issue of any computer gaming magazine—the audience for which will be boys between the ages of ten and eighteen—presents a bleak, macabre landscape of dismemberment and murder. Rock lyricists, the muses of youth culture, can find no nobler subject for their rhapsodizing than rape and suicide. Television ratings are chained to the reinvented wheel of “professional wrestling,” now transformed from the once relatively innocent mock combats of muscular clowns into the modern day mayhem of vicious demi-gods driven by blood-lust and revenge. Movies marketed to boys compete with one another for the highest body count and the most creative methods of massacring other members of one's own species. No image is too grizzly to be presented in all its gory slow-motion detail for the recreation of our nation's young men. That's entertainment?

I hope that as one consequence of the sobering and saddening reality of Columbine High—children murdering children inside that most American of institutions, a public school—that we as a nation will take a second look at what we have offered our young men for the purpose of profit, in the name of amusement, and under the protection of the Constitution. I would like to see the inventors and marketers of computer games, the owners of America's television networks and recording studios, and our nation's major movie producers join with parents and educators in

a national forum to discuss seriously the moral responsibilities of any individual or industry that profits from the sale of images and ideas to children. The blood of thirteen students and a teacher in Colorado calls out for such a discussion. Perhaps we will find it in ourselves as a nation to care more about the real moral consequences of what we offer our children to think about and thus to emulate, than we do about lining our pockets at their expense.

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