

**Beyond the Requisites:
Alternative Starting Points in the Study of Media Effects and Youth Violence**

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Criminology and media studies converge in a common fascination with the possibility of the predictability of human behavior and the power of representation. Both fields, historically, are empirically driven toward causal explanations of the fundamental relationship between social institutions and violent behavior. It is the problem of effects – the relationship of specific factors and variables of influence – upon human behavior that constitutes the framework for the driving questions and conditions of both fields of inquiry. This paper seeks to address this relationship by surveying the disciplinary frames – questions, theories, and methodologies – which typically accompany the study of youth violence and the media – and the manner in which these conventional frames relate or fail to relate to larger theoretical concerns in our understanding of media, youth, and violence. It is, in this sense, both a review of literature and an attempt to theorize complex intersections and disjunctures between oppositional kinds of knowledge. The study concludes with a discussion of what an alternative framework which privileges the social in the study of media effects might look like.

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INTRODUCTION

Part I: Introduction

Let us begin at the requisite starting point.

Washington, D.C. sniper Lee Boyd Malvo is presented as obsessed with the film *The Matrix* upon psychological evaluation.ⁱ A car theft ring is accused of staging their crimes in connection with the video game *Grand Theft Auto*.ⁱⁱ Rival gangs confront each other at a mall at the premiere of rapper 50 Cent's film, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, similar to scattered violent confrontations in the early 1990s at theaters showing *New Jack City* and *Boyz N' The Hood*.ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Harris and Jon Venables are believed to have re-enacted scenes from *Child's Play 3* in their murder of toddler James Bulger (Young, 1996). Events at Columbine and the actions of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are interpreted through discussions of films like *Heathers*, *The Basketball Diaries*, *The Matrix* (again), as well as the influence of rock bands Marilyn Manson and Nine Inch Nails and the video game *Doom*.^{iv} Goth culture and heavy metal music constitute courtroom evidence in the case against the teen-aged Memphis Three who are convicted of the murder of three small boys and become the subjects of two documentaries, *Paradise Lost I* and *II*.^v In season six of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, the plot of an entire episode centers upon the hit-and-run homicide of a prostitute, a crime that is modeled by the on-screen

perpetrators after a popular video game (which is in turn modeled after the real-life *Grand Theft Auto* - again). Senators Hillary Clinton and Joseph Lieberman lobby for the Family Entertainment Protection Act, legislation that would, among other things, restrict the sale of video games to minors. Clinton also pushes for more federally funded research on media effects, insisting “We don’t know the effects...Never have children been raised in such a media-saturated environment. How do we get more research, better facts and evidence?”^{vi} In the aftermath of newly released F.B.I. crime rates showing a 2.5% increase in violent crime, Criminologist James Fox warns of a national resurgence in gang activity and youth violence as children of the 1990s come of crime age, invoking a language profoundly reminiscent of the conservative criminological discourse of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which warned of teen superpredators.^{vii}

The requisite starting point in any public debate concerning the role of media effects and youth violence insists upon an insertion of the anecdotal into social patterns of significance - repetitively. The atypical and often times profoundly unique circumstances of a particular violent incident will enter public discourse in a desperate sort of fashion – one where claimsmakers strain toward the necessity of meaning, explanation, patterns, and causality at complex sites of disjuncture in the social order, ruptures that, by definition, defy suture (Young, 1996). As Stanley Cohen writes of the James Bulger murder, “it was precisely the rarity of the event and its context that made it so horrible” (2002: ix). It is also the fact that these events intersect in new and compelling ways with technologies of representation (Bulger’s abduction on CCTV; Columbine on school security camera; film showings as sites for “setting off” confrontations) that they become singled out and replayed intensively and extensively by media (Young, 1996). They are, thus, visible failures in the social order which achieve national and international audiences. As failures and ruptures, they are as well zones where the gap between the “real,” in its lack of accessibility, and its representation is foregrounded – a gap which is so disturbing that actors strain always toward its quick but inherently unworkable resolution. At these ends, public and media attention focalize in a compulsion to resist, rather than meditate, upon the limits of representation. And this compulsion continually manifests itself in a steady popular resurgence of simultaneous fascination and repulsion with mediated acts of youth violence. Part of the reasons for this intense concentration upon children depends upon the disciplinary categories that shape notions of “childhood,” including the prominence of psychological/cognitive perspectives on childhood development. Juveniles, when interpreted as minds and bodies that are not fully grown or developed, carry with them a peculiar contradiction of both cultural innocence and volatility. Consequently, the violent acts of children are sights from which we seek to turn away and yet cannot. These acts/images circulate across media, replicating from the real to the news to prime time drama to movie theater to video game and back again. And although the nature of this gaze as it is directed at youth violence in public, political, and scientific discourse is profoundly problematic, it is rarely problematized. As Pierre Bourdieu points out in his critique of journalism, the anecdotal – the scandal, the high-profile instance – seemingly always distracts us from rather than bring us toward analysis (1996) and professional socialization as journalists, as scientists, as criminologists always occurs within these kinds of conventional constraints. This problematic is the structural framework for a revisiting of the media effects debate and its relationship to criminology.

Criminology and media studies converge in a common fascination with the possibility of

the predictability of human behavior and the power of representation. Both fields, historically, are empirically driven toward causal explanations of the fundamental relationship between social institutions and violent behavior. It is the problem of effects – the relationship of specific factors and variables of influence – upon human behavior that constitutes the framework for the driving questions and conditions of both fields of inquiry. In the specific instance of the measurement of youth violence and media effects, these fields intersect in a manner which provides strategic insight into the privileging of particular kinds of disciplinary perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and research methodologies in the pursuit of a rather elusive probability: the conditions under which youthful actors will perform deviantly, criminally, violently, and the role of a specific and increasingly powerful set of late modern social institutions in that probability, the complex of institutions, practices, and discourses which make up mass media. The question of effects, consequently, is, in many ways, the defining relationship between criminology and the study of representation and the juvenile their quintessential subject. This paper seeks to address this relationship by surveying the disciplinary frames – questions, theories, and methodologies – which typically accompany the study of youth violence and the media – and the manner in which these conventional frames relate or fail to relate to larger theoretical concerns in our understanding of media, youth, and violence. It is, in this sense, both a review of literature and an attempt to theorize complex intersections and disjunctures between oppositional kinds of knowledge.

Part II: The State of Things

Media Effects Research

The media effects debate sits persistently center stage in the study of violence and representation broadly, and youth violence and representation specifically. From the inception of mass media, particularly the rise of the popular press, film, and radio, assumptions have existed concerning the possibility of an “all-powerful” and highly influential media (Jenson, 2002; McQuail, 2000). The rise of the social sciences, particularly the intersection of sociology and psychology, alongside of the rise of the media as a major social institution, create a context for the emergence of the kinds of concerns which historically have marked the study of media effects. With a new emphasis upon statistics and probability techniques, tracing the impact of mass communications upon human behavior and social life made a seemingly natural point of scientific analysis, particularly given the newness of such modes of technology as movies and television. And from its earliest phases, a focus upon children and adolescent youths defined some of the most important studies in this arena. Beginning with the pioneering efforts of the *Payne Fund Studies*^{viii}, a theoretical and methodological emphasis upon the relationship between media content and effects upon children and youth has constituted the centerpiece of media research, particularly national studies. Several of these reports evolved out of larger crime and justice commissions, including the 1969 National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, which included, beyond its final report, another report titled *Violence and the Media*. Others were monumental research efforts undertaken specifically to address the issue of media and violence such as the 1972 Surgeon General’s Report on Television and Social Behavior and the National Institute of Mental Health’s 10 year follow-up in 1982, the Attorney General’s Task Force on Family Violence in 1984, and the ongoing National Television Violence Study.

These reports are fascinating in their scope and scale. They are studies which emerge out

of the social conditions of late modernity, specifically the uncertainties which accompany the arrival and pervasiveness of new technologies (motion pictures with the Payne Fund; television with the 1960s reports – coded into a massive civil rights display; internet, gaming, and heavy metal/rap music in contemporary settings). They are, thus, socio-politically, culturally, technologically, and scientifically contextualized: The research questions which drive the study of media effects and violence are only possible by way of innovations in statistical measurement, technology, and public access to and anxieties with new modes of media and their relationship to social life and other social institutions (family, education, religion, etc.). Entertainment is markedly politicized in these contexts and the formation and implementation of these studies involve politicians, policymakers and powerful lobbying groups. They are consequently able to assemble large amounts of public and private support in funding and are generally attached to key claimsmakers within the political and scientific community (including the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry). Routinely, they bring together many of the top researchers in the fields of communications and psychology for that particular historical moment in order to take on the question of the media's role in the production of violence.

The methodologies, consequently, which inform these efforts tend to be wide-ranging, both quantitative and qualitative, but the early landmark studies are most notable historically for particularly innovative attempts to integrate fairly new high-powered statistical analyses of national data through quantitative measures. These early frameworks often relied upon laboratory research as well as content analyses, surveys, fieldwork, and autobiography – and, consequently, laid out the contours for future study. Typically, for instance, research programs would include a content analysis of the medium's violence (Dale, 1935; Baker and Ball, 1969; Gerbner, 1970; Gerbner and Gross, 1976; National Television Violence Study), interviews with viewers and media professionals directed at attitudinal assessments of normative behavior (Baker and Ball, 1969; Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1971), national surveys measuring actual experiences with violence (Baker and Ball, 1969), measurements of media habits and preferences often through observational measures of television viewing (Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1971), field experiments (Feshbach and Singer, 1971; Leyens et al., 1975), and laboratory experiments and observational studies directed at measuring aggression (Bandura et al., 1963; Bandura, 1965; Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1971).

Out of these reports some of the primary frames for media effects research develop, including Bandura's modeling theory of media and behavior. Here, behavioral effects are mapped through laboratory studies where children or adults are shown violent images and then their behavior is observed (Bandura et al., 1963). Bandura's studies are now famous for introducing the notion that violence is socially learned behavior from media content where children imitate media role models. Another significant theoretical contribution which emerges from this kind of work, cultivation theory, insists that television (in particular) cultivates particular understandings about power relations and identity politics, including who constitutes perpetrators and who constitutes victims, thus reaffirming or reproducing particular kinds of social hierarchies and worldviews (Gerbner, 1970; Gerbner and Gross, 1976). In a more recent

invocation of this perspective, Gerbner (1994) insists that heavy users of television develop a “mean world” perspective, one which exaggerates fear of crime and overestimates individual chances in the involvement with violence. As Lowry and DeFleur (1995) argue, these national studies serve as mass communications landmarks, establishing the primary questions, theoretical frameworks, and methods for the study of media effects. Most of the research which follows builds from their work, testing, reiterating, and challenging their frames and findings. Somewhat surprisingly, however, media effects research which empirically tests these theoretical contexts through the collection of new data and its analysis is relatively small in comparison with the commentary that surrounds it. In the end, there is estimated to be “somewhere around 300 carefully designed and executed empirical studies that have undergone rigorous peer review and have been published in the most respected scholarly journals” and then supplementing the research base is “another set of publications – numbering up to 3,000 – in which other scholars have reviewed those findings, synthesized new insights or promulgated the central conclusion: Exposure to violence in the media increases risks of harmful effects” (Potter, 2003: 26). This conclusion – the central contribution of media effects research – then, depends upon a dynamic core of routinely cited and/or replicated studies in the context of a much larger literature which perpetually and chronically reviews previous work.

The effects mapped by these studies typically include concerns directed at the following, overlapping conditions, each of which expresses a particular affinity with concerns for the cognitive and moral development of youth: an erosion of moral standards, the stimulation of emotional arousal (measured physiologically and interpreted often as aggression or sexual stimulation), harmful effects upon health, and the development of aggressive or violent behavior through a number of psychologically-coined terms, including disinhibition, desensitization, or the production of fear. The parameters of this research center upon the analysis of short-term and long-term effects in primarily psychological paradigms, including attention to behavioral categories (imitation, copying, triggering, disinhibition, attraction), physiological measures of arousal (fight-flight reactions, excitation transfer, narcotizing, etc.), emotional contexts (fear, desensitization, catharsis), attitudinal changes (opinion creation, reinforcement, cultivation), cognitive processes (learning behaviors, acquiring social norms), and, finally, societal effects, where a cultural and normative mean is hypothesized as a worldview which becomes progressively more aggressive, violent, and desensitized with social institutions entering modes of crisis in response to this more cynical and apathetic shift in perceptions. The fact that the social resides in a single category of its own is telling and reveals the manner in which these kinds of studies quite clearly merge sociological, psychological, and communications paradigms in a predominantly positivist, behaviorist, and quantitative framework – frameworks from which the social and cultural are historically difficult to access with any depth.

The fact that the majority of the research in the field consists not of original data collection and analysis but rather meta-analyses and review (Freedman, 1984, 2002; Hearold, 1986; Paik and Comstock, 1994; Wood et al., 1991; Felson, 1996; Bushman and Anderson, 2001; Anderson et al., 2003) constitutes a compelling instance of disproportionality, one worthy of analysis in itself. When a particular research problem provokes more discussion about the terms and meanings of scientific findings than it does actual research, then it potentially reveals something important about the nature of inquiry and in this case, the role of science in the study of media effects and the intractability of this debate under its current configurations in theoretical

and research design. Dick Hebdige refers to this kind of naturalization process as one where “*particular* sets of social relations, *particular* ways of organizing the world appear to us as if they were universal and timeless” (203). Peer review in the context of dominant paradigms always functions through processes of selection to refine the already articulated frames of scientific research, thus always working to both narrow and limit the research questions asked, theoretical frameworks proposed, and methods chosen – even in the best and most interdisciplinary of contexts (Kuhn, 1996). Thus, there is a certain predictability and conventionality within this literature that is by now well-known to media researchers. Particular disciplines, theories, methodologies, questions, and objects take precedence. The field of media effects itself comes with its own requisite debate, routinely reduced to those who believe in the scientific proof of effects and those who refute the evidence which makes up such proof, a field which consequently is always generating more studies, more accumulation of debate – but only within existing and legitimized frameworks. Here, the task of the criminologist “becomes, like Barthes’, to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to trace them out as ‘maps of meaning’ which obscurely re-present the very contradictions they are designed to resolve or conceal” (Hebdige, 2006), not simply of representations and media texts but of science itself.

The Media Effects Debate

Most introductions of media textbooks and mass communications handbook begin their discussion of media effects and violence by alluding to its conventionally controversial character. Many attempt to resolve this debate by explaining the debate and asserting the merits of both positions with a call for balance. This balance, interestingly, generally resolves itself through an assertion of the obviousness of some mode of media effects upon behavior. For example, Gary Potter, like many effects proponents, insists that, regardless of flaws in individual research studies, in all of these studies, a general consensus emerges that must be taken seriously concerning the relationship of the media to violence, keeping in mind that violence when used generally in the effects literature is usually a reference to youth violence specifically. He argues, “Although acceptance of the research evidence is not unanimous, the number of people who continue to believe there is no link between exposure to media violence and negative effects has dwindled to a very few. For example, during the 1980s, Jonathan Freedman continued to publish several critiques of the existing social science research (Freedman 1984, 1986). Today, the lone dissenting voice in the research community is Jib Fowles, who recently published a book titled *The Case for Television Violence* (1999)” (Potter, 28). Here, Potter reduces the debate to a fading critique which is given voice by two researchers alone – two researchers who work within the primary boundaries of media effects research. His critique, importantly, is deeply embedded in the parameters of the media effects literature which privileges psychological and mass communications perspectives. As Potter asserts, Freedman (1984, 2002) has argued consistently across his work the notion of limited effects – but within the frameworks of the field. His analyses are largely reviews of the existing literature and they emphasize the correlational relationships between violence and media rather than causal models. Consequently, in his assessments of field experiments (where subjects in natural settings are exposed to various kinds of television exposure and then are measured for aggressiveness) and correlational studies (in which various kinds of existing viewing behaviors are measured against patterns of aggressiveness), he finds correlations, but not causation. The debate is interpretive by nature –

dependent upon the way in which one reads and translates previous research. More significantly, as a recognized critique, it is one which achieves acknowledgment by operating within the terms of the debate itself. As we will see, it is more difficult to articulate other kinds of effects which are not easily measured through causal frames. In such a way, particular kinds of knowledge achieve legitimacy and dominance.

Take, for example, the case of the laboratory and media effects, the most idealized research setting in the measurement of youth behavior. Freedman finds, like much of the research in the field, that laboratory experiments demonstrate increased aggressive behavior when viewing violent material. The divide in the research community here is manifested in the interpretation of the social relevance of the laboratory, a particularly crucial site of critique within the effects literature. Because laboratory settings are inherently social simulations, they are difficult places from which to elucidate social practice. To be terribly reductive, neither violence nor aggression in real-world contexts may relate to punching dolls or distributing shocks in laboratory settings (although these kinds of lab experiments, specifically the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Milgram studies, as explanatory frameworks in public discourse, have achieved recent popularization in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib and other prison/torture scandals). Critics also like to point to the role of research expectations in such contexts where subjects are necessarily influenced by researcher demands. Actors are also likely to exhibit a self-conscious awareness of the experimental status of the setting and this changes behavior. Consequently, laboratory settings and the manner in which they display violent material is distinctly different from real-world viewing habits and conditions which are diverse and intersect with other kinds of social conditions and institutions. Of course, each of these critiques is bound up with one fundamental obstacle to this kind of research for the critical media scholar, one where no act or behavior can be reduced to a single variable or set of variables nor are these settings revelatory of some defining characteristic about groups, populations, and human nature in general. However, these studies remain cited as some of the most powerful evidence for the role of media in the production of youth violence and they routinely re-emerge at moments when explanation becomes intensely complex and volatile.

These studies, with their proclivity toward direct effects, overlook the more profound ways in which the media indirectly and informally enter into the practice of everyday life as well as the larger interpretive kinds of research questions and theoretical orientations which are not causally driven. Deriving from behaviorist schools of thought and positivistic in approach, these empirical approaches insist in a functionalist and overly-deterministic manner that demonstrable patterns in behavior may be mapped through the measurement of external stimuli upon the cognitive functions of individuals and, more generally, groups in a manner that omits both culture and the social – the fundamental forces shaping the image itself. These studies as well have had difficulty measuring long-term effects and have largely been relegated to a discussion of short-term impacts of viewing habits in their theorizing of predictability. In the end, the “legacy” of media effects, as Yvonne Jewkes insists, is fraught with the problematics of both the potentiality and failure of isolating the mass complex of the media into a single factor of influence upon human and specifically youth behavior (2004). Consequently,

Much effects research cannot adequately address the subtleties of media meanings, the polysemy of media texts (that is, they are open to multiple interpretations), the unique

characteristics and identity of the audience member, or the social and cultural context within which the encounter between media text and audience member occurs. It mistakenly assumes that we all have the same ideas about what constitutes ‘aggression’, ‘violence’ and ‘deviance’, and that those who are susceptible to harmful portrayals can be affected by a ‘one-off’ media incident, regardless of the wider context of a lifetime of meaning-making.... It also ignores the possibility that influence travels the opposite way; that is, that the characteristics, interests and concerns of the audience may determine what media producers produce (Jewkes, 2004: 11).

However, the complexity of this critique continues to be reduced to one of no effects or limited effects – a zero sum formula in which one either accepts the possibility of effects or denies it. This critique manifests itself through an unusual preoccupation with method and its critique – a critique, I would argue, that actually seeks to articulate a larger theoretical disagreement as to the proper terms of debate and study – and that disagreement depends upon what happens when one particular field or framework has a definitive influence on the shape of a social problem. As Carter and Weaver assert, this debate largely disintegrates into an oppositional framework that overlooks the complexity of what is being studied, “a binaristic model” where “you are either with ‘us’ or you are one of ‘them’” (Carter and Weaver, 2003: 15). A concern with the polarized nature of critique is echoed in many of the criminological studies which focus upon the effects debate. Marcus Felson argues that “the inconsistencies of the findings make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the effects of exposure to media violence on aggressive behavior” (Felson, 1996: 123). He also voices similar concerns, insisting “it is not clear what lesson the media teaches about the legitimacy of violence, or the likelihood of punishment. To some extent that message is redundant with lessons learned from other sources of influence. The message is probably ambiguous and is likely to have different effects on different viewers” (Felson, 1996: 124). In fact, some researchers have found a reverse effect: “Contrary to what might be expected on the basis of previous research, there is no evidence in the aggregate data to support the claim that high levels of exposure to television violence are related to high rates of violent crime. In fact, the relationship that does emerge is in the opposite direction. The data consistently indicate that high levels of exposure to violent television content are accompanied by relatively low rates of violent crime” (Messner, 1986: 228). Others take issue with the psychological terms which make up the “effects” of this research. Stanley Cohen argues powerfully throughout *States of Denial* that:

Taken individually, the elements of the desensitization thesis make some sense. But the whole thesis is an urban myth. There is not the slightest evidence for this in personal biography (sensitive souls hardening away with each week of television) or in cultural history (where exactly the opposite could be argued: a heightened emotional sensitivity to the suffering of distant others). Denial cannot result merely from familiarity and repetition....Desensitization is a treatment method used in behaviour therapy to gradually induce patients to give up their troublesome phobias. As such, it works with a crude stimulus – response psychology that ignores mental reflection, symbolic meaning and cultural context” (2001: 191).

In the end, the consensus in criminology and critical media studies is that the media cannot be construed as a primary cause of crime in society or as a promulgator of youth violence nor can it

be argued that it has no effects. Rather, most argue that “the actual relationship of the media to crime and justice lies somewhere between these two extremes” (Surette, 1998: 2). The structure of debate then is modeled in a way so that much of the discussion of media effects is cyclical – an assertion of effects which is countered and then re-asserted.

Criminology and Effects

In criminology, the question of media effects manifests itself in a number of ways which extend outside of this dominant paradigm. Here, the relationships between youth and violence are most likely to be conjugated through the lens of moral panics. Consequently, media “effects” are more likely to be inverted in a manner which emphasizes the ways in which youth are constructed as dangerous threats through a variety of discursive frameworks. Non-conformist, unconventional behavior by youths has been defined within criminological literature as an unusually high profile target for state social control and public anxiety (Becker, 1963; Cohen, 1972; Hall et al., 1978; Hebdige, 1979). The role of media is instrumental to this targeting. Moral panics depend upon media coverage that is often sensationalized and exaggerated while still attached to some kernel of a real social problem, often the single case. Routinely the worst instances of behavior are framed as typical – thus, the resurgence of the anecdotal – and in public rhetoric, the episodic is transformed into the epidemic – behavior that is both extreme and extending from margins into central sites of social life (Reinarman, 1997). As Angela McRobbie points out, however, youth subcultures do not serve as central sites of moral panics in the manner in which they once did; rather, now moral panics are more likely to circulate and be amplified through larger kinds of social concerns which intersect with the youthful status of target groups (1994).

In this manner, the kinds of crimes which become the object of public discourse tend to be mapped into larger social anxieties about race, class, gender, and sexuality. Moral panics are thus indicative of how cultures conceptualize not just threat but anxiety and insecurity, specifically in the way in which these amorphous fears demand a re-assertion of public safety through existing social orders and hierarchies. In this regard, criminology’s treatment of youth violence and media at least obliquely invokes questions about the relationship of these representations to larger kinds of social problems. More fundamentally, the moral panic, as a structuring concept, always references a gap between reality and representation. In this way, panics are built upon a similar kind of assumption as much of the more conventional media effects literature, which assumes a causally-related and measurable social reality. Both view the media as an agent of social and behavioral change and one that is profoundly disproportional in its emphasis upon violence and crime. These assumptions suggest that social actors simply import negative information or knowledge back into social practice and experience but this process is far more complex. Foundational to social constructionist perspectives is the idea that people use knowledge culled from the media to construct an image of the world and reality upon which they then act. Where social constructionist and moral panic perspectives differ from media effects frameworks has to do ultimately with the modeling of causality. As Surette insists, “what a people hold to be real, true, valued, and just is largely acquired symbolically rather than directly” (7). Building from Surette, who argues that for areas of reality where most people have limited non-media sources of info (such as crime and violence), the media play an even more prominent role in determining what the socially constructed reality ultimately looks like, the

question arises, in late modernity where so much of social experience is mediated, of how that experience is profoundly changed. In this regard, the social construction of crime and justice emphasizes the way in which the anecdotal is privileged and the manner in which large amounts of attention are focused upon typically rare criminal events. It is, then, in its own way, an antidote to traditional media effects claims.

Amidst such strategies and constraints, crime policy and cultural understandings surrounding youth violence are more likely to match perceptions of violence and victimization rather than actualities. This is confirmed in the fear of crime literature which insists that fear plays a large role in the construction and implementation of public policy, attitudes, and assumptions toward crime built into popular consciousness (Zimring, 1998; Sasson, 1995). In the best of what this literature has to offer with respect to representation, the media operate as an ordinary routine and discourse of daily life – not directly responsible for violence, fear, or crime but probably inseparable from its imagining and from social reaction. For this reason, one of contemporary criminology's perpetual reminders in the study of representation is that the media must always be theorized in the context in which its messages are disseminated: with, against, and in the midst of other social institutions, practices, and experience (Lupton and Tulloch, 1999; Girling et al., 1999; Hollway and Jefferson, 1997; Taylor et al., 1996; Sparks, 1992). It is, as Ien Ang argues, not a question of the location of power but rather of how "relations of power are organized within the heterogeneous practices of media use and consumption," where consumption is always a site of cultural struggle. "What kind of viewer," and by extension, what kind of social actor or effects results from this problem then "can be seen as the outcome of this struggle, an outcome, however, that is never definitive because it can always be contested and subverted" (2006: 188). As Anthony Giddens argues, "Sociological knowledge spirals in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing both itself and that universe as an integral part of that process" (1990: 15-16). To date, the ability to track the nature of this complex interaction and the recursive quality of the role of the media in social life remains underdeveloped.

Rather, the main contribution of the fear of crime literature to this debate is an understanding of how the high levels of concern and preoccupation with media effects and youth violence are bound up with a range of diffuse anxieties and insecurities about change, identity, and social position. Recent work in this area points to the manner in which fear is a displacement for larger and in many cases closer to home concerns – a displaced anxiety (Lupton and Tulloch, 1999; Hollway and Jefferson, 1997) manifested in those moments where crime serves as a "repository for anxieties about other fears that are more intractable and diffuse for the individual" (Lupton and Tulloch, 1999: 513). As Sheldon Ungar insists, "the sociological domain carved out by moral panic is most fruitfully understood as the study of sites and conventions of social anxiety and fear" (2001: 271). Methodologically, these studies emphasize the manner in which "fear of crime...always involves issues of representation and meaning, and therefore it is vital to understand the character and uses of mass media in conjunction with other sources of meaning. This underlines the point that 'gossip' and media need to be analysed together, in local context, rather than in isolation" (Lupton and Tulloch, 513). Such a framework emphasizes the inability to separate key variables of influence, insisting upon a larger theoretical framework for understanding the interaction between a vast variety of everyday discourses, representation, communication, and productions of meaning. Consequently, in revisions of

moral panic frameworks, the media becomes inseparable from social life, practice, and experience:

“In addition to unpacking ‘society’, on the one hand, and the ‘media’, on the other, the third consideration in updating models of ‘moral panic’ need be that the media is no longer something separable from society. Social reality is experienced through language, communication and imagery. Social meanings and social differences are inextricably tied up with representation. Thus when sociologists call for an account which tells how life actually is, and which deals with the real issues rather than the spectacular and exaggerated ones, the point is that these accounts of reality are already representations and sets of meanings about what they perceive the ‘real’ issues to be. These versions of ‘reality’ would also be impregnated with the mark of media imagery rather than somehow pure and untouched by the all-pervasive traces of contemporary communications” (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995: 571).

As Stuart Hall insists, the idea of “perfectly transparent communication” or representation is a myth, challenged by the notion of “systematically distorted communication” which is communication that accounts for context – cultural and social – in the process of interpretation. In this respect, reality is only and always signified, never a direct representation. A traditional media effects perspective depends in its emphasis upon causality on the notion that media be far more manageable and predictable than such a perspective permits. Consequently, the effects literature leaves us at an impasse which cannot explain “the labyrinthine web of determining relations which now exist between social groups and the media, ‘reality’ and representation” (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995: 560) and the contributions of criminological and critical media research leave us wondering what the kinds of studies which can explain such complexity might look like. And yet, it is always the first and most reductive framework which emerges in public discourse and media representation in the aftermath of Columbine, of the Bulger incident, or of the arrival of a new and popular violent technology of representation – such as *Grand Theft Auto III: San Andreas*. To understand what is really at stake in such a course of action, we must confess what is omitted – which is the structure of things itself.

Part III: The Structure of Things

“These are, of course, the great traditional questions of causality, contingency, and prediction in the human sciences, but in a world of disjunctive global flows, it is perhaps important to start asking them in a way that relies on images of flow and uncertainty, hence chaos, rather than on older images of order, stability, and systematicness. Otherwise, we will have gone far toward a theory of global cultural systems but thrown out process in the bargain. And that would make these notes part of a journey toward the kind of illusion of order that we can no longer afford to impose on a world that is so transparently volatile” (Appadurai, 2005: 600).

An alternative starting point.

It is at least partially because violence is real that these issues of theory, method, and disciplinary boundaries are so important. As Klaus Bruhn Jensen argues, “At the level of

individual socialization, then, the modern media are bound to inform how people think and act, even if the evidence will normally be indirect or circumstantial. At the level of social institutions as well, the media are one of the inevitable structural conditions under which social interaction takes place” (2002: 152). All media researchers must, by definition, believe that the media impact society, and citizens and researchers alike believe and will continue to believe that a link must exist between the media and violence. However, this assertion is particularly misleading as it is not the link itself (which no doubt does exist in complex layers of interaction) but the manner in which the link is popularly and scientifically imagined (as direct, causal, and fully explanatory) which is analytically and practically problematic.

A reframing of these kinds of concerns hinges upon the kinds of questions and approaches we imagine as well as an account of cultural and social contexts. Consequently, it is an interdisciplinary framework which promises the most productive generation of these kinds of innovations precisely because interdisciplinary contexts compel the confrontation of disciplines. In juxtaposing psychological, sociological, criminological, cultural, and media paradigms, the limits of disciplinary boundaries are laid bare in sometimes forceful oppositions and demands for accountability. Such an approach is genealogical in a Foucauldian sense in that it depends upon mapping discourse in order to “use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest” (Foucault, 1980: 53-54), to “make the organization of knowledge cry out under a harsh interrogation” (Dumm, 1987: 38). In this respect, the point of this piece is not simply to forward another critique of the media effects literature directed specifically at its positivist and otherwise functionalist and behaviorist underpinnings (which, importantly, have their own contributions and place in the construction of knowledge) but rather pose a question of origins and the history of the present – of how the dominant shape of science and knowledge surrounding the study of media and violence came to be – and why this is the shape of interaction and explanation most likely to be demanded and relied upon in public discourse. The larger theoretical questions then are ones which seemingly reference the elephant in the room: What is it about media representations and the explanation of youth violence that culminates in such a durable convergence and configuration of knowledge, one that is so persistent in its assertions, oppositions, and omissions? And, importantly, what would it be to conceptualize this relationship otherwise?

The work of following these questions commences with the anecdotal and the episodic – with those very specific cases which achieve representation and enter cultural discourse with such persistence and insistence – with Columbine, Lee Boyd Malvo, James Bulger, and Grand Theft Auto. Here, in these ephemeral moments where the media effects debate routinely surfaces as an immediate response to acts of youth violence, there is an opening for theorizing the work of representation and youth violence. This linkage is crucial in that a singular case expresses the potential and often serves to focalize so many concerns with diverse social anxieties. The social construction of identity is central to these fears. Children and young adults are perceived as susceptible to influence, impressionable, thereby innocent and vulnerable, but also dangerous and unstable – invoking conflicting categories of childhood and adolescence. They are, thus, perceived to be fundamentally volatile social participants. Acts of youth violence which are selected for representation are often, again, episodic events framed as epidemic and they serve as cultural barometers attached to notions of rupture and social breakdown. As Hebdige argues such events and the subcultures to which they are attached, youth subcultures specifically, constitute “noise,” “interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real

events and phenomena to their representation in the media” (207). As Mary Douglas theorizes, community and social boundaries are defined through these kinds of perceptions and cultural frames of danger and risk (1992). The intersection between youth and violence also marks a portent of what is to come, where the potentiality of the next generation is analyzed and theorized popularly – with uncertainty a hallmark of this kind of cultural practice. Consequently, considerations of youth and violence are framed in notions of process and development, connected to the engineering and prospects of the future of society but always in an uneasy context of doubt and insecurity. And of particular significance, there is a resurgence of a politics of knowledge entrenched in the media effects debate. Youth, in particular, are primary consumers of media. In fact, as Boethius argues, “they pioneer the modern, they fall upon new media and media products” (1995: 48). Thus, youthful actors are often far more knowledgeable about new media than adults or older generations. And certainly, contemporary youth are more media savvy than any previous generation. Such knowledge and the abilities and skills to use it may be threatening, its consequences unforeseeable, with the foundations of long-standing norms subject to transformation.

Beyond this, the acts of violence we usually seek to account for through media influence mark the limits of representation – they are often acts of extreme and ultimate violence, ending in death. This character, in itself, heightens the sense of anxiety which accompanies these incidents as they are precisely sites about which we can do very little. This quality amplifies the extensive visibility of the event as a site of public fascination. As Alison Young theorizes, “Here, the limit is that of representation, with the discovery that the content of images and medium of their display have no guaranteed interpretability. The result is anxiety, because the limit failed to do its work in shoring off the ‘beyond’: If James Bulger’s murder is unthinkable, how did two children come to think it and perform it? The media’s symptomatic response to that anxiety is to offer another sense of the limit, to re-state it as that beyond which we will not go. Hence the persistent exhortation in the media to feast our eyes on the invisible (the abduction) and to imagine the unimaginable (the murder)” (1996: 95).

For Young, it is this very quality of paradox which constitutes a key parameter for the study of representation, one “whose functions and values we generally prefer not to remember” (95). As Young insists, “in reconstituting the value of the limit, it becomes necessary for the media to offer an explanation for Venables’ and Thompson’s actions. And so the question ‘why did they do it?’ resounds through the media coverage and through all discussions of the event” (96).

This problem persists as the driving condition of media effects research and, as Young insists, there are “consequences which accrue from the answer chosen” to this question. And the answer chosen will necessarily derive from the kind of “cultural frame which permits some explanations to make sense to us. What that frame reveals is where we wish to place blame (with parents, with technologised images of violence) and the satisfaction that such blaming affords us” (Young, 96). Thus, “the desire for an explanation speaks to the need for the limit to be re-affirmed: Venables and Thompson went beyond the limit because they were abused/ badly brought up/ allowed to watch violent movies. Thus any child which is *not* abused/ badly brought up/ allowed to watch violent movies will not follow these two beyond the border of imagination” (97). The logic is not simply easy and convenient, but seductively naturalized and protective -

what Young refers to as “empirical waywardness.” So, in public discourse, the anecdotal, the atypical are quick to be the subject of media focus and coverage as they are singular and promise resolution. Their display is insistent, repetitive, and cyclical in order to offset the contradictions and ruptures which cannot be resolved. Individualized agents and monolithic conceptualizations of institutions are more easily made culpable than structures, processes and systems and the human lives they support. Science itself makes more sense when it operates through parameters of causality rather than complex social contexts and cultural relations – when it drives toward explanation. And youth violence makes a compelling site for the articulation and containment of a host of late modern anxieties.

All of these characteristics intersect with the kind of ontological insecurity that derives from and defines contemporary social life. The media effects debate depends in its possibility – like the mass media itself – upon late modernity. Alternative approaches to the study of media and violence will depend, consequently, upon an understanding of the unprecedented nature of this social context – and the theorization of new organizing frames. As Appadurai writes, traditional assertions of causality, contingency and prediction now occur in settings which complicate and sometimes defy their very possibility, in short in a world of global disjuncture and radical transformation. Here the frames of and for explanation are not simply realigned but inverted in contexts which exhibit just the opposite: uncertainty, instability, disorder. As Giddens elegantly puts it, “waves of social transformation crash across virtually the whole of the earth’s surface” (6). As he outlines in the *The Consequences of Modernity*, one of the key discontinuities in the traditional social order includes new “forms of social interconnection which span the globe” (4) and are unparalleled in the pace and scope of their change. In the vastness of these transformations, the anecdotal and episodic portrayal of youth violence recurs in a chronic repetition that is simultaneously ephemeral and disconnected from the experience of daily life in the main. As social relations are “lifted out” of the “local” as it was once conceived, social connections are made in ways across time and space which were not only previously unimaginable but now touch millions globally on a daily basis, while segregating and isolating others who are disconnected from these technologies. Thus, the experience of violence is primarily mediated for the majority and images of youth violence take place against global backdrops of transformation and instability. In a mass-mediated world, “place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them” (19), a process of “flows,” “networks,” and “liquidity” that is marked as fundamental by contemporary social theorists (Harvey, 1989; Castells, 1996; Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 1998, 2000). In such a setting, the transformation and retrenchment of knowledge is inevitable and fundamental, and the robustness of the parameters of the media effects debate popularly and scientifically with its persistent emphasis upon causality and explanation, its resistance to the uncertainty and contingency of social life, is exemplary of this globalizing process.

One of the principal features of the late or post-modern then is the possibility, as Giddens puts it, of a “plurality of heterogeneous claims to knowledge, in which science does not have a privileged place” (2) because “In science, *nothing* is certain and nothing can be proved...” (39). Ulrich Beck argues similarly in his discussion of risk society that science constitutes “speculative assumptions,” “a framework of probability and statements” (29) where “the implied causality always remains more or less uncertain and tentative,” ironically demanding a “*scientized*

consciousness, even in the everyday consciousness of risk” (28). This scientized consciousness is likely to manifest itself in public discourse at moments when ruptures in the social order appear, moments which expert authority is called upon, even, ironically, as its very legitimacy is undermined. For Beck, the construction of risk, and in this case the youthful violent actor, depends upon the very fact that “sciences’ monopoly on rationality is broken” (29) and in the risk society, “there is no expert on risk” (29). The persistence of violence in the world, the fact that children and adolescents are sometimes involved in acts beyond what we choose to imagine for them or can comprehend, betrays the fact that such acts carry with them the promise of nothing more than partial explanations. Nonetheless, public discourse demands a kind of expertise directed at prediction, prevention, and effacement and science proliferates as it collapses. To echo Senator Clinton, “how do we get more research, better facts and evidence?” If the critique of science marks the movement of the late twentieth century into the present, then the nature of the production of knowledge from a conventional media effects framework bears the signs of knowledge in crisis.

In these contexts of fear and uncertainty, of which representations of youth and violence seem to be essential, questions of social action are central. As Beck wonders, “it is still completely unclear how the binding force of anxiety operates, even whether it works. To what extent can anxiety communities withstand stress? What motives and forces for action do they set in motion?” (Beck, 49-50). In the specific context of media effects, public, political, and scientific discourse converge in a manner that distracts scholars from the kinds of questions that would permit a deep and thoughtful exploration of the role of the media in such complex times and rather makes immediate demands for action. And the policies and reactions which follow are cyclical, predictable, stuck in static repetitions of extant frameworks for youth violence. The alternative framework is one that requires more work with what would most likely be considered less gain (in terms of causality and predictability). But it is precisely the site from which what the media do and the profound ways in which images intersect with social experience might begin to emerge. This framework is defined by an acceptance of ambiguity and contradiction – and even more fundamentally, uncertainty. As Giddens reminds us, it is, in late modernity, our quest to live with uncertainty, but “so long as the institutions of modernity endure, we shall never be able to control completely either the path or the pace of the journey. In turn, we shall never be able to feel entirely secure, because the terrain across which it runs is fraught with risks of high consequence. Feelings of ontological security and existential anxiety will coexist in ambivalence” (139). Susan Silbey argues similarly that, in fact, disruption is central to social life, echoing longstanding notions concerning the normalcy of crime. For her, it is a question of how violence comes to be seen as without or beyond the social that is most revealing: “How is this sense of crime as abnormal, as rupture of social expectations, produced and sustained in the face of overwhelming evidence of its normalcy? That is the dilemma” (2002: 167). This critique is also the source of social action: “By normalizing crime, we contain its threat. We collectivize and socialize it and in this way it becomes a public project...” (172). Even in the most extreme cases, amidst acts and representations which defy “normalcy,” it is important to acknowledge the constructed nature of the categories we work and live with – and the fact that social life is sometimes beyond comprehension – in order to maintain the social itself.

These questions of social action are inevitably bound up with our approaches of study. If particular models of science are more likely to be popularly invoked, then, as Colin Hay argues,

“we must construct alternative narratives capable of finding greater purchase and of more successfully accounting for the routine daily experiences of real subjects” (1995: 218). Methodological approaches in this pursuit will depend upon attention to processes which map not simply the role of variables but the complex ways in which subjectivity-building practices occur. These will no doubt be bound up with ethnographic accounts that seek to merge text, practice, and talk into the not simply overlapping but melded contexts of experience from which they actually emerge. These accounts will avoid the seeming proclivity toward the single cause and a framework which facilitates blame over explanation. They will be interpretive, capable of managing multiple voices, identities, and accounts in the construction of meaning. They will be bound up with an understanding of the media as not only a set of complex institutions, practices, discourses, and techniques of governance but as an elemental condition of modernity which can no longer be separated from the experience of everyday life. And they will privilege uncertainty over resolution against the anxiety of proliferating representations of violence. Why this debate is worth reconsidering is bound up with its stakes. As the field is currently and historically configured, it is the social itself which risks loss. As Hall introduced to us some time ago, in the study of communication, new ways of being and thinking emerge in disruptive moments of crisis, where “events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading” (176). It is this kind of “oppositional” reading of a major paradigm and its effects that reminds us of our obligations and where the “‘politics of signification’ – the struggle in discourse – is joined” (Hall, 176).

NOTES

ⁱ See “Malvo Using Matrix Motive,” by Stephen Kiel, December 05, 2003, The Baltimore Sun, Section A, P. 10; Accessed May 15, 2006 through Lexis-Nexis.

ⁱⁱ See “Is Video-Game Play Linked to Crime Rate?” in Toronto Star, November 4, 2004, Page 6, Accessed May 15, 2006 through Lexis-Nexis.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Eyewitness News, November 29, 2005, 10:00 PM FOX, Channel 68 WSYT, Syracuse, Accessed May 15, 2006 through Lexis-Nexis.

^{iv} See “Time to Look for Real Links between Media and Violence – Shooting Prompts Usual Fingerpointing” by Geoff Pevere, Toronto Star, April 23, 1999, Accessed May 15, 2006 through Lexis-Nexis.

^v For more information about this case, visit <http://www.wm3.org/splash.php>, an activist web site directed at the release of the West Memphis Three, Jessie Misskelley, Damien Echols, and Jason Baldwin.

^{vi} See <http://www.gamespot.com/news/6152481.html>

^{vii} See “U.S. Violent Crime Rises at Pace Unseen in 10 Years” by Laura Sullivan, National Public Radio, All Things Considered, June 12, 2006 (date of access) at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5480227>.

^{viii} For a more comprehensive discussion of this report and others cited in this paper, see Lowry and Defleur, 1995.

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