

I'M IN THE REAL WORLD: THE INTERPRETATIONS OF VIOLENT IMAGERY IN
POPULAR CULTURE BY ADOLESCENTS

by

Karen Coflin

B.F.A., University of Calgary, 1980
B.Ed., University of British Columbia, 1990

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUTE STUDIES
(Department of Curriculum Studies)

~~We accept~~ this thesis as conforming to the required standard

The University of British Columbia

October 2000

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Department of Cornellian Studies

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date Oct 11/2000

Abstract

This research seeks to understand the interpretations of the violent imagery in popular culture by adolescents. Examples of television, movie and games were chosen by a group of nine secondary students and then discussed.

Through the use of lists generated from surveys collected from a larger population the students involved in the focus group chose to view *The Matrix* and *The Simpsons*. These programs were then discussed at length in a variety of interview situations. Information concerning electronic games came out of the interviews as well. Interviews focused on the ways in which students interpreted the imagery in the context of the programs and their own lives.

The results indicate that students are actively involved in constructing meaning in ways which are appropriate to them as well as indicating a consciousness of the contexts of the specific programs in relation to larger contexts of their own lives and society. For art educators this study has implications in relation to the acknowledgement of popular culture as a legitimate form of visual culture as well as advocating recognizing students expertise in relation to the forms of popular culture that interest them. With the recognition of this expertise art educators can initiate dialogue in order to create an environment where culture is shared and discussed and seen as a viable and exciting part of our lives.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to the students that I have worked with over the last nine years and in particular to those that volunteered their time and thoughts to make this thesis possible. I have been very fortunate to work with bright, enthusiastic and interesting young people. They have made my job interesting as a result. My hope is that this research will help me to be a better teacher.

Without the support of my colleagues, Jasna Guy, Brian Daniel and Barb Mingo, I would not have persevered through this process. They listened to my ideas, tolerated my whining and put up some good arguments. My thanks to them.

Rita Irwin was an advisor in the best sense of the word, a mentor and an extraordinary educator. I have learnt so much from Rita as I have endeavored to live up to her expectations. I hope I have succeeded. Special thanks to Linda Stanley Wilson and Linda Farr Darling for their careful and thoughtful readings of this work.

Thanks to my mother-in-law Irene Carscadden for her gentle reminders that the work does not get done if you don't do it and I offer a very special and long over-due thank-you to my mother, Alice Coflin for believing I could and should go back to school and for making that possible through her own hard work.

Finally and most importantly, I would like to acknowledge my husband Bruce Carscadden and my daughters Emma and Martha. They allowed me the time, space and encouragement to complete this work. I could not have done it without them and they know it!

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

Recollections

1962

I was in the front yard of our yellow house on Broadway. My brother Kevin came running across the street holding his head, his arm and hair thick and dripping with blood. I don't remember if he was crying but he probably was. Mom said Kevin cried throughout most of his formative years. She says she would put him in the corner some mornings and tell him to get his crying over with for the day. She says that he was always such a good boy he would do it. He ran across the street without looking. I remember thinking that that was bad, he should have looked both ways. He and his friends had been playing war, with rocks. Kevin lost. I see the images of this memory being very aware of my own presence. I can almost see me, the back of my head, over my right shoulder. It is as if I am watching me watch. It is as if there is a camera filming this memory.

It turned out to be a small nick in his head. Mom cleaned it up and then went to the hospital to give birth to my youngest brother Pat. I now had five brothers.

1964

On Saturday nights we ate in front of the television. First we watched Bugs Bunny and then hockey. The Roadrunner was by far the favourite character of my Dad and brothers and the most violent. There was no plot other than the coyote's failed attempts at catching the roadrunner. I loved the cartoon and I hated Hockey Night in Canada but in retrospect there is little difference.

1966

My sister and I had finally received Barbie dolls for Christmas. Well, not quite. We actually got Barbie's little sister – Skipper. Mom would not allow us to have Barbie dolls. She told us that the size of Barbie's breasts was unnatural. While I believe my mother was driven by certain kind of Catholic prudishness, I also know that her sense of herself as a woman was one, which I came to understand as feminism. She was strong, opinionated, intelligent and willful. No daughters of hers' were going to play with Barbie dolls. We never did.

1968

I remember signing a form promising never to look at any pictures or read any stories that were sinful. I was in Grade Five at Bishop Klein Elementary, in Saskatoon. It was a brand new school in a new sub division. I had to walk across a field to get to the street and the school itself was very clean and white. The whole class had to stand and read the card together. I can not recall if "sinful" was explained but by that time I had a very good understanding of sin. Five years of Catholic school teaches you a lot about sin. The pictures I wasn't supposed to look at were definitely those concerned with naked bodies and kissing. Luckily there were none at my house, at least not any I knew of in Grade Five. A few years later we had a live-in housekeeper who had an extensive collection of *True Confessions* and *True Crime* magazines. The lure of those pictures was stronger than my promise to God. I snuck into her room on several occasions to look at those magazines.

1970

Two nights before Christmas I watched out my second floor bedroom window as our neighbour to the west of our house was beaten so badly that his leg was broken. I was 12 years old. I do not remember how long it lasted, or how long it had been going on, nor do I remember how many men were involved, except that it was one against many. One of the attackers opened his car trunk to get a crowbar and I think he used it but I am not sure.

Details of the memory are not all clear but certain images remain vivid: my Dad sitting on the edge of his bed watching out his window, a police detective at our backdoor on Christmas Eve showing me his badge and our neighbour, a few days after Christmas, on crutches, trying to get up the icy curb. My second floor vantage point allowed me to look down undetected. I watched from above, an eavesdropper on the scene, separate and powerless, yet with a clear view. It was a cold crisp night in the middle of a prairie winter. The kind of night in which the ice crystals hang and sparkle in the air. The lighting was blue and cold because of a street lamp directly over the "scene." They stood over him and took turns kicking him as he lay on the ice-covered street. This light also served to back light and frame my Dad as he sat at the window on the edge of his bed.

The next day a police detective stood at our kitchen door wearing a black trench coat, black gloves and a hat. He showed me his badge. It was a sunny Christmas Eve and he was very polite and matter of fact. I can still put myself there in that kitchen, telling the officer that my dad was at work.

I do not remember the event ever being discussed by any one. I can only presume that it was a topic my parents felt was too upsetting but that is conjecture on my part. I

know how I would feel if my daughters witnessed such violence but yet I do not recall how I felt at the time. I do not remember feeling anything at all, yet the images are in my mind.

1971

We were in the basement watching television in the dark. I don't remember specifically who was there but I was not alone. Whatever we were watching involved kissing and then a killing. The next day at school I asked the teacher if the people kissing were sinning. I did not ask about the killing, as I knew that that was pretend, but they really were kissing. She assured me that acting was outside the realm of sin as they were only pretending.

1995

I am an art teacher in Vancouver and I am doing my job deconstructing media images for a grade 9/10 class. My lessons illustrate the way in which media constructs images in order to sell, manipulate and control the minds, emotions and wallets of their intended audience, in particular, adolescents. I have finished with the car and food commercials and now I was embarking on the big part of the unit. We were going to watch *Terminator 2* and I was going to show them how the gratuitous violence and a ridiculous plot line amounted to nothing more than a huge waste of time. In my fervor to show my students the errors of their pop culture habits I had ignored several fundamental pedagogical principles: check prior knowledge, preview all material, check your own baggage.

Rationale

The anecdotes of my life serve as starting points for my own understanding of the complexity and power of imagery – real and constructed, an attempt to understand my own baggage. Witnessing a violent act stays with me for no apparent reason but plays out in my head like a movie. My mother's disgust with the portrayal of women by a doll manufacturer has had profound influence on my understanding of myself as a feminist and the role of adults in helping to shape my own sensibilities. When I was an adolescent I was attracted to violent and provocative images but was never effected by those images to act out in inappropriate ways. The influence of a caring and strong family has defined me, not television images. My religious education resulted in my questioning the role of the church as a censor and yet I stood in front of a group of students prepared to do the same thing. All that was missing was the card with the oath and the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Watching *Terminator 2* with the students I was startled to observe their reactions in contrast to my own and surprised at my reaction as well. Where I grimaced or covered my eyes they watched intently, laughed, cheered and expressed their approval. I knew these students, or so I thought I did. They were not callous, uncaring young people. As far as I was aware there was not a history of any of the students ever being involved in any violence themselves. They were good kids, from good homes, if anything most of them led sheltered lives. At that point I decided it was necessary to change my approach. In discussion with the students I discovered that they were analyzing the film in much the same way they looked at myths and stories in their English classes. This is a story of good and evil, a parable on the importance of living a fully human life in the face of all

obstacles. *Terminator 2*, as the students understood it is a cautionary tale of the dangers of glorifying technology at all costs. In the end the robot “terminates” himself so that humankind may live. The violent imagery was a necessary device to the film’s integrity. They saw it for what it was, imagery used to tell a story, not reality.

In discussions with colleagues I felt I could test my hunch by showing a film sanctioned by the Vancouver School Board, *The Night and The Fog*. This is a documentary made by French filmmakers of the liberation of a Nazi concentration camp. The students’ initial response was one of frustration and boredom, as the film is black and white and utilizes subtitles. In a short time the room was silent. They were repelled by the images, all of which were far less visually graphic than those of *Terminator 2*. Lamps made of human skin, piles of hair and skeletal victims proved to be extremely violent images as the students were horrified as they began to grasp the reality of the Holocaust through the images. The discussion that followed left the students wanting to know why and how such a tragedy could occur.

The Study

I was left wondering how I could be so wrong as to assume that students were in need of “education” in relation to film and video. I felt that I had not only misjudged their understanding of the imagery in popular culture but I had little sense as to why violent imagery is interesting to them. I had to ask myself whose needs are being served if I dismiss imagery that obviously holds great fascination. And if that imagery is so fascinating to students, why is that? What meaning do they derive from movies, television programs and video games that contain graphic violent imagery? My interest in investigating this was further piqued by an Art Education and Psychology course that I

took with Ron MacGregor. He listed twenty-five points that we would learn through the course. Three of those that were significant to me were:

1. The brain is not a camera: it is an information processing machine.
2. Growth is marked by increasing consciousness of the difference between the event, and the identity it is given in an art form.
3. The history of art education is as much about the way adults expect children to be, as it is about the way children are. (MacGregor, 1997)

Much art education literature (Blandy & Congden 1993; Duncum 1996 1999; Freedman & Wood 1996; McFee 1966) concerns itself with the need for popular culture to be part of the study of art in education but little work has been done concerning the specifics of popular culture. The prevalence of violent imagery in popular culture and its interpretation by students is the focus of my research. Specifically the questions posed are the following:

1. What meaning do adolescents derive from movies, television and video games that contain graphic violent imagery?
2. What process do adolescents employ in interpreting the violent imagery in popular culture?

From the research I hope to be able to shed some light on the ways in which art educators can approach the use of popular culture in the classroom.

The popular understanding is that the graphic depiction of violence on television, video games, and movies is detrimental to young people and the cause of a perceived increase in violence involving youth. I have observed not only an intense involvement in the forms of entertainment that delivers this imagery, but also a prevalence among

adolescents to copy these images and create new ones; taking every opportunity to incorporate violent imagery into their work. A major focus of the BC Integrated Resource Package (1997) for visual art includes media study which prescribes a critical deconstruction of media images. The premise is that with proper instruction students will be able to understand and counter the negative effects of television, film etc. My hunch is that students are cognizant of the media and their understanding of it may exceed that of the adults or at the very least differ from adult interpretations in ways which are relevant and appropriate to them.

As an art educator pursuing questions concerning meaning it was most appropriate to initiate this study with my own students using a qualitative approach. I initially conducted surveys within two Art 9-10 classes. One block which was my own and another taught by another teacher. Following the surveys I asked for volunteers to participate in a focus group. The group consisted of nine students, six females and three males. We met as a whole group and spent the better part of a day watching *The Matrix* (chosen by the students) and I audio taped the discussion that followed. I then watched an episode of *The Simpsons* with two of the participants and audio taped a discussion. The subsequent audio taped discussions were follow up discussions with four other students. Time and scheduling conflicts made it impossible to schedule another whole group discussion. This proved to be advantageous in terms of allowing individual students a greater opportunity to share their thoughts but it did limit them in their capacity to expand on their opinions in relation to others' opinions.

It proved too difficult to actually watch and play video games with the whole group or individuals as it required technology I did not have access to (Nintendo and

Playstation) as well as placing further demands on the students' time. This resulted in asking specific questions concerning video games to the students who took part in the follow-up interviews. This certainly proved to be the best way to gather some video game data as it relates to popular cultural, but it did not, however, provide a comprehensive look at violent imagery in games.

The Purpose of this Study

Television, movies and electronic games are an integral part of culture and the Ministry of Education in British Columbia recognizes this in suggesting ways that popular culture can be integrated into the art classroom (BC Ministry of Education, 1997). However the violent imagery, seemingly so prevalent within popular culture makes it problematic for most teachers. In a teaching milieu that attempts to foster and nurture peaceful resolution to conflict popular culture seems to glorify and perpetuate violence. Why then would we allow it into our classrooms?

This study will attempt to clarify how adolescents see and interpret the violent imagery in popular culture. Only after we have heard from them can we determine what we can do as art educators.

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purposes of this study it is necessary to draw from literature in the following disciplines: education, art education, media education, and the social sciences. As well it is necessary to touch upon popular media and its role in informing the public on the state of violence and its causes.

Popular Media

I feel it is necessary to address the attitudes about violent imagery in popular culture with a brief discussion of popular print and television media as the students in the focus group are aware of these attitudes and allude to them in the interviews. In no way will this be an exhaustive survey as that would be going beyond the scope of this study. However it is necessary to acknowledge that the students in my focus group are aware that the popular notion is that the violence they watch on television and in movies is seen as a cause of violence in our society and that it is young people like themselves who are seen to be effected by the violent imagery.

My work with high school students over the last ten years has shown me that the media ignores the vast majority of high school students. The very small percentage that exceeds at a sport or in an international math contest may get their photo in a local newspaper but it is more likely that the even smaller percentage of students involved in criminal activity get an inordinate amount of attention. This of course is true of the media in general and for all demographic groups. Bad news is of more interest. The unfortunate result is the perception that young people are more violent today. Statistics Canada offers much evidence to the contrary indicating in fact that the number of young people convicted of violent offences (including murder, attempted murder and robbery) as decreased every year since 1994 (Statistics Canada, 2000).

As I write, the first anniversary of the tragic murders at Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado has just passed and the newspapers and television reports were saturated with reliving the tragedy and offering analysis as to why such a tragedy occurred. At the time of the shootings (April 29, 1999) the media was also pre-occupied with Littleton and with laying the blame at the feet of popular culture and in particular television. President Clinton appeared on television on April 21, 1999 and said, "Parents should take this moment to ask what else they can do to shield our children from violent images and experiences that warp young perceptions and obscure the consequences of violence." The week following the murders I clipped several opinion pieces from the *Globe and Mail*, which discussed the relationship of the tragedy to television violence. The by-lines read: *Littleton and the culture of violence* (Gee, 1999), *TV gun ad should be real target* (Allemang, 1999), and *Who's to blame when kids in trench coats open fire?* (Schneller, 1999). Schneller's article discussed the various movies that were believed to be the inspiration for the shooting rampage. The trench coats worn by the two young men were similar to the one that the characters in *The Matrix* wear. Going against the tide of public and presidential opinion these journalists questioned that relationship but this was possible only because of the overpowering belief that television violence does cause real violence.

A 1996 *Maclean's* cover story entitled *Toxic TV*, by Joe Chidley, quotes the Chairwoman of Canadians Concerned about Violence in Entertainment: "Television violence is eroding, scrambling up, the value systems of children" (Dyson, 1996). The article quotes many "experts" (see Neil Postman, 1985) who claim television does have a negative effect on children's behavior. Chidley (1996) sights others, such as University

of Toronto psychology professor Jonathan Freedman who believes that images of violence on television have no real life effect. Parents and teachers offer anecdotal accounts of Power Ranger play fighting in the schoolyard and zombie-like behaviour in front of the television. The article provides no conclusions and does little to add to the debate other than sensationalizing four violent crimes committed by children.

Beyond Popular Media

In an attempt to move beyond the daily news media but still stay within the realm of the popular (not academic) I investigated the Cultural Study section at a large chain bookstore. Several books have been published which attempt to address the issues surrounding youth, media and violence. Several titles proclaimed that television is bad and ruining our youth. Neil Postman (1985) has been the most popular (and media savvy) in this call to arms in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Interestingly enough he does not object to programming that he refers to as “junk” (sitcoms for example) but rather to those programs that purport to inform dissemination, in particular educational news programming. “We do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant” (p. 16). Postman’s bias against the visual in favour of the written is overwhelming. “The written word endures, the spoken word disappears; and that is why writing is closer to truth than speaking” (p. 21). He goes on to say:

I will not burden myself with arguing the possibility, for example, that oral people are less developed intellectually, in some Piagetian sense, than writing people, or that television people are less developed intellectually than either. My argument is limited to saying that a major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it

does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favoring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and by demanding a certain kind of content—in a phrase by creating new forms of truth telling. I will say once again that I am no relativist in this matter, and that I believe the epistemology created by television not only inferior to print based epistemology but it is dangerous and absurdist. (p. 27)

The danger that Postman sees is in that the information on television is based in story telling and this will ultimately lead to “culture-death”(p. 156). Postman’s elitist attitude is very disturbing. That story-telling is inferior to exposition (p. 148) as a means to knowledge and truth denies so much of what is valued in culture. Not only does he deny cultures based in oral traditions (is that not the basis of all cultures?) but he rejects a fundamental way in which people attempt to understand the cultures in which they live. It is not the form (novel, film, made for TV or oral) the story takes that determines the importance of the story but rather the story itself. Postman also claims:

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture death is a clear possibility. (p. 156)

When considering television programs such as *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and *Survivor* it is tempting to agree but the danger in this is that it denies acknowledging the complexity of peoples’ lives or allowing for any

understanding as to why people watch the programs they do. It is in light of this attitude that I felt it necessary to undertake this study.

Two other books that add to the sensationalizing of the debate are *A is for Ox: the Collapse of Literacy and the Rise of Violence in an Electronic Age* (1995) by Barry Sanders and *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1978) by Jerry Mander, a retired ad executive. Sanders' argument is simply that if children are watching television they are not reading. That makes sense but his arguments are emotional and bordering on hysterical.

TV makes young people passive recipients of hundreds of thousands of images of violence, of sex, or of sexual violence, each and every day and each and every evening. Even if a child takes issue with those images while sitting in front of the screen, - a monologue with a light and sound show - the images still work unrelentingly, leaving their indelible impression on the imagination. (p. 39)

Now imagine the contemporary young person, if he or she does manage to stay in school - and recall that the odds are against that happening - as a freshman in college. This is the young person who has already drifted fairly far away from books, fairly far from reading and writing. This same young person has already been accustomed to turning to the TV screen as a source of information, power and probably as a reservoir of knowledge. (p. 145)

Sanders goes on to make sixty-two references to guns, violence, murder and gangs—all attributed to television and video games.

Mander's (1978) book is very perplexing and I admit to not being able to grasp most of his argument. The gist seems to be that television causes diseases such as

epilepsy and hyper-activity and at the same time, it numbs one into a dream-like state as it deprives us of our senses. Yet he also argues that images enter our bodies and become part of our cells. "It has physical character."(p. 222) "The person who observes a pyramid ingests the image; its shape has power. The person who ingests the tree becomes tree like. Viewing Kojak means absorbing his character and his way of being"(p. 222). I was fascinated to discover that the argument that television violence causes violence was not directly discussed, but it would follow that images of violence would cause the viewer to become violence-like.

One "pop" cultural study book I was able to locate, *Saturday Morning Censors: Television Regulation before the V-Chip* (1998) by Heather Hendershot worked from the premise that children are thoughtful and critical consumers of what they watch. "TV reformers see culture as something that is merely added onto an inherently innocent child. Many reformers conceive of television as endangering its potentially dangerous viewers: innocent children will imitate sexism, racism and violence they see on 'bad' shows" (page 5).

I have cited these books only to illustrate that the discussion around the issue of violent media imagery seems to be in itself a form of popular culture.

Social Sciences

In academic disciplines the discussion of the effects of violent images from popular culture also has a strong showing. Determining the behavioural effects of popular culture on adolescents is beyond the scope of this study although it is important to account for some of the research in the social sciences as it belies my own interest in the relationship of violent imagery to adolescents. As a high school art teacher my

experience has been that student behaviour does not seem to be related to violent imagery in popular culture. It is therefore necessary to examine some of the work in the social sciences that informs this notion more closely.

According to Dubow and Miller (1996) aggressive behavior among children is a major clinical and social problem. Citing the American Psychiatric Association, 9% of boys and 2% of girls in the United States suffer from severe behaviour disorders of which aggression is paramount. In their introduction they point out that there are a variety of factors contributing to aggression in children, the most significant being parental socialization. In other words if a child grows up in a violent home they are more likely to exhibit anti-social aggressive behaviour. That said, the focus of their review is the effect of violent imagery in producing violent behaviour. They claim that over 1000 studies have been published since the advent of television in the 1950s (Hutson et al., 1992), and that the majority point to the relationship between television violence and aggression. Dubow and Miller suggest there are studies that suggest otherwise but they are not discussed except to point out that the researchers who downplay the relationship of violent imagery to aggression are critical of those studies that garnered evidence from laboratory scenarios as opposed to real-life situations. In relation to this study this is an interesting consideration, as the students in my focus group have never before taken part in a laboratory situation, until this study. To a large extent the study attempted to be "natural", in that the students did not look at particular imagery in isolation from the film itself. All television and popular culture viewing has been part of their everyday lives.

Dubow and Miller conclude that most researchers agree that television is only one of the causes of aggression in children and as a result it is difficult to determine how

violent imagery effects behaviour. They also acknowledge that this aggressive behaviour is exhibited in children who are already pre-disposed to violent behaviour, whether through biological or environmental factors. What I found significant was that in all the studies that Dubow and Miller reviewed they did not feel it was necessary to indicate the types of programming watched. Studies measured blood pressure (Bushman & Geen, 1990), behaviour towards inflated dolls after watching violent shows (Josephson, 1987), and the effect of television on a community which had never had it before (MacBeth, 1986). Programs may have been as diverse as television news coverage of war, *Sesame Street*, game shows, or commercials. Which sequences of violent imagery were taken out of context from which programs? There appears to be no acknowledgment of a child's attempt or ability to mediate the violent imagery.

A study on the effects of television on homicide rates in South Africa, Canada and the United States (Centerwall, 1989) concludes that the introduction of television in South Africa in 1975 caused the homicide rate to double within ten to fifteen years. The study claims that this time period allowed for children to grow up with the violent imagery until they reached an age where it was possible for them to act out the aggressive behaviour patterns they had garnered from television. The research notes that a drop in the homicide levels in Canada and the United States for the same period is due to the saturation level of television in the two countries. This anomaly is not fully explored; the researcher suggests that perhaps there are other factors that may contribute to an increase in violence such as "poverty, crime, intoxication, stress and conflict" (p. 190). Centerwall then concludes that "The evidence indicates that if hypothetically, television

had never been developed, there would be 10,000 fewer homicides in the United States every year” (p. 190).

The most recent publication on the effects of media violence is entitled *Mind Abuse* by Rose Dyson (2000). Her arguments are similar to Postman (1985) and Mander (1978) and she quotes them throughout the book. Much of her argument is hinged upon the LaMarsh Commission (1975) which produced an extensive document concerning the nature of the Canadian experience in relation to media violence. The commission found that although evidence was inconclusive as to the extent of the effects of media violence on real violence the public perception was that there was an effect. The commission recommended film classification (in Ontario) and guidelines for parents’ in relation to their children’s viewing habits. Dyson sees the LaMarsh Commission as an important step in the control of media violence in Canada. Her premise for justification of even further regulations stems from her assertion that children process information differently than adults.

Adults transform the material into particular needs on the basis of present and past relationships, experiences, dreams and fantasies. For the young child who has barely emerged from the proverbial fog of infancy, life experiences are limited. If hour after hour of television watching constitutes a primary activity, the child’s subsequent real-life experiences will stir memories of television experience, not, as for the adult watcher, the other way around. (p. 8)

In the context of discussing the failure of shows such as *Sesame Street* in having a positive effect on children’s’ reading skills Dyson goes on to state:

Other studies dealing with actual comprehension of television material have found that while children enjoy programs intended for their age group and are thoroughly attentive while they watch, their understanding of what is happening on the small screen is very small. (p. 8)

It raises the question, how is it that images of violence influence and images of Big Bird singing the alphabet do not? Ultimately Dyson sees education's role as one for social change. She calls for the institution of media literacy curriculum that "incorporates the aim to prevent violence" (p. 201) and "teaches students how media driven consumer lifestyles have a harmful effect on the natural as well as cultural environment" (p. 201). These are laudable goals but I sense that her zeal stems from a sense of powerlessness in affecting change in relation to real violence in our society. She says in her introduction, "Media violence may be only one of the many contributing factors but it is one that, if we choose to, we can ameliorate" (p. 1).

Art Education: Relevance

A major emphasis for art education research has been a call for social relevance through multiculturalism, gender issues and the use of popular culture in acknowledging and representing the diverse needs of those students in our classrooms. This has been one of the underlying factors for my own interest in investigating violent imagery in popular culture. My students are watching television programs and movies and playing video games that show a wide variety of images that I at times find perplexing and disturbing, yet fascinating. One of the first tenets of multicultural education is to recognize and celebrate the differences (Chalmers, 1996). Youth culture deserves the same regard.

Much art education literature concerns itself with the necessity of popular culture in the study of art but little work has been done concerning the specifics or students' own take on popular culture. Educators are placed in the dilemma of acknowledging students' fascination with programs that contain violent imagery and recognizing their own biases against such imagery. It was the pioneering work of June King McFee (1966) that makes consideration of such a dilemma even possible.

The work of McFee was instrumental in bringing about an awareness of the lack of social relevance in art education. *Society, Art and Education* (1966) represented a paradigm shift in attitudes towards the role of art in society and more pointedly in education. Social upheaval was dominating the American consciousness and concepts of pluralism and multiculturalism were causing Americans to question their sense of the absolute. McFee's post-modern tendencies predate issues discussed today. McFee asked, "What is art?" "Whose art?" and "What function does it serve?"

She defines art by providing a list: all traditional fine art forms, product design, advertising, architecture, city planning, television, film, and costume design. Add to this the idea that each culture and each sub-culture has its own legitimate art forms. Art is defined by those who make it and those who consume it. This was not a revolutionary concept in the art world in the 1960s but McFee raised the stakes for art education with the insistence that all art served a function peculiar to the culture from which it is derived.

The first directive, to be sure, is the need to do a great deal of research of the field of art, of the social functions and the behaviors involved, as the basis for evaluating what might be possible to help these young people. (p. 126)

With this McFee changed the discourse of art education, but she falls short of full advocacy for all aspects of popular culture as she sees art education as a means to saving students from television. By her own definition it is a viable art form but she qualifies it with notions of “quality” and “aesthetics.”

The major question which the impact of television and mass media raises for us is whether we do and can give students the tools with which to evaluate the obvious subtle and one way communication system. We have the obligation to offer the students more alternatives. This requires that we be aware of what we are receiving; that we analyze the art forms being used so that we may develop and use aesthetic criteria in their evaluations. (p. 131)

It is interesting to note that her views on television are from a position of cultural dominance. She seems unable to recognize her own bias, which includes notions of aesthetic quality and as a result denies television and denies its audience the right to make those decisions without help from art education. She likens the role of art educators to a form of quality police rather than one of mediator. “The art quality ranges from the sublime to the odious, and the students must have qualifying concepts to evaluate the whole range if they are to make aesthetic discriminations as citizens in a democracy (p. 123).

Paul Duncum clearly identifies himself as an advocate for popular culture (or as he refers to it, dominant culture). *Clearing the Decks for Dominant Culture: Some First Principles for a Contemporary Education* (1990), builds on McFee in that it acknowledges the importance of social relevance but Duncum sees art education as being unable to give up its position as a “highly conservative, defensive reaction to dominant

culture” (p. 214). For Duncum, it is not the role of the art educator to pass judgement on popular culture or its consumers.

To disregard disdainfully people who enjoy violent, sentimental or escapist fare as if they were deficient in discernment is to ignore their lived experience (of which such enjoyment is part) and to judge them by criteria inappropriate to their lived experience. (p. 212)

In other words, who are we to judge the television that people watch. Duncum does bring into focus the vast distance between students’ understanding of what constitutes culture and that of the teachers, but his account of popular culture smacks of elitism as well, a kind of resigned acceptance of that which will not go away so must be accepted.

More recently Duncum has modified his position. He now espouses adopting an approach to curriculum that is more inclusive than simply accepting popular culture norms and he advocates confirming that our students already possess the knowledge. This is in sharp contrast to the more traditional approach to art education where the teacher has the power and responsibility to dispense information and skills that the students have not yet acquired. “Every day aesthetics experiences”(1999, p. 295), are more significant in shaping a student’s perception of the world and of his/her place in it. It is at the level of the ordinary that most learning takes place and that as art educators our concern is all forms of visual culture.

Teaching will involve, metaphorically, but also literally, learning to understand everyday aesthetics by looking over our students’ shoulders. Through dialogue with our students and by being honest about our own preferences, we can develop

rich ethnographies of everyday aesthetic sites, which can form invaluable resources to critique. (p. 307)

This position seems to negate the role of the art educator. After all if students are already the negotiators of their own visual experiences and these visual experiences are constantly changing as Duncum suggests, what good are we? Duncum sees the role of art education in “developing broader socioeconomic and political readings of imagery” (p. 308).

They are ignorant of what Marx called the material conditions of the production, distribution and variety of uses of cultural sites. Students’ construction of their identities through the sites of the everyday need to be made problematic and not left unreflective, even unconscious where it is especially powerful. It is necessary to move beyond phenomenological encounter and study the social worlds from which images emerge and in which they function. (p. 308)

In other words art educators must continue to develop students’ capacity to observe and think critically.

Duncum says we are to look over our students’ shoulders and learn from them, yet some of what he sees he finds to be “sexist, racist, and xenophobic” (p. 308). It is in these instances that Duncum sees art educators acting as critical mentors for our students. My problem with this position is that it assumes that students do not already critically negotiate their way through the plethora of everyday culture. For every episode of *WWF* (to my mind sexist, racist and xenophobic), there is an episode of *Touched by an Angel* definitively revealing the evils of racism, sexism and xenophobia. The fact is that some of my students see *WWF* as entertaining and others think it is ridiculous, while none of

them regard it seriously at all. Some find *Touched by an Angel* heartwarming and others consider it sentimental and simplistic. Ignoring the quasi-religious overtones I am sure that none of my students would disagree with themes of love and forgiveness.

In other research Duncum (1989) has looked at spontaneous drawings of violent imagery that young children (particularly boys) produce. His work in this area is significant as he points out the contradictory nature of our society's attitudes towards violence. He accounts his own experience of channel surfing to be a kind of "temporal collage of conflicting ideas"(p. 253). While Sanders (1995) would have us believe that television is simply one image of violence and sex after another, I feel that many of us have had the experience of observing a variety of images in a single viewing, many of them in sharp contrast to the other. Duncum sees the act of drawing violent imagery as developmental. It is a way of coming to terms with violence that they experience as images in the media. "As participants of a violent society, children need to examine violence and come to terms with their fear of it" (p. 255). I would add that it might also be an attempt to understand it and rather than leading to its' glorification offers children the groundwork for rejecting it.

Duncum calls for research, which moves beyond generalization (1999). I agree. He calls for a dialogue concerning the everyday experience. It is obvious to me that such conversations should not ask what students are watching in an attempt to mediate on their behalf but rather why they are watching certain programs and what it means to them. Giroux and Simon (1987) put it much more eloquently:

We are moving towards a position within which one could inquire into the popular as fields of practices that constitute for Foucault an indissoluble triad of

knowledge, power and pleasure (Foucault, 1980). In an important sense this is what the pedagogical struggle is all about: testing the ways we produce meaning and represent ourselves, our relation to others, and our relation to the environment. In doing so we consider what it is we have become and what it is we no longer want to be. We also enable ourselves to recognize and struggle for, possibilities not yet realized. (p. 244)

Giroux and Simon however issue a warning in the use of popular culture within a critical pedagogy. Like Duncum they feel it is important to address those aspects of popular culture that are “regressive” and move beyond them but the real danger is in the possibility that encouraging student voice is in fact partaking in a form of voyeurism and exploitation of youth culture. They advise that,

A pedagogy which takes popular culture as an object of study must recognize that all educational work is at root contextual and conditional. It arises not against a background of psychological, sociological, or anthropological universals, but from such questions as: How is human possibility being diminished here?” (p. 248)

In an editorial in *Studies in Art Education* (1994), Terry Barrett addresses the issues surrounding controversial aspects of diverse cultural studies by stating, “While continuing to advocate multicultural education, we would be willing to suspend some naïve acceptances of generic multiculturalism in favour of facing some serious problems that the acceptance of diversity engenders (p. 3). The conflict created by this clash of cultures can also be defined as a cultural hierarchy based on socioeconomic class division (Bersson 1986), educator/adult versus student/child.

While the work of McFee, Duncum and Giroux contributed significantly to my interest in the use of popular culture in the classroom I am frustrated by the lack of specificity in their work in regards to popular culture. What are we really talking about? Duncum (1999) accounts for this somewhat by indicating the fluid nature of popular culture; *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is replaced by *Power Rangers* is replaced by *Sailor Moon* is replaced by *Pokemon*. He suggests there is no point discussing today what will be passe tomorrow. In every case teachers and adults were alarmed by the influence these programs had over their children. Yet my sense is that there is a commonality in these programs that belies their appeal and it is necessary to discuss the specifics, for certainly these images are significant in contrast to *The Simpsons*, *Friends*, and *Much Music*. Congdon and Blandy (1990) are two art educators who have dealt with specific forms of visual culture. While their interest in pornography is not directly related to my own interest in violent imagery, there are parallels in relation to choosing and dealing with contentious imagery in a classroom setting.

Their objective in using pornographic images in the classroom includes, "a responsibility to identify, present and critically study" (p. 6) such images. Pornography is defined as "a view of woman as subordinate to man", "sexual overtones to demean females," "disrespectful sexual representations," and "men as the source of power." With this in mind they chose the following images: comic book character Catwoman, Calvin Klein Obsession ads, Willem de Kooning's 1954 portrait of Marilyn Monroe and Ivan Albright's 1929 painting, "Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida." While these images could be interpreted as pornography given Blandy and Congdon's definition I feel that they have misread the images (Barrett, 1994) to serve their own political biases.

For Congdon and Blandy the ultimate goal is to counter sexual violence against women through critical analysis of such “pornographic” images. I find it difficult to believe that a student, given the task of locating pornographic images in an art history text, would choose Albright or de Kooning. From my experience some would (naively) choose Rueben, as pornography is often equated with nudity and others would find none at all. As for *Catwoman* and *Obsession* ads they may or may not find the exaggerated and/or idealized depictions of the human form (the ads include both males and females) demeaning. Perhaps a less top-down study would have had the students choose images that they felt met the criteria for Congdon and Blandy’s definition of pornography. Most importantly though is the assumption that images cause sexual violence against women. I would suggest that this view of the nature of sexual predatory violence is simplistic.

Art Education: Interpreting Visual Imagery

This study hinges upon the notion that adolescents interpret the movies, television and video games they watch and play, therefore it is necessary to review literature in the field that deals with interpretation and criticism. Most of the studies deal with more traditional forms of art (art historical images) while others specifically deal with media.

No examination of the role of interpretation and art criticism in art education would be complete without looking at the work of Edmund Feldman. Only one of the theorists that I encountered in art school resurfaced when I went into teacher training. That was Feldman. *Varieties of Visual Experience* (1992) was the art history textbook at the University of Calgary. Ten years later when the process for critically looking at artwork was introduced in the art methods class Feldman was there again. The process made sense to me and still does, as it became apparent that the students in the focus group

were involved in the process: observe, describe, analyze, interpret, and judge. In 1994, Feldman re-examined his approach to criticism and among other things reconsidered the cultural context in which a work is produced and viewed as well as the viewer's position in the process (McGregor, 1995). Prior to this it was assumed that the process of describing, analyzing, interpreting and judging would reveal the truth of the work. The meaning was there if you just went through the steps. Now the process is described as being much more complex and integrated; the meaning is there if you want to take part in the process of examining yourself, the various and contradictory contexts and are willing to work to construct and recognize the meaning. Feldman also acknowledges the role of intuition in the process. Postmodernism has denied the object its place in the center, so that criticism has been forced to become inclusive and unwieldy. I suspect that this was always so but now it has been acknowledged.

Geahigan (1999) stands in contrast to the accepted classroom usage of Feldman by questioning the role of description in the critical process. He sees description as: not intrinsic, not concerned with listing the elements of an object, that description can involve the use of expressive language and that it is not classified by true or false claims. He also suggests that description "must be suitable for the purpose at hand" (p. 217). In the context of different art works in various situations description may or may not be employed, in varying degrees. His assertion is that by having students describe the endless details of a work of art you force them into an artificial exercise, removed from the "ordinary" ways in which people engage in discourse. For my students I have always justified the task of describing as a way of measuring how closely they are observing an artwork. Geahigan would say that this serves my purposes and not the students. He

would be correct. Geahigan goes on to describe that his model would involve personal responses to works of art, student research, and concept and skill development.

In this approach to art criticism instruction, students are taught to look at works of art not by having them describe works of art but by confronting them with problems of meaning and value in works of art. In such an approach, students share their responses to works of art and justify their responses through reasoned discourse. (p. 224)

As will be discussed in Chapter Five, my focus group engaged in the process that Geahigan advocates. It is significant to note though that this behaviour was not prompted by me but seemed to be a natural response to the task of talking about a film.

This would suggest an ease and familiarity with discussing film. In the work of Koroscik (1997) this would suggest that the “learner’s knowledge base” was significant. Koroscik is concerned with the potential understandings of a work of art, and with asking the question, “What does it mean when we speak of understanding a work of art?” (page 145). As well as knowledge base, she deals with the types of search strategies that students have available to them and a student’s disposition towards learning about the art. She goes on to list all of the problems inherent in the three categories that inhibit the potential for students to learn about art. In her article she is concerned primarily with traditional objects of art, such as the *Grande Jatte* by Seurat, an art work in which she assumes students have little knowledge base, strategies or inclination to learn about. Ultimately she recommends art educators develop a more comprehensive understanding of how art works are understood in order to best facilitate this process for our students. From Koroscik’s comparison of novice/expert differences I would suggest that

adolescents generally are “domain specific experts” in terms of the forms of popular culture that they participate in.

Freedman and Wood (1999) did a study, which investigated high school students’ responses to a variety of images, including popular culture. This quantitative (survey) and qualitative (thematic case study) study looked for the following: purposes of images, interpretations of images and relationships between images. The study was conducted in a high school social studies class. The popular culture images (chosen by the researchers) were a World War Two bond poster, two ads and a cartoon of Native Americans and Pilgrims playing football on the first Thanksgiving. The fine art images included Van Eyck, Bruegal, Russell, and an 18th century Hindi image from India. The research indicates that “when given an opportunity to discuss the relationship between forms of “visual and textual culture,” students demonstrate a relatively sophisticated ability to make connections between objects and meanings” (p. 138).

They point out that the students had difficulty in grasping the “didactic nature “of the fine art images presented, except when “forced” to do so. “They began to understand that images convince” (p. 139). (What exactly are these images supposed to convince you of?) The students did not, however, have this problem with the popular culture images. I find this assertion somewhat perplexing as to my mind the fine art images they chose are not didactic (in the sense of preachy, instructive or moralistic), images, even those dealing with religious subject matter, while propaganda posters and ads are in that they are explicit attempts to sell products. I would also suggest that the students might not construe a WW2 bond poster as popular culture image. The Van Eyck may in fact

have served such a purpose in its own historical context but it unreasonable that students should infer that. No wonder they had to be “forced.”

The researchers indicate that most of the connections the students make to the paintings involved their own choice of images “from outside school.” Films represented the most significant form students cited in relation to the images. Wood and Freedman conclude:

These results indicate that curriculum should include a greater focus on analyses of visual culture in all forms, including relationships between various types of imagery and the multiple meanings they suggest. Such an education would include discussions of images in traditional categories and the ways in which these categories blur, particularly in contemporary life. All images have visual qualities that reflect and can influence people’s knowledge and understanding of culture or cultures. In the context of schooling, such definition of visual culture, and the connections between various types of imagery, may even mean that we should broaden our definition of art education. (p. 141)

In a year long study of the interpretation abilities of second and sixth graders Mary Erickson (1995) attempts to “assess art historical interpretation ability, that is, the ability to link artworks to the context which they were produced” (p.19). While Erickson’s study dealt with students much younger than those involved in this study, there are implications for understanding how students interpret visual imagery. Her study concludes that the students’ scores for identifying with the historical artist went up over the course of the year while scores for historical viewer and historical culture did not go up. This was not the case for two particular themes studied: “Where We Fit

into the World” and “Art and Religion,” both themes dealing with “what people thought and believed.” Erickson has no explanation for this, suggesting it warrants further study. It is simply conjecture on my part as there are many possible explanations for such results but I would suggest that perhaps those themes by their very nature are linked to the “contexts within which they were produced.” To look at a sculpture of Jesus from Chartres is to look at it in the context of the complexity of Christianity. To look at a painting by Kandinsky however, is to discuss it in many different contexts. To that end I can suggest that it falls into three of the ten themes Erickson outlines.

She goes on to state that, “The ability to imagine oneself out of the present and in the past or in another culture is an important skill in art historical understanding”(1995, p. 25). My experience with adolescents and the data from this study leads me to believe that students are capable of this when dealing with certain forms of popular culture, such as movies. No doubt this is the case as film is more often than not produced within a context that students are knowledgeable of, even while representing cultures and scenarios they are not knowledgeable of. They also have vast experience with looking at film. I have no doubt, that if students looked at art history on a daily basis, of their own choosing, from the time they were little children they would be able to “link artworks to the contexts in which they were produced” (p. 19) the way they do for popular culture. Further to that my hunch is that students ability to look at one form of visual culture within the appropriate contexts may be transferable to other forms of visual culture.

Media Study

This section will look at researchers (including art educators) whose interests lie specifically in the study of media and its relationship to criticism, interpretation and audience.

Leslie Devereaux (1995) says in *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography* that:

The problematic power of photograph and film, in their apparently authentic representation of what has actually happened, in their capacity to be highly constructed in inapparent ways, in their dependence upon context for interpretation, is deeply present in the material culture of our present era, lavishly exploited and celebrated in the pop rock video clip as well as in presences and more significant absences of images in the television news. (p. 1)

Film, photography, cinema are all cultural products available as artifacts to be scrutinized for their form, their use, their origins, and their meaning. (p. 3)

A study by Susan Neuman (1992) looked at the inferencing strategies of fifth grade students across media, in this case text and video. Specifically the study looked for differences, if any, in strategies employed in constructing meaning. Her research suggested that “viewing” was similar to “reading”, where reading “is conceived of as an interactive, strategic and constructive process, involving simultaneous analysis of cues at many different levels and for multiple purposes” (p. 133). This is very interesting in light of the popularly held view (Postman, 1985) that viewing television is a “mindless activity. Research by Langer and Piper (1988, cited by MacBeth, 1996,

pp. 161-2), is said to be inconclusive in measuring mindfulness and mindlessness. The study asked adults to watch one program, of their choosing, a week. One half of the group was instructed to watch from a different perspective every night (e.g., lawyer, child) while the other half was instructed to relax and enjoy themselves. The study did show that watching television in mindful way is apparently stimulates some aspect of creative, flexible thinking. The popular held notion that watching is mindless while reading is mindful is interesting in light of our role as art educators to teach children to “read” art objects. The problem lies not in recognizing that both viewing and reading are interactive so much as regarding one form as “higher” and more worthy than the other.

Bette Kauffman’s research looks at “visual competence.” Her premise is that as a visually literate society we all have the ability to “read” visual images “automatically, instantaneously and without awareness” (p. 70) of the process within the context of visual communication, “a profoundly social activity at both producing and interpreting moments” (p. 70). She sees the acquisition of this visual competence as result of growing up with television. The students in my class represent the second generation born with television. Working with elementary school children the study has students interpret ads as opposed to news photos. Kauffman concludes that the children are highly visually competent in reading the advertising images but less so with the news images. It seems that the notion of “real world” was prevalent even though the images had been constructed from certain political and ideological viewpoints. She sees this as part of the social agreement that society has in relation to the news. She advocates

encouraging students to take what they already “know” in terms of reading ads and apply it to the images presented within the context of news.

Kauffman concludes that children are unable to transfer their interpretative skills successfully from ads to news because they have no personal experience with the images being shown as news. I would suggest that if the purpose of the study was to examine visual competence in the realm of social context then looking at ads (complete) compared to news photos (text missing) denies the news photos it's context. The students may have been able to apply the interpretative skills more critically if they had been given all the information. Perhaps then they could have read the images to be “constructed” in relation to its context.

Finally, a note on one of the roles of film as narrative in our culture, and the desire to regulate those narratives for they can “under certain circumstances motivate or change people” (p. 81). Philosopher Edward Sankowski (1999) states the problem as he sees it:

A community that respects individual autonomy (free self-determination), it seems, ought to protect narrative art to a large extent as a realm of free creation, communication and appreciation. From this point of view, the autonomous or self-determining choice should be the prerogative of those who choose to create and those who experience narratives. Nonetheless and in conflict with the attitude just described, we also have a complex attitude of the following sort. We recognize the power of narrative art to shape and manipulate apparently autonomous free agents. We concede that audiences can resist to some extent. We think, however that a

narrative, or a barrage of narratives, can under certain circumstances motivate or change people. (p. 81)

Sankowski goes on to discuss the role of narrative in defining the individual within a community and in defining a community in relation to other community. This presents yet another conflict in determining regulation of film narratives.

In light of all of the studies presented in this chapter it is understandable that art educators and adults view adolescents involvement with various forms of popular culture as problematic. If the individual and the community are defined by *Terminator 2*, *Fight Club* and *Something About Mary* what does that say about our children, what does it say about us?

CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY

Overview and Rationale

The approach to this research was guided primarily by the nature of the questions the study proposed to answer. As a result this research is qualitative and since the focus of the study was to find what meaning, if any, students derive from the violent imagery in popular culture it made the most sense that the study be conducted as a series of interviews. The emphasis is on the students telling their stories in relation to specific examples of popular culture. Also as both the students' teacher and the researcher my role is crucial. Interviewing as a research method and the notion of researcher/teacher will be discussed.

The Setting and the Population

As a high school art teacher concerned and interested in popular culture and its relationship with my students it was an obvious choice for me to work within my own school setting. The school is culturally diverse in the larger context of the school district as a whole but within the context of our surrounding community the population is predominantly Asian Canadian. The majority of the students are second and third generation Canadians with strong cultural links to their own communities and the community as a whole. The community is fairly stable, in that many of the families have lived in the neighborhood for several generations. It is not unusual for students to point out their parents and aunts and uncles in the graduation photos on the walls in the hallways. Economically the community that feeds the school is solidly middle class, and along with the cultural aspects project most of the values associated with their economic status: work ethic, respect for authority and trust that the school is doing its job. However, there are pockets of neighborhoods living on or below the poverty line. The school also borders an

area of the city infamous for teenage prostitutes and drug dealing. As a result the school has a partial inner city designation. At the other economic end there is also a small but growing, percentage of the population whose parents are professionals. This is due largely to the nature of the housing market in the city. In contrast to other schools in the city and in the Lower Mainland, out of the 1200 students approximately fifteen to twenty own cars. Those that do more then likely have part-time jobs.

It is a good community, solid and decent. It is important to address this in this study, as there is a predominant assumption that east side schools are “rough”, laden with violence, crime and poverty. I have worked at Templeton for seven years and lived in east Vancouver for ten. Three years ago I moved within three blocks of Templeton and becoming a member of the community only further confirmed my experience as teacher; these are ordinary kids from ordinary families. While the focus of this research is not east side as opposed to west side attitudes to students it is important to note, as I became aware that my initial curriculum response to the students, seven years ago, in relation to media studies, may have been shaped by my own innate biases based on assumptions about the “eastside.”

The students who took part in the survey and the focus group were characteristic of general demographic of the school. More specific information about the students who participated in the focus group is provided in Chapter Four.

Data Collection

Initial data was collected by the use of a survey. The survey (see Appendix p.112) allowed some preliminary insight into students' attitudes and behaviors towards violent imagery in popular culture. Out of a possible fifty-six participants, twenty-one students (fourteen females and seven males) returned their parental permission forms.

From these students, nine agreed to take part in the focus group. This small sample it is not intended to provide comprehensive quantitative data but rather a basis for further understanding of the data obtained from the discussions. The surveys also provided a list of movies and television shows that were the "favourites", from which the focus group chose.

After viewing the programs that the students chose, the discussions and interviews were audio taped. In addition to this I kept field notes. This process took place over a considerable time period given the busy and conflicting time schedules of nine young people and myself. The results of the survey data were complete on October 5, 1999. The final interview took place on March 2, 2000. I had planned for the completion of all data collection by the December break.

Interviewing as Methodology

Harry Kiyooka was my painting instructor at the University of Calgary in the late 1970s. His adage was that "one must do what is necessary." In relation to painting this meant that the technique and process were contingent upon the concept. At the time it seemed a difficult idea to grasp but its sense is in its simplicity. In conceiving of the ways I could structure this study it became clear that if I wanted to determine what meaning my students derive from violent imagery in popular culture I would have to ask them. The most efficient way to do this was in a group situation allowing for viewing of the programs with the discussion immediately following.

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to evaluate as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people

and the meaning they make of that experience. Being interested in others is the key to some of the basic assumptions underlying interviewing technique.

(Seidman, 1998, p. 3)

Much of the social science literature I reviewed dealt with the behavioral effects (Dubow & Miller, 1995; Kueby, 1996; MacBeth, 1996) of television on adolescents. My interest lay in their own telling of their relationship with popular culture. Seidman goes on to state:

Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience.

Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action. (p. 4)

The Interviews

Initially I had anticipated that the three interviews I would conduct would involve the whole group of students. For various reasons the interviews (five in total) took on several different forms: unstructured group interview, non-structured individual interview, structured interviews and semi structured interviews (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). This process also allowed for validity checks (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995).

The first and most comprehensive interview was the only one which involved all of the students at the same time. A focus group is defined by Anderson (1990) as a group of people who focuses on a particular topic and discusses it fully with the leader. Anderson would also identify the group of students I worked with as "elite" (p. 223), as a

group having a particular experience or knowledge about the subject. In this case the object of our attention was the film *The Matrix*. After watching it the students and I ate lunch together and then sat around a round table where a tape recorder in the middle taped our discussion. I had pre-prepared some questions in order to initiate the session hoping that the discussion would evolve. I could not predict how much time the process would take but the students had committed to most of the day (with the help of the pizza bribe). The interview, which took place after lunch, lasted eighty minutes. After the initial, "What part did you like best?" it proved to be unnecessary to use my prepared questions as the process took on more of a quality of a conversation and I would ask questions in the context of the discussion. I felt that it was necessary to guide the discussion at times in terms of addressing issues more closely related to my research questions.

The subsequent interview was similar in that a program was watched and then discussed in relation to initially prepared questions while other questions arose out of the context of the discussion. However only two students were able to take part in the session and one of them did all the talking. The third interview was completely unstructured as it was at the request of a particular student who had more to say in relation to *The Matrix*. The last two interviews were structured and occurred months after the initial interview. While this was unintended it proved advantageous as it allowed me the opportunity to work with the data already collected and to gain some insight into the kinds of questions I felt were neglected and to explore themes that I felt were emerging (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). These final structured interviews also allowed me to keep the students who participated focused, as two had a tendency to be

easily sidetracked (admittedly to the benefit of this study) and the other student was quite shy.

Researcher and Teacher

It seems to me that I have believed in teacher research throughout my career, even if that belief was unconscious in my first years in the profession. Teacher research values the practices that I have discovered during my clinical experience; it moves the philosophy of clinicians into classroom situations. What worked for me in my teaching was not etched in a curriculum manual, but it emerged from observing, talking and writing about my students. I learned about teaching and made instructional decisions by taking time to think and talk with colleagues about what I was learning. I based instructional decisions on my own research. I was a learning professional. (Santa, 1993)

These may be Carol Santa's words but it seems as if she wrote them for me. The only difference is that coming from art school I viewed my approach to curriculum as an artistic creative process, not as research, although Eisner (1979) suggests they are one in the same.

The role of teacher/researcher is one that I enjoy as the dynamic of trying out ideas on and with students keeps me renewed. It is a very fluid role and can take any form that I and my students see fit. There are no requirements for ethical review, no proposals to write, no references to cite and no data to code. The formal role of researcher/teacher in the context of this study presented a different type of challenge. The obvious difference is the necessity for more rigor but reflecting back on the process that was not the most challenging aspect. The researcher/teacher role proved problematic

in relation to collecting the data from the students – the interview process. I was very conscious of trying to be the “researcher”, as well as their teacher, as my experience as a teacher has shown me that students will provide responses that they think you want to hear. In the initial round of questions in the first interview Saka says she likes the fighting and Allan says he likes it when people die. Also I was somewhat unsure of how much of my own voice to allow into the conversation. In reviewing the data there are a few occasions where the students heard my stories in relation to theirs. Seidman (1998) cautions against developing a “we” (p.80) relationship with the participants as this has the effect of creating a conversation rather than an interview whereas Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) see conversations as a method of research in their own right (p. 163). Seidman then goes on to suggest the interviewer share some personal experiences in order to establish rapport as too little rapport or too much rapport can create distortions. Being their teacher I would assume put me on the side of too much rapport but from Seidman’s contradictory recommendations it would seem that the problem (if it is in fact a problem) is inherent in the process of interviewing for research. I do think the relationship was reciprocal allowing the students to feel comfortable in the process. I didn’t specifically analyze the data for distortion (misconception or exaggeration) but I was aware of instances (as mentioned previously) where students comments were less than genuine. Overall I feel the students were very open, honest and enjoyed the opportunity to talk to me and each other.

Being their teacher did prove to be advantageous in terms of having access to the students in order to collect the data as well as allowing the students to feel very comfortable in the whole process. While I am confident that I would have collected

interesting data from a group of adolescents with whom I had no prior relationship I am aware that I would not have collected this data.

Treatment of Data

All data was transcribed into a format that allowed for ease of reading as well as providing a sense of the tone of the conversations and interviews. To that end the transcriber was asked to denote emphasis in a person's voice (bolding the text), laughter ("heeheehee") as well as frustration and confusion. I then listened to the tapes with the aid of the transcripts. This facilitated a certain level of audio and visual recall. I eventually could read the transcripts and hear the students' voices as well as see their facial expressions.

After reading and listening several times, I coded the data according to several different patterns that I felt were emerging: description, analysis, interpretation, judgement, language. I also attempted to code according to issues I had anticipated might emerge and be meaningful (gender). This proved to be futile for a number of reasons but mostly because it became necessary to let the data lead me. I then pulled out and isolated the significant patterns: personal, social, and philosophical approaches to interpretation and language use indicating acknowledgement of construction. This allowed for a more thorough analysis. This inductive method of qualitative research (Bogdon and Biklen, 1982) proved to be successful as it allowed me to discover the data. This process worked well with my own sensibilities, as it is similar to my approach to teaching and my own art practice. Eventually my data analysis took on a more organic form as I read and re-read the data making notes in the margins, colour coding various aspects and drawing boxes and arrows and stars to draw my attention to significant aspects. I also found it necessary

to read the data in its unadulterated state throughout the process as the often a word or passage in isolation took on more significance than warranted.

Validity

Through the use of a survey and the process of interviewing students in one large group, smaller groups, and as individuals, with both unstructured and structured interview formats allowed me to check and re-check my data. This resulted in triangulation (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). This was one of the intents of the survey data but the variety of interview methods and participants taking part was an unintended benefit to the study.

CHAPTER FOUR FINDINGS ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings and an analysis of the data in order to facilitate the interpretation in the subsequent chapter. Also this chapter will provide a sense of the students and the programs they watched and discussed. I have included brief descriptions of the students and a history of my relationship with them. As their teacher and the researcher my role in the study was pivotal. The findings are based on surveys, interviews, (audio-recorded) observations, and my field notes. The data presented is primarily from the five sets of interviews: the first where the entire group discussed the Matrix, the second being a follow-up discussion with one male student, the third involving two female students and *The Simpsons*, the fourth a follow-up discussion with two other female students and the final a brief interview with a male student which focused on video games.

The Survey

The survey asked students to estimate the numbers of hours they spent watching television, movies and playing video games, as well as the types of programs and movies they prefer, the criteria for “good” programs, movies and games and the specifics programs and movies that they watched. As well the survey asked specific questions pertaining to the purpose of violent imagery and their opinion on the need for age restrictions for viewing violent imagery (See Appendix).

Out of the twenty-one students who took the survey, eight watched more than twenty hours of television a week, five estimated that they watched between ten and fifteen hours, six watched five to ten hours and two under five hours a week.

The majority (fourteen) of the survey participants rented at least one movie a week, while five students rented and watched more than three a week. One student claimed to watch over twenty hours of movies in a week (this is approximately ten), while another student did not rent movies.

Sixteen participants claimed to play under five hours of video games a week, three played between five and ten hours a week, while two students played video games between 10 and fifteen hours. In this category it is noteworthy that thirteen females played under five hours a week. This may also indicate that some students do not play any games. Games included card games such as Solitaire, as indicated by some students.

Sixteen students indicated that their most preferred type of television program was either comedy or cartoons. This was re-confirmed in their choices of *Friends* and *The Simpsons* as the favourite programs, with *The Simpsons* being the most watched among both sexes and *Friends* being the first choice of the females.

In terms of criteria to judge "good" television programs students overwhelmingly cited plot, story, characters and dialogue as important. "Good comedy, not stupid things, a good program with a point, suspense, showing real things in life." "A good television program should contain good theme, some romance, some fighting actions, some comedy and a little science." Another student's criteria for good television included, "funny, some violence, maybe foul language, not boring, good music." It is not surprising that these criteria differed very little for movies, but I was surprised to see that the criteria also applied to video games. Good characters, plot and good graphics dominated the criteria list for video and computer games. "A good computer or video game has something to really make you think, it has to be fun and interesting." "Lots of action, good graphics,

sound, control, role-playing and a long time to play.” The time element came up on several lists.

In relation to the question asking to list the programs that they watch which contain violence one student responded, “ Probably all of them, in one way or another. Most of them are just cartoon violence, but some (because of their genre) has to contain some sort of violence.”

In response to the question pertaining to viewing restrictions for people their age all the students but two felt that this was not necessary. “ No, because if we are restricted then we’ll just try harder to watch and we’ll always have a way to watch it. I think people are smart and I think a lot of people choose not to watch.” Some other responses:

Female, Age 14: Yes, I do because people get easily influenced by TV and movies and might copy the violent acts. But they shouldn’t be restricted from programs like *The X-Files* because the purpose of the show isn’t the violence.

Female, Age 14: Yes, and no because it can influence us and we can think that like in wrestling after getting hit they get up. No because we’ve been watching it since we were little and it hasn’t influenced us yet.

Male, Age 16: No! because violence in programming and movies generally do not effect my age group. Because at a certain age you become less susceptible to death and violence.

Female Age 14: No if you take away the violence it’s almost as if you’re restricting them from enjoying life. Kids know deep down that its all fake.

The First Interview: Setting the Scene

All of the students agreed to meet at the school early on a professional day so that we could watch the film *The Matrix*, eat pizza and then hold the discussion, allowing for the students to enjoy the rest of the day off. The film was chosen through consensus from a list generated by the twenty-one students who completed the survey. We watched the movie in the school's Multi-Purpose room, allowing for the students to spread out and be comfortable, as the film is over two hours long. This also allowed us to hold the discussion in the same room thereby avoiding the disruption of moving to another space.

The students were transfixed for the duration of the film and as much as possible I observed their reactions and body language. This proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated as I was also completely caught up in the film. Though I had already seen it twice I found it difficult to ignore. I regretted my decision not to videotape the viewing. Two female students in particular were very demonstrative and vocal in response to scenes involving the star, actor Keanu Reeves: "he's so hot", "he's so cute" and a lot of sighing in kissing scenes. Some fight scenes caused students to grimace, grunt or groan in response, particularly when the heroes were hurt. Other scenes of violence elicited positive responses: cheering, clapping, and laughing.

The end of the film had one student exclaim, "It's over – it can't be!" They asked if they could watch it again while eating the pizza. As not all of the students in the group knew each other this may have been a way of eating lunch without having to talk to each other. After the pizza the students sat at a round table with the tape recorder situated in the middle. The interview session lasted approximately 80 minutes. The interview was not formal in the sense that I did not have scripted questions. Its tone was relaxed. This

was intentional in that I was attempting to be sensitive to the students' thoughts and reactions to the film. I took somewhat of an exploratory approach, as this is indicative of my teaching style as well. I say somewhat though, as I was mindful of my study's questions. The tone of the discussion is also indicative of my relationship with the students.

The Focus Group Profile

The group was comprised of nine students, ranging in ages from 14 to 16. Six of the students were females and three males. This is not a group of students who would normally spend time together but within the group all but one student had a friend. No doubt this was the result of the "I'll do it if you do it" syndrome, typical of adolescents. Starting from my left the students sat in the following order: Drew, Saka, Amanda, Angeline, Patrick, Allan, Lisa, Chris, and Jane, to my right as the circle came back to me. Within the group the pairs of friends were Drew and Saka, Amanda and Angeline, Patrick and Allan and Chris and Jane.

Drew is a grade nine student who exhibits little interest in art but is generally cooperative and conscientious. Given the opportunity he would prefer to use art class time get caught up on his homework then paint. He does not contribute much to class discussions and initially I felt he was not an obvious choice for the focus group. While he did not say much his contributions were interesting and important. He added significantly to the video game findings.

Saka is a grade ten student who is not strong academically but enjoys art and ultimately would rather play basketball. I believe her reason for wanting to take part in the focus group was to get out of class.

Amanda was one of the three students from the other art block. I did not know her before this focus group was formed. She is a very quiet girl and she seemed to find it difficult to contribute to the discussion. My sense is that she agreed to take part only after being convinced by Angeline.

Angeline, although from the other class, was known to me through a leadership club that I sponsor. A bright student, she contributed to the discussion in a thoughtful way, providing much insight into the film.

Patrick is not in my class either but I worked with him on a public art project the previous year. He is a "skater" and "BMXer" and has a bit of a reputation in the school for being a bit odd due to his appearance. He is notorious for wandering the halls and as a result does not do well in school academically. He is very involved in our theatre and video programs as a technician. He is a very pleasant student who cultivates himself as a bit of an outsider.

Allan is his best friend and has even more of a reputation as an outsider. I have known Allan since Grade Nine. He is in Grade Eleven now. A timetable error has put him in my class but he is very keen to take part in the study. Allan has learning disabilities relating to reading. He is however a very serious young man who proved to be an extremely interesting part of this study. Involved in the world of Magic cards and fan of alternative rock groups such as *TOOL* and *GOB* Allan provided much to the discussion and even requested further time to present his thoughts as he felt the girls dominated much of the initial discussion.

Lisa is a new student to the school having recently moved from Chilliwack and before that from Mexico. She has worked very hard to take part in my art class and is not

afraid to share her views even when her views differed from the other students. This was very evident during the taping of the Matrix discussion where her comments were very interesting, at times in contradiction of her peers. Unfortunately due to her accent and her soft voice, some of what she says is very difficult to decipher on the tape and she often gets drowned out by the louder students. This proved especially difficult for the transcriber but I think I was able to determine most of what Lisa said.

Chris and Jane were the characters (read a little silly) in the focus group; insightful at times and very interesting in terms of aspects of the study I had not anticipated. Good friends since elementary school they often finished each other's sentences. Their main interest in the film was the star Keanu Reeves. These two young women were not afraid to talk and enjoyed the process of the interview immensely. I also did a follow up interview with them.

The Matrix: Plot Synopsis

The film is a stylized science fiction film based on a futuristic post apocalyptic theme. In this case the apocalypse is the result of an army of super intelligent robots originally built by humans to make life on earth easier and more efficient. The robots become so efficient that they begin to assume power to the point where they have complete control. The environment is destroyed and ultimately the power (the sun) necessary to keep the robots functioning is in danger. The robots devise an immense underground battery. Each individual cell contains a human who provides power necessary for the robots to continue. All human life is born, lives and dies within the immense battery. They are all networked to a computer system, which allows each individual to live out a virtual life in the year 1999. This is the "matrix".

A group of resistors, unplugged from the matrix, lives underground in the sewer system. They have hacked into the system and they come and go through telephone connections. Underground they live in a dark and stark environment, a mixture of old and futuristic technology. When in the Matrix they are able to move within it in ways that seem super human as if they were characters in a computer game, although it is not a game. The agents, robots who look like CIA agents, have much more power and control within the matrix as they control the program. The resistors are in constant danger and if they die within the Matrix they die in reality as the program has been written to allow for the natural life cycle of humans.

So the scenario is set for the “Chosen One” – the individual who will save humankind from the robots and take back control. The prophecy says that the Chosen One will not only match the power of the robots but exceed it. He (and it is a he) will be both human and computer.

Stylistically the film is very slick in its use of visual imagery and special effects. It has somewhat of the same aesthetic as *Brazil*, *Seven Monkeys* and *Bladerunner*, old technology used and adapted with amazing new results. For example the telephone used throughout the film is a clunky black rotary dial that allows for the connection from the “real” world to the matrix.

The Discussion of *The Matrix*

I initiated the discussion by asking the students what they liked about the movie. Saka led off by stating “I liked the fighting.” Each student in turn accounted for a scene in the film that they liked the best. From this point the discussion wanders in many different directions as I tried to stay sensitive to the students while keeping in mind my

questions. In examination of the data it was apparent that the students were involved in Feldman's (1971) process of critiquing the film: observation, description, analysis, interpretation and judgement. This process did not take place in a strictly linear fashion as all aspects of Feldman's process seem to be integrated throughout the discussion. However it must be noted that the initial aspect of the discussion was dominated by description due likely to the nature of my line of questioning. To best facilitate the analysis of the data I will present the findings using Feldman's descriptors: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgement.

Description

The students used description for a variety of purposes the most common being a way of recounting the plot line of the film.

Chris: It's about a guy who is living a regular life

Jane: He's living in two lives.

Chris: He's living two lives and he.... and they are tracking him down and the agents were after him.

Jane: And then Trinity took him and they put him through all of these little things and he became one of them....fantasy man.

At times this recounting was in response to questions asked by the researcher, such as "What did you like about it?" Often the description was the result of students adding to each others comments with more information and confirming each others comments.

Saka: I liked the fighting.

Jane: The ending, the ending where he dodges the bullets.

Chris: He stops it and then and then he pushes him or kicks him or something. And then he does that real cool thing.

Jane: And then he does that leg thing which is really cool.

Angeline: I like the part where Morpheos was explaining to Neo about the Matrix.

Angeline: Yeah that was cool.

Chris: Oh in the white room.

Jane: I liked when all the guns came. (Agreeing noises from the others and Chris makes a noise, which is intended to imitate the noise from that scene.)

Jane: I loved it when they lifted his shirt.

Researcher: whose shirt?

Jane and Chris: (giggling together) Keanu's!

Chris: I don't like it when they take that bug out of his belly button. That was really nasty.

Such accounts were typical in that there was an understanding within the group that we all knew which scene a person was talking about. This makes sense given we had all just watched the film together. As a result these descriptions were barely descriptive; they were utterances, often punctuated with the word "cool".

Description was also used to explain aspects of the film. Again, the description is far from detailed or complete. Just enough information is provided as a point of clarification.

Jane: And they shoved a thing into the back of his head.

Chris: That made him learn karate and kung fu and stuff like that and that way he can fight the battle against the agents.

Researcher: So does someone want to give more information about sticking the thing in the back of his head?

Lisa: I think that they make him believe that, that the world he lived in wasn't the real world.

Jane: That he was actually living in.

Patrick: It was a computer program.

Chris: It was the thing to enter him into the Matrix.

Description dominates the first ten minutes of the conversation as the students all come to terms with hearing their own voices in the group. It represents little risk in terms of sharing their ideas and thoughts. They all saw the film and they could explain what happened, more or less. The students employ description throughout the eighty minutes but in a much more integrated fashion as their thoughts on the film emerge.

Jane: I think it is all just part of the system because I think the Matrix is just trying to get as far away as they can from the real world. Outside there was sun and everything is just clean and all, but in the real world is like basically dirty and dark. And I think they made the system as far away as possible from the real world so that they might think that they won't belong and turn into the real world.

Analysis

Analysis of the film focused primarily on examining the plot line in relation to the settings and characters, with very little discussion of the mechanics of the film. The students were interested in looking at how the story was told and not how the film was made. Jane for example is explaining the difference between the real world and the Matrix.

I think it is all just part of the system because I think the Matrix is just trying to get far away as they can from the real world. Outside there is sun and everything is just clean and all, but in the real world it is like basically dark and dirty. And I think they made the system to be as far away as possible from the real world so that they might think that they won't belong and turn into the real world.

In this example Angeline is explaining how the conflict in the film is set up.

I think the fighting was in the movie because the agents were trying to keep their system going....and not let it destroy and get into the real world cause they don'tthe system for them was going really well, but the people in the real world want the people that are in their Matrix, to actually like....unplug them and give them back into the real world...and the fighting was all about the real world people fighting against the people that is keeping the Matrix going.

There are only a few references made to the special effects employed in the movie and most of the comments were made in the initial stages of the conversation when I ask the students to tell what they liked best about the movie. The lack of discussion around special effects was a surprise to me as the film is renowned for its effects. I had anticipated that this would dominate much of the conversation. Jane does say, "how like you really never see it in real life ...like they just did it and you see it for the first time like whoa, like its astonishing!"

There is however a reference to some of the stylistic aspects of the film as the students clarify which world was "real" and which was "virtual".

Overall the student's analysis of the film is related to the students' discussions of how the movie made them feel and what it made them think.

Interpretation

Interpreting the film was by far the most significant aspect of the discussion for the focus group. I have always felt that the BC Art Integrated Resource Package (1991) was correct in including the notion of context in the study of visual art, as it has been my contention that making and looking at art has always been informed by context(s). The IRP simply named what was already there. I was very excited to discover in the analysis of the data that this was the case for the students. The students seemed to look at the film from three major contexts: personal, social, and philosophical.

Personal Context

A strong sense of empathy for the characters and their situations was very prevalent. Lisa, Jane and Chris all expressed sadness over certain characters (“good guys”) dying or being in danger. Lisa also stated that if she were to re-make the film she would change it so that the innocent people did not have to die.

To a question regarding their physical reactions (covering their eyes, gasping, or showing no physical response) to watching the film the students responded by describing which parts of the film solicited response.

Saka: Parts where the main characters would get hurt or killed or have something on them.

Lisa: You didn’t want anything to happen to the good guys.

Angeline: There are parts you are basically not used to seeing in normal life so that you find that kind of sickening or whatever and then you will have no response to that and you just think it is too graphic for you too see.

Amanda: Well, I felt what they were doing you know but I just kept it all in.

The film portrays two contrasting worlds: the fantasy virtual world of “Matrix” which looks and feels like the world we inhabit today and the “real” world which is the dark, underground sewer existence inhabited by a few humans unplugged from the system. The actual world as we understand it no longer exists. The students expressed their preferences for the world in which they would live. Out of the nine, five claimed they would live in the real world. The strongest reason for choosing the real over the virtual was the idea of being in control over your own life no matter how difficult. Also the idea of real experience over virtual was appealing to the students. Even if the food was awful it was real. As Chris says “You are actually eating and tasting food for yourself.”

Lisa: I would live in the real world because in there I can like, in the Matrix they were like using people and they are telling you how to live and where to live.

She goes on to state later in the discussion:

I wouldn't want to stay in the Matrix because the agents could take my body like when I didn't really expect it. You don't know when they are going to use you and in the real world you can be yourself always.

Saka sees it as a question of having authority over your self; “You have more power down there.”

Drew stated that he would want to live in the “good world – inside.” I was initially confused by this, thinking that “good” must mean the virtual world, (steaks, wine and sunshine). For Drew “good” had moral implications and not the hedonistic connotations that I was referring to. He also went on to point out that, “You don't learn though – in the Matrix – you just get it.”

An interesting response was from Allan who was not sure which world he would live in.

Cause if you lived in the real, world you probably die sooner or later due to robots, and if you lived in the fake world and you knew it was all computer simulated and you wouldn't exactly be happy there."

Chris was quick to point out to him that, "You can die whether you are in the real world or in the Matrix."

For Amanda and Angeline the not knowing that your world was not real and in fact was computer simulated made it palatable.

Angeline went on to clarify the notion of empathy with a character in film in general.

I think we all get so into the movies because we kind of want to forget about all of our problems and we get so absorbed into their problems we feel we are part of it.

It is not just a screen with a picture. We feel that we are really in the screen, we're just watching it, live. That's how I think we get all our emotions of like,

"Oh no! He's going to die! I don't want him to die" or whatever like that.

Chris, Saka and Lisa concur. "We can pretend we are that girl, what we would do." "We can put ourselves in their shoes and we can pretend that we are them." "So you are in your own world and you become like in a trance and its kind of like connected to the movie. Something like movies is good because it makes you feel that way."

Social Context

Out of the discussion of the lack of control and power in the Matrix an interesting, yet confused discussion around the nature of school and learning evolved (confused in that the students were often confused as to which world was which). Molly initiated the discussion when she pointed out that you could “go into the white room and get whatever you want.” It was in this white room that Neo receives his training for entry back into the Matrix after becoming aware that it is all just a computer program. Drew followed by stating that he felt that that wasn’t learning, “They give it to you its like free.” Jane and Angeline are in agreement with Drew in believing there is no challenge in simply being plugged into the program. “You are just getting the stuff put in your head.” Angeline says, “I think the real world doesn’t seem real because you don’t learn how to fly helicopters. They just feed it to you, so how is that real?”

Lisa however has a different take on it. She says, “It goes in your brain and that’s how you learn. You can go as far as you want, as far as you want to go and that’s why I would live in the real world.” Where Drew and Angeline see an absence of challenge Lisa sees an opportunity, “ basically they teach you the brain and that’s how you learn stuff.”

The students also see a relationship to the idea of access to knowledge as a way of eliminating a social hierarchy. Saka points out:

If you get fed the thoughts in the real world, everyone could be fed the same thing and you would all be equal. Like no one would be higher then the other. We would all be exactly the same.

The discussion continues on for several minutes to clarify if in fact a hierarchy does exist in the underground real world. Jane concludes this segment of the conversation by

stating that we are in fact living in the Matrix. Michael succinctly agrees by blurting out “and that’s school!”

Philosophical Context

When I ask the group to put together the plot for me Jane answers “that reality isn’t reality.” I respond by telling her that she is getting ahead of my question and I request a description of what happened in the film. Patrick answers by saying, “It is a classic battle of good and evil.” Jane retorts, “No, it is a battle between reality and fantasy.” Michael responds in a very frustrated tone, “Yes, but there is a good side and a bad side.” To this Jane sticks out her tongue and rolls her eyes at him. And so the philosophical debate begins.

Early in the discussion Allan played devil’s advocate by claiming that what he liked most about the film was “people dying.” As my history with Allan has encompassed the last three years he has been aware of my interest in violent imagery and I believe he was playing with the other students a bit. Later I pressed him to elaborate and he responded,

I just figure that by killing the innocent people they are not really innocent. In a way, because they were helping to kill the robots, [who] live because they are on the batteries. But they want to save them too, so then it is a kind of half half thing – in between – you can’t decide because you have to take them out of the Matrix, so then they can’t reuse their batteries to kill them, they also can’t use their weapons.

In other words, all of the “innocent people”, as the students called them, are actually an integral part of the system that keeps them in a virtual oppression and allows the robots

their power and yet they are also part of the power source that is tapped in to by the resistance fighters. Allan has recognized a moral dilemma. He later elaborates on what he sees as the philosophical conundrum of the film when asked to chose which world he would live in. The inevitability of death is echoed by Chris when she states that “You can die whether you are in the real world or the Matrix.” Her comment is not as fatalistic as Allan’s though as she seems to imply that the type of life you lead is what counts.

Lisa feels strongly that the good characters (Switch and Mouse) should not have died and if she had made the film they would not have. Saka points out to her that “They needed to die.” She qualifies this by claiming in order for the film to work they had to die. If they did not die the whole story would be different.

An important theme of the film was the concept of Neo being the “Chosen One”, the one who would save human kind. The students focus on this when the discussion concerned what lessons could be learned from the film. In order to be the “Chosen One” Neo has to believe in himself and the students see belief in oneself as a key to succeeding. Lisa states, “It was like believing in something and are strong then you can be whatever you want.” This was a prevalent view throughout the first discussion and in the follow-up interviews.

Interview with Allan

Allan and Patrick requested another interview a few days after the large group discussion. They felt that they did not have an opportunity to say all that they wanted to say as Jane and Chris talked too much and they did not think that the girls really understood the film. Finding a time slot that was suitable proved too difficult and as a result only Allan was available. This occurred on November 12th, approximately three weeks after the initial discussion. This interview seemed somewhat rambling and disjointed when I initially read through the transcripts. Allan is generally pre-occupied with meaning in and of life in relationship to technology and questions of morality. He presents a darker, more angst ridden take on the film and at one point claims that he would prefer to live away from the city without all the aid of technology. As Allan had complained that he did not have his say the first time around I let him lead the conversation.

The first thing on his mind is the concept of the virtual world not being perfect. The robots tell one of the characters that their first computer program was unsuccessful because they made the world perfect. The human battery cells would wake up so the robots found that they had to change the program from an utopian ideal to one, which included death, destruction and disease.

The notion of being controlled by technology is one that he grapples with throughout the interview:

They make the movies to try to scare you, but then you hear about how they are trying to advance computers and how they win at chess and checkers and all that and I think it's I don't exactly like computers myself. I don't play on them

but eventually people are going to be dependent on them cause they don't want to think for themselves, they're too lazy it seems like to me.

Now they are making watches that have all these features and everyone has a computer in their house I guess cause they sell so many. I thought that Y2K thing was supposed to be so they could prevent the computer from getting smarter but it might be a false scare too, just to convince people that year 2000 is bad. And the next year, 2001 is better cause people always say this product can do 2001 things or the revolutionary Dirt Devil 2001. There is the extra "1", its not exactly 2000, it's an extra one to make it extra special or something.

And in *The Matrix* they're kinda trying to demonstrate that its bad when you make all of these computers they think for themselves.

When asked if the killing in the film is futile (you can not kill the robots, only the human host) Allan replies:

We're violent people, we choose to kill others just for sport or fun or just for survival sometimes but somehow there are those people that say we'll eventually end up killing ourselves cause everyone gets greedy and they want power, kinda like Hitler. He went out and killed the Jews just cause, he didn't like their religious beliefs or something and it's almost like, sometimes, cause people.....what's the point of carrying around a gun if youcan't you feel secure enough, living in this world? It's like other people want what you have just cause they can't get it, and they think they have to kill you for it. There is those people that say that we will eventually kill ourselves cause we pollute the world. There are those people that shoot at each other in the States during traffic

jams cause they get so pissed off. It's like the more and more we get into these more crowded societies the more likely we are to kill each other. It's like cornering a wild animal. You don't know what it is going to do once you corner a wild animal. You don't know if it's going to submit or if its going to go crazy try to kill as much as it can or attack. You don't know. It is an unpredictable kinda thing.

When I suggest that the film offers hope in the form of Neo, The Chosen One, Allan responds:

It's like the concept of good and evil. It's like I started thinking after seeing the movie, what is good and what is evil? People defined killing someone as evil or bad or wrong, right? But then in some ways, we're all eventually going to die of age or cancer or maybe we get addicted to cigarettes or Aids or whatever, right? It's like we don't know what's going to happen but we are going to die anyway, so how can it be considered wrong?

I'm not saying it's exactly right but I'm not saying it's totally wrong, cause sometimes people decide they should go take someone else's life and what should you do? Should you kill him? It's like you are going to be a hero or a murderer? You're going to be a murderer for the fact that you killed him, but then you are going to be a hero since you stopped him from killing other people.

Allan also discusses the role of government, with the help of technology in controlling our lives. The interview concluded with my suggestion that perhaps he would be interested in borrowing and reading some of my philosophy texts from university.

The Simpsons: Interview with Amanda and Angeline

This session was to include all the students in the focus group that were available after school on November 10, 1999. After waiting fifteen minutes it was agreed that we would proceed though only two students had showed up, Angeline and Amanda.

Angeline provided the tape that we were to watch. Angeline also did all the talking so as a result the data for television viewing can hardly be called a focus group. We watched a Halloween episode of *The Simpsons* that was made up of three separate cartoons, all three of which were based on popular movies and television shows. Both girls were very familiar with *The Simpsons* so as a result many references were made to other episodes. As I had seen most of them myself this was not a problem.

We wasted no time in getting down to the use of violence in the program. It should be noted that I found it necessary to remove the word "like" from Angeline's responses. This in no way impacts on what she is saying.

I think its not trying to promote violence, but I think they are using it to kinda reflect on society now. Because our society, like, most kids find violence quite funny, so I think that's why they try to work it in *The Simpsons*, but I know they are not really trying to promote violence, but just trying to show that our society is kinda weird or something like that.

In one scene Homer throws Ned off the roof and then pokes him in the eye with a stick.

The girls thought this was hilarious. I ask if they would find it funny in real life.

Angeline says no and then explains:

I think they kinda use it, but they stretch it a bit more and they use comedy with it, they incorporate comedy with it so it actually makes it funny. But then if it was a true accident, like if Homer wasn't didn't have the character of being this guy....lazy and stuff and has real small mind and if the character wasn't like that and the character was a compassionate person and it was an accident that he threw him off the roof people wouldn't laugh. Since the characters are meant to be small minded or funny it works with the whole thing.

Angeline goes on to say that because the violence is incorporated with the comedy you don't really notice the violence unless" you are analyzing it which most people don't do." "I think it's humour. I think it's just entertainment."

She expands on comments she made in the beginning of the interview about *The Simpsons* commenting on society:

But maybe in a way they are trying to use it to show that laughing at these kind of things aren't funny because they made it so extreme that when you watch it you find it disgusting.

Jane and Chris and Drew

These interviews were conducted on February 10, 2000 and March 2, 2000.

Again, several attempts had been made to get all the students together but this was unsuccessful. I interviewed Jane and Chris after school for about forty-five minutes and Drew during a preparation block with the permission of his block teacher. As they had not requested interviews but came at my request I had a set of questions prepared. This proved advantageous to keeping Jane and Chris on track as they can get very excited when talking about most things but more so when the conversation concerns Keanu

Reeves. Drew is a shy student and the questions allowed him to focus. The young women were at once delightful and frustrating to talk to as they are such close friends that they anticipate each other's thoughts and complete each other's sentences. They agreed on most aspects of the film: how "cool" *The Matrix* is, how cute the star is (especially in leather) and on the appropriate use of violence in the film. However being close friends also allowed them to disagree with each other, which they did on several occasions. I will deal with the two interviews separately.

Chris and Jane

What does the Chosen One mean to you? This question produces a lot of sighing and giggling pertaining to how cute the star, Keanu Reeves is. I am told that he is especially cute in leather. Since we had watched the film in the focus group it was made available for purchase and Jane now owns it and she and Chris have watched it again. They do not really answer the question except to say that it has something to do with God.

What thought have you given the film since we watched it? They claim to have not talked about it except to reconfirm that it is "cool."

Do you feel the violence in the film was appropriate? The girls respond by discussing the nature and use of the special effects. They analyzed where they felt the filmmakers had gone too far (the scene with the hundreds of walls of guns) and where they felt there could have been more special effects (the subway). In the initial group discussion I was surprised at how little discussion there was of special effects. My hunch is that the second viewing of the film allowed for focusing on aspects other than the plot.

Do you feel you are affected and influenced by violence in the film? Why or why not? Both Chris and Jane agreed that they are not affected by the violence in the film. As Chris says, "It doesn't mean "oh they have a gun, they're cool, we're going to go out and get one"...I don't think that's going to happen."

Do you think others are? Who and why? This question initiated an interesting discussion about the affect of violent programs on Jane's ten-year-old cousin. After watching the *Power Rangers* "he acts it out." "My cousin will fight his little sister and he made her cry thinking that she's going to get right back up." She goes on to recount that when she was a little girl she fought with her brother. "I was a girly girl, but I use to fight with my brother cause he's like seven years older then me and he would always take my stuff so I would always have to fight him for it, so yeah, but it wasn't for movies. It's just that I had to defend myself." This story is told with a lot of laughter.

How does television violence differ from movie violence? Chris felt that television violence was not allowed to be as "big" as movie violence. When asked for specifics they returned to the *Power Rangers* and the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*; they did not compare the two television programs to movies but only to each other (although it was noted that *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* had also been a live action feature film). They felt that the *Turtles* were more interesting in that the violence they used was reliant on the martial arts and not on lasers, guns and knives. Jane also felt the *Power Rangers* were violent towards women as the female heroes were always put in the position of having to be saved from the "guy monsters" by the male heroes. It is important to note though that both girls acknowledged that they did not feel this way when they were

younger but only now thinking back. Chris (of course) also thought the Turtles were cuter.

Can you recall any violent imagery on TV that you found disturbing? Jane answered this question immediately with “ All those movies that the girls get raped.” For Chris some of the issues on the program *Law and Order* were disturbing. Chris goes on to account a scene in *Beverly Hills 90210* that she had watched the previous evening.

They didn’t show you the nudity part but they showed like the raping and the screaming and the hitting and the yelling and the ouchy. They just showed their heads and their arms and they showed like if he would hit her, they show him hit her and that really gives you the chills.

She goes on to say, “You picture yourself in it. It’s very scary. Like if you were saying, oh, what if I was there, or what if I went down that road or whatever, that it can happen to me, - like on *Blair Witch*. They are in agreement that movies that scare you are different; as Jane says a movie where there is a dog attack can make her afraid of dogs, even though she has a dog (this of course leads into a discussion about whose dog is cuter). When I have them back on track Chris talks about thinking about those images that scare you and how you can’t control them. “You don’t want it to but it just comes into your head.” I ask if she watched the whole program. I suggested that she could have turned it off if it was disturbing. “ Well to see what turned out.”

From this point the conversation moves quickly through *Da Vinci’s Inquest*, (Jane’s uncle had a part in one episode, Chris thinks the partner is cute), to *The Simpsons* (Jane thinks that it is interesting that Americans “don’t get” *The Simpsons*), to a *This*

Hour has 22 Minutes episode where they made fun of Americans. It takes me a few minutes but I get them back on track once again.

Do you play video games? A resounding “Yes, we do!” Their list included *Spiral*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Crash Bandicoot*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Simba*, *Monopoly*, card games (“cause they’re really, really good”) and *WWF2000*. I suggest they tell me about one of them. Chris picks *Crash Bandicoot* but Jane points out that “there’s no violence.” They settle on *Grand Theft Auto*. The gist of the game, it seems, is to have the character “drive around, beat up people, steal cars and deal drugs.” Jane elaborates,

He throws people out of cars, gets in, crashes into things, runs upstairs, picks up dope and stuff like marijuana and sells it to people down on the corner. There’s three big gangs and you have to get on all of their good sides. And if you get on someone’s bad side, they’ll chase you down and try to shoot you. So you have to do things for them to protect you.

I have dropped all pretense of being an objective researcher and I can only respond, “You are kidding.” Jane tells me that there is no object to the game, it is just fun. “It’s not like we’re going to actually do it in real life, it’s make believe.” I inquire if they would find a game about an ambulance driver trying to get to a scene of an accident to save someone life as much fun. They said they would, as the point of the game is to get through the maze and overcome the obstacles.

Should there be restrictions on the amount and types of violent imagery shown on television, movies, and video games? Jane initially said yes to this question and qualified her response by stating that she felt *Grand Theft Auto* was game for 13 years olds and up as there is a risk that younger children wouldn’t be mature enough to understand that it is

make-believe. Chris says, "If I had my own kid, I wouldn't let them play until I felt they were mature enough to understand the game." Both girls say that their parents know that they play this game and that they don't care, however Chris says, "My mom's against anything that's in the 90s!" and adds that her Dad try's to buy video games to play and her mom throws them out. Jane adds that she stopped playing Mario with her Mom because her mom would talk to the characters, "Jump, jump!"

Should there be age restrictions on programs containing violent imagery? "Yeah, it depends on which games. Like Grand Theft Auto, yes. *Simba* and *Spiral* and stuff like that – no."

Drew

What thought have you given the film since we watched it? Drew says he has thought about the film "a little bit." Thinking about the film means "weird *Matrix* playing around stuff", acting out the slow motion martial arts scenes.

Do you feel the level of violence was appropriate? "Yup, cause it makes the film better, it makes it more...well... it makes it more watchable." I asked him if he thought any parts of the film were over the top in terms of the violence. He didn't think so.

Do you feel you are affected and influenced by the violence in the film? "Yeah a bit." Drew and his friends enjoy play fighting the kung fu scenes from *The Matrix*.

Do you feel television violence is different from movie violence? Drew feels that movie violence is better because "they show more."

Can you recall any television violence that you found disturbing? "The wars...like in other countries."

Do you play video games? If so describe one of them. Drew describes Resident Evil. He says it is more violent than *Grand Theft Auto* and *Final Fantasy*. It is about taking on the character of a member of a team which is saving the world from virus spreading zombie/mummy creatures.

Should there be age restrictions on games, television or movies? He feels that there should be restrictions on some games, but it depends as he thinks some people “can handle it.”

Use of Language: Evidence of Awareness of Construction

Throughout the data the students, in the context of discussing the programs and games, used certain language that indicated that they understood that the programs are created. The most prominent indication of this was the word “they.”

Chris: I guess **they** find things that would interest a normal person and make it extreme.

Allan: **They** make movies to try to scare you and in the Matrix they are trying to demonstrate its bad.

Saka: If you changed that then **they** needed to change the whole story.

Lisa: That’s what **they** make you wonder.

Angeline: I think it’s not trying to promote violence, but I think **they** are trying to use it....I think **they** kind of use it, **they** stretch it a bit more, **they** incorporate comedy with it. **They** made each character have one personality sort....**They** didn’t show violence **they** went POW BAM.

Jane: Like how **they** used graphics, like how the graphics came together and how **they** actually made the film...**They** don’t need like seventeen walls.

Chris: I think **they** could have put some really cool effects in the subway.

Chris: **They** didn't show you the nudity part but **they** showed like the raping and the screaming.

Jane: Cause **they** know that teenagers would like it.

The following are other examples of language that indicates awareness of construction:

Saka: I guess it makes it look nice, makes you get into it.

Lisa: If it was real how would you feel doing that.

Chris: It feels weird cause you feel like you are in the exact same scene.

Angeline: It's not just a screen with a picture. We feel that we are really in the screen.

Jane: It's the characters.

Drew: Cause we've never seen it before. It's a new style I guess.

Conclusion

In presenting the data in this chapter I attempted to provide a comprehensive accounting of the conversations I had with the students. In reviewing the transcripts I am struck by the amount and quality of insight the students brought to the discussions. Postman (1985) states: "The point I am trying to make is that only through a deep and unfailing awareness of the structure and effects of information, through the demystification of media, is there any hope of our gaining some measure of control over television, or the computer or any other medium"(p. 161). In Chapter Four I will attempt to show that the students in this study are aware and are, in ways appropriate to them, taking control.

CHAPTER FIVE INTERPERTATION

Introduction

In order to facilitate the interpretation of the data I will discuss it in the order it was presented in Chapter Four: discussions relating to *The Matrix*, discussion of *The Simpsons* and the follow up interviews, starting with a discussion of the survey results. Bette Kauffman (1997) defines "visual competency as the ability to identify and classify images according to message families"(p. 70) which she identifies as art, news advertising etc. She goes on to state:

The cultural norms and guidelines for interpreting media images are invoked in part by recognition of these characteristic structures, or conventions of picturing. The viewing context thus established articulates with the producing context through the image to form overall social context, which is thus a system of socially agreed upon definitions, relationships and practices by which meaning is constructed and reconstructed. (page 72)

Through the interpretation of the data it is my contention that the students are "visually competent" and inherently involved in this process.

The Survey

The survey allowed me a sense of what students in my school were watching and playing and some of their thoughts in relation to their interests in popular culture. Overwhelmingly the students indicated a strong preference for plot, character and dialogue in television and movies. Add good computer graphics and a challenge to play to the video list. To me this is a strong indication that what students that I teach are really interested in is stories. Also the surveys indicated that there should be no restrictions on people their age from watching programs that included violent imagery. With this

information I was not surprised that they chose *The Matrix*, for viewing and discussion, as the film has a complex plot line, with an emphasis on strong characters and of course violence.

The Matrix: Good vs. Evil. Fantasy vs. Reality

With a thorough examination of the data pertaining to the group discussion of *The Matrix* it became evident that the students were involved in the process of critical analysis (description, analysis, interpretation and judgement) as outlined by Feldman (1971) in *Varieties of Visual Experience*. While all of these students were enrolled in art classes it is my hunch that they were not consciously employing this process. It is here that it would be appropriate for me to clarify my understanding of each of these elements. Description is an account of what is being looked at and in the case of *The Matrix* it is an account of what happened in the film—the plot line. Analysis is an examination of the various elements that make up the art work and in terms of movies and television that means the elements and principles of design combined with those aspects particular to moving pictures as well as the literary elements such as plot and characters. Interpretation involves looking for the meaning in the artwork in relation to the use of the elements and principles and in relation to the context within it has been produced, and its intended audience. Judgement, as I tell my students is saying “It’s cool or it sucks.” But it is also looking at the artwork as a whole in relation to the elements it is made of, its meaning (intentional and unintentional) and the contexts within which the artwork operates and deciding if the artwork is successful within those parameters (Anderson, 1988). This of course can be a difficult and time consuming process when you are showing students the work of Joseph Beuys for they are not (presumably) operating with a significant learner’s knowledge base, a comfortable set of knowledge seeking strategies

or a learner disposition (Koroscik, 1997). I found the opposite to be true with the focus group in regards to *The Matrix*. In this case they were functioning (to varying degrees) as domain specific experts (Koroscik, 1997).

In fact the coding of the data revealed a natural and intuitive (Anderson, 1988) approach to talking about the film. The prevalence of description in the initial part of the discussion was the result of my prompting them to give more information than the one and two word answers they started with. A certain amount of apprehension to speaking and sharing their ideas in front of the group was anticipated. As the discussion took on a life of its own the coding reveals the students employed more than one aspect of the process at one time in order to best express their thoughts (Geahigan, 1999). This I think is truer to the actual lived experience of students talking about television and films. The students in the group employed the process individually and as a group. They built on each other's observations and thoughts, adding to the discussion in significant ways.

For the purposes of this study the most important aspect of their critical analysis of the film comes from their interpretation of the film. I have chosen not to discuss the other aspects (description, analysis, and judgement) at length, though they are part of the process, they did not figure as prominently as interpretation. This is in keeping with Geahigan (1999), in his analysis of Feldman's critical analysis model as well as in keeping with the study's questions. Description, analysis and judgement will appear, when necessary, in the context of what meaning the students derived from the film.

To this end my analysis of the data pertaining to interpretation broke down into the following contexts: personal, social and philosophical. Finally, I will include a discussion of the students' conceptions of the construction of imagery. Analysis of the

data revealed that there is an explicit understanding of popular culture, in its various forms as being either separate from their real lives whether it takes the form of fantasy, satire, diversion.

Personal Context: Empathy

“It was sad. I didn’t want them to die.” “You didn’t want anything bad to happen to the good guys.” These statements are indicative of the strong connection the students felt with the characters in the film. The good guys were very good and the bad guys were very bad and the students empathized with the good guys. Several students gasped or cried out loud when Neo or Morpheus were being tortured. When a good character was punched, some students made that noise of exhaling sharply as if they themselves were punched. When a robot/agent was attacked (as it was impossible to kill them they were attacked voraciously all the time) students cheered. When Neo did finally defeat the agents they **all** applauded and cheered. Jane and Chris sighed when Neo kissed Trinity (major female protagonist). Some students reacted physically to various violent scenes; they jumped in their seats. When the Luminere brothers showed their first movie in the early part of the twentieth century of a train coming into the station the audience screamed and tried to escape. After they realized that the train would not run them over they lined up to see it again and again, screaming every time and suppressing the urge to escape.

This vicarious feeling of and for the characters is related closely to the literary function of the characters (they were in fact stock characters, as this film is ultimately a morality play), but also to the nature of film. When asked if this film would work as a book there was general agreement that it would not be as good. “You have to see it. You have to hear it.” The combination of the visual with the sound track produced some

literally startling results. The students jumped just as if someone had jumped out at them from behind a door.

However some students, particularly Amanda and Angeline, showed little or no response to scenes that others were displaying physical and audio reactions to. When I asked why, Angeline's response was, "There were some parts that you're basically not used to seeing in the normal life, so that you find that kind of sickening or whatever and then you will have no response to that and you just think that it's too graphic for you to see." Social scientists might suggest that violent imagery causes an increased insensitivity to violence. It could then be extrapolated that filmmakers need to make their imagery more and more graphic. But what Angeline is saying is that it was too horrific for her to even comprehend. It is not that she is insensitive to the imagery but that she is **too** sensitive to the imagery.

Angeline explains further what she sees as the reason behind their emotional involvement in movies in general.

I think we all get so into the movies because we kinda want to forget all of our problems and we get so absorbed into their problems we feel like we are part of it. It's not just a screen with a picture. We feel that we really are in the screen, we're just watching it live. Yeah, that's how we get all of our emotions like, "Oh, no he's going to die! I don't want him to die."

This experience of becoming lost in a story, in a character, is one that we have all experienced. I know for myself that I can only read novels on vacation, as I need the freedom of no responsibility, as I become so absorbed. Chris says that she can "put herself in their shoes and pretend that we're them." Lisa adds that, "Something like

movies is good because it makes you feel that way.” In a word, escapism, to retreat into another world for no other reason than it is not your own. Chris says, “So you are in a world and you become like in a trance and it’s kind of like connected to the movie.”

Personal Context: Speculation

When I asked the students how they felt the film engaged them, the response was not as I had anticipated. I expected them to account for the visual and audio effects but Lisa and Chris talked about how it made them think about the future. “I don’t know how they do it, but like, they make you wonder if that could be true some day.” “Like when they show the picture of the matrix, in the future how no life form is left.” I suspect that if I had asked the question differently I would have received the answer that I thought I was looking for, however the girls’ response was much more interesting and obviously of more importance to them. The film engages because it makes them think. In this case it made them think about the possibilities for the future. It implies an awareness of the possible consequences of today’s actions. Ultimately the students are aware of how their own lives could be impacted if technology and environmental damage remain unchecked.

The students speculated further when the discussion turned to which world they would choose to live in, the world of the freedom fighters or the virtual world. All but two of the students said they would prefer to live in the “real,” the world of the protagonists, the world of the resistance. Their reasons for choosing this world did not include the romantic notion of fighting the good fight against the evil robots. In studying the data I became aware that their reasons in fact reflected their own issues as teenagers. The “real” world afforded them control over their lives, unmediated experience and the opportunity and challenge to learn.

Lisa: I would live in the real world because in there I can like...in the Matrix they were like using people and they were telling you how to live and where to live.

Saka: You have more power down there.

Chris: Real world cause in the Matrix, everything is pretend, like you're not really tasting for yourself. In the real world everything was real. You were actually eating and tasting food for yourself.

These comments reflect the status of being an adolescent: little or no choice, no control over their lives, and therefore no power. Lisa's comment is particularly telling as her family had recently moved to Canada from Mexico.

"Real world because **it is** the real world." Patrick's comment is interesting in that he emphatically states that he has no desire to live in a fantasy world. As adult/teachers we accuse adolescents of living in a dream world, then we tell them they should grow up because it is going to be different when they get out into the "real" world. These contradictory statements must be very irritating for young people who do live "real" lives but who want to have more say in their lives. As adults we also assume that their interest in popular media results in all of their experience being mediated and therefore not valid. We place adolescents in a no win situation.

Allan speculates that the chance for happiness in either world is limited. He states that he is unsure which world he would live in for in the Matrix, all of your experience is the result of a computer program and is not a viable alternative to constantly living in fear of being killed by the robots. Allan is the oldest of the students and his response in my mind, reflects his maturity.

Amanda and Angeline are alone in choosing the Matrix. They felt that if you are unaware that the life you are living is all an illusion then so be it. They did not elaborate on this except it is interesting to note that one of the characters in the film (the traitor/Judas) chooses to be plugged back into the Matrix. He was tired of the gritty, bleak existence and expresses this while indulging in a steak and expensive wine. My sense is that although most of the students chose the “real” world that in fact Amanda and Angeline were more honest in relation to their physical needs and desires.

Finally, in regards to relating to the film in a personal context the students discussed what they saw as one of the films messages, the belief in one’s self. Neo, the “Chosen One” has to go through denial and a crisis of faith in order to come fully to the realization that he does in fact have the power to realize his potential. The notion of believing in yourself, being strong and having others who believe you was very important to the students. Chris pointed out that the Oracle told Neo that he was not the Chosen One only because he had to “walk the path” himself. If he did not choose freely and believe in his ability he would fail. Lisa says, “It is like believing in something and you are strong then you can be whatever you want.”

I found this to be very interesting and it is the reason I asked the question concerning the “Chosen One” in the follow-up interviews. My background in Catholicism made the references to Christianity seem quite obvious. (Neo must die to save the world.) The students however, seemed to see Neo’s position more in terms of a Nike commercial. In fact the film drew on many different religious and cultural references and in that sense allowed for a multiplicity of view points. Lisa says it best, acknowledging that the message of the film as they see it is one of hope and possibilities:

“It gives you the message like you have to believe in yourself and you have to be open-minded to anything that comes to you.”

Social Context

“In the Matrix you don’t learn, you just get it.” Drew’s comment prompted a discussion about the role of school in actual learning. This part of the discussion was confusing and rather muddled but it did reveal students’ thoughts about learning and school’s role in maintaining a social hierarchy. Drew feels that learning should be more of a challenge, that “just getting it” is unfair, that “everybody would be at the same level.” Lisa and Saka point out that may be a good thing as it would mean that everyone would be equal. “Everyone will be equal, like nobody would be ranked higher than the other. We would all be exact the same.” Drew is in challenge classes while Saka and Lisa for a variety of reasons have a difficult time academically.

This recognition of a social class system based on intelligence is partly due, I feel, to the local context of the school I teach in as it contains a “mini-school” for academically motivated students, as well as many challenge classes for gifted students. This does at times create a problem in relation to how students interact with each other. Those in the gifted programs are seen as “brains.” School is easy for them; “they just get it.”

In the follow-up discussion with Allen I ask him if the violence is justified in the film. He responds (in an almost stream of consciousness fashion):

It’s kinda like saying that we’re violent people, we choose to kill others just for sport or fun or for survival, but somehow there are those people that say we’ll eventually end up killing ourselves cause everyone gets greedy and they want

power, kinda like Hitler. He went out and killed the Jews just cause he didn't like their religious beliefs or something. What's the point of carrying a gun around if you, its like can't you feel secure enough, living in this world? It's like other people want what you have just cause they can't get it, and they think they have to kill you for it. There are those people that say we'll eventually kill ourselves because we pollute the world and there are those people that shoot at each other in the States during traffic jams just cause they get so pissed off. It's like the more and more we get into these crowded societies the more likely we are to kill others. You don't know. It's an unpredictable kinda thing.

Allen is obviously struggling to understand why violent things happen in society. He never directly answered my question but in a way he provided the most profound answer. Why would we care about the fantasy violence between robots and humans fighting for their freedom when there is so much real, senseless violence in the world?

The Philosophical Context

The film has a scene where a glitch in the computer program is explained away as a "déjà vu." This leads the students to speculate about which world we are living in now. Lisa giggles as she says: "It makes you wonder!" Lisa and Jane say that we are in the "matrix." Michael added that the "matrix" was like school. Both views provide interesting insight into the way in which students see society and their more immediate society of school. Saka says, "It makes us think if there is a real world out there." This statement could be construed as pessimistic or fatalistic but it in fact may be more of an indication of an adolescent's view of the world. What in fact is out there waiting for them? It suggests that they do think about the larger questions: an acknowledgement of

the systems that do impinge upon our lives, questions of reality and the necessity to consider an individual's place in these questions.

To this point the discussion of the students' interpretations of the film has included little discussion of violent imagery. Without seeing the film one could presume that there was little violence in *The Matrix*. In fact the film was extremely violent and was rated 14A in Canada and Restricted in the United States due to its violent imagery. A film with a 14A rating means that children under the age of fourteen must be accompanied by someone nineteen years of age or older. In the United States no one under eighteen years of age was permitted to see it without an adult. I asked in the early part of the discussion if the movie could have been made without the violence. Several students together said "No!" Lisa and Jane are in agreement that the movie would not have been interesting without the violence. Lisa also claims that the violence is necessary. I then asked if the film would have been interesting with just the violence and the special effects, without the story of Neo, the robots and the matrix. The students say "nope!" Lisa: "because there would be like no point to the violence." They were fighting because of what they believe in." The violence was, in fact, discussed throughout the eighty minutes but in the coding it became evident that when they did talk about the violence they considered it in relation to larger moral and philosophical questions as well as thinking that some of the scenes were "cool."

Angeline: I think the fighting was in the movie because the agents (robots) were trying to keep their system going and not let it destroy and get into the real world cause the system for them is going really well, but the people in the real world want the people in the matrix to actually like unplug and give them back into the

real world and the fighting was all about the real world people fighting against the people that are keeping the matrix going.

Angeline's description of the basic premise provides a rationale for the conflict. She explains why there is violence in the film. The students go on to discuss this, citing that the violence is justified as Neo and Morpheos are "good guys" fighting not only against evil but robots, non-human evil. As Patrick says, "It's a classic battle between good and evil." They also suggest an argument of self-defense ("they had to because they were after them") and a moral imperative since the fate of the world depended upon it.

The discussion becomes more interesting when the fact is raised that innocent people are killed in the process of fighting the robots. Lisa says that if she had made the movie she would not have had the innocent people die. Allan points out that the killing of the innocent people may be necessary as they help to power the robots' existence but he adds, "But then they wanna save them too, so then its kind of a half half thing...in between...you can't decide because you have to take them out of the matrix, so that they can't be used as batteries to kill them (Neo etc.) they also can't be used as batteries." The resistance movement steals its power from the robots. Allan has pointed out the complexity of the situation and the moral dilemma inherent within it. He explains further in our follow-up discussion:

I started thinking after seeing the movie, it's like, what is good, what is evil?

People defined killing someone as evil or bad or wrong, right? But then in some ways we're all eventually going to die of age or cancer or maybe we get addicted to cigarettes or get AIDS or whatever, right? It's like we don't know what's going to happen but we're going to die anyway, so how can it be considered

wrong? It's just yes you take away some of their life but you don't know they are going to like that life. There's those people that commit suicide. They say it's wrong to commit suicide but how do you figure it? These people decide for themselves that they don't like this so they kill themselves or whatever, but I guess it's a lot better then getting mad at the people around you and trying to kill them right?

Allen later in the conversation grapples with the idea of capital punishment, the role of religion, the government and laws and one's own conscience. He is a young man seriously trying to make sense of it all. When I ask if he sees the movie as ultimately hopeful or depressing he responds:

I don't know. You're living a real life it seems, but then you wake up, from this dream it's almost like. Whenever you have dreams it doesn't make sense and sometimes the real world doesn't make sense, the way people act. You just can't understand everything.

Poking Homer's Eye Out with a Stick: Humour, Satire and Social Commentary

After watching a Halloween episode of *The Simpsons* Angeline wasted no time in telling me that "most kids find violence quite funny" but that *The Simpsons* was not trying to promote violence but using it to reflect on society. The Halloween episode that the girls brought in to be viewed is a spoof on other forms of popular culture: *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, (a teenage horror film), *An American Werewolf in London*, and television superheroes battling the Riddler from Batman (BIFF! BAM! BOOM!). I ask her if kids would find it funny if they witnessed someone really having their eye poked out with a stick and thrown off the roof. She said "No", and goes on to explain:

that by creating characters like Homer (fat, lazy, underachiever) and incorporating comedy with the violence that the whole thing “works.” Later she elaborates on the notion of the characters being stereotypes: Ned is the religious nut who won’t let his kids watch cartoons because they are too violent, Homer is so stupid, Lisa is “eight years old and super smart,” Bart is the bad boy, etc. “I think they take one kind of stereotype from society and they exaggerate it way more.” She then adds that in society it is different because people are “more open-minded and have more than one stereotype.” I think what she is trying to say is that real people are more complex. She sees *The Simpsons* as being about reflecting our own idiosyncrasies and foibles back at us.

Angeline’s insight on the use of stereotypes in *The Simpsons* is very interesting and from her point of view it is very funny when violent things happen to any of these characters, for they are either deserving of the violence or responsible for it. However when that stereotype reflects back on society’s view of children she has a different take.

Itchy and Scratchy is the cartoon within the cartoon, a popular culture version of Shakespeare’s play within the play and used for similar purposes. The cartoon is a spoof of *Tom and Jerry* and *The Coyote and Roadrunner* but the violence is more exaggerated, more outrageous and very grotesque. This is something considering the number of Acme bombs employed by the coyote. Angeline finds *Itchy and Scratchy* “nasty” and “extreme.” She tries not to look at it when it’s on. I agree with her. Although the *Simpsons* employs a rather crude and simplistic style of animation it is very effective in being disgusting. One episode of *Itchy and Scratchy* that I found particularly abhorrent saw the cat being skinned alive when caught in an escalator in a shopping mall. Lisa and Bart sit on the floor in front of the television and howl in delight.

Angeline is insulted that this seems to be a commentary on young people and their relationship with cartoon violence. She feels that most kids are not interested in that kind of extreme violence. It is ironic that she started the conversation by telling me that most kids find violence funny. It seems that it is funny if “others” are the butt of the joke. Satire is not humorous when you are the object of the satire. She senses the corner she has put herself into:

The fact that Bart and Lisa laugh their heads off watching it does not help the whole thing because that just makes it more disturbing...but maybe in a way they are trying to use it to show that laughing at these things aren't funny because they made it so extreme that when you watch it you find it disgusting. And when they laugh you kinda think about the stuff you watch sometimes and I think they are trying to incorporate that too, but its just gross.

Angeline's thoughtful critique goes back to Duncum's (1999) view that the role of art education is in “developing broader socioeconomic and political readings of imagery” (p. 308). His assertion that students are “ignorant” and that they must be made “reflective” is interesting in light of her reading of the violence in *The Simpsons*. My question would be, is this the result of the nature of the study and therefore evidence of Duncum's assertion or was Angeline's understanding of the complexity of the imagery in relation to a social context already there?

In the context of a cartoon that seeks to question all aspects of our culture through humour, violence figures prominently. No one is safe from the biting commentary of *The Simpsons*, not even their prime audience. My sense is that this visually uncomplicated animated family is watched for its complexity. No one person, group, cultural icon is

safe from the lampooning of *The Simpsons*. Every aspect of popular culture is fair game and fodder for this program. I think Angeline is right when she says that perhaps they are satirizing young peoples' relationship to violent imagery, but I also think they are poking fun at adults, (teachers, regulators, parents,) who see children as mindless and uncaring (Hendershot, 1999) as they sit in front of the television watching the cartoon mouse skin the cartoon cat alive.

Grand Theft Auto: A Game of Skill and Major Crime

In the interviews with Jane, Chris and Drew the electronic game *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA* to the students) was discussed. It was my original intention to have students play video, computer or electronic games in a group session and then have a discussion. Like the film, this would allow me the opportunity to see for myself their involvement with the games. Due to a variety of circumstances this proved to be too difficult to co-ordinate. At this point I felt it was necessary to include the discussion of games within the follow-up interviews. As the interviews were conducted three weeks apart (first the girls and then Drew) it is just a coincidence that *GTA* was discussed in both. Drew in fact prefers another game called *Resident Evil*, which he feels is more of a challenge, has better graphics and is more violent. I ask that they describe the games that they play to me. As Jane and Chris described *GTA* to me I reacted by saying, "You are kidding!?" over and over again. I could not fathom what would attract these two young women, who only moments before were going on about how cute Keanu Reeves is, to a game where you steal cars and run over people all in attempt to make a drug run without getting killed yourself. In spite of my best efforts I am an adult and I do find the idea of such a "game" repugnant. The girls think my reaction is funny and assure me that it is "fun." "It's not

like we're actually going to do it in real life, it's make believe." The object of the game is to overcome obstacles, plan ahead, strategize and anticipate your next move in relation to all of your enemies, as there are three warring gangs after you as well as the threat of nuclear warheads. It should be noted that although they have played this game themselves they prefer watching their male friend play.

I think back on my brother Kevin playing war with his friends. It was make-believe too and I have no doubt that he thought it was a lot of fun and that a lot of the "fun" was the planning, the strategy and the anticipation of his enemies' next move. The fact that he got hit in the head with a rock was bad luck as far as he and his friends were concerned. As an adult I now think that he is lucky he did not lose an eye.

Resident Evil, although much more violent by Drew's estimation than *GTA*, is similar to the premise of *The Matrix* in that those being killed are zombies who have a virus and that if you don't kill them the whole planet will be infected. The object of the game is to have your team clean (read kill) the infected town of the zombies in as fast as time as possible. Drew is not a very talkative or articulate student and so when I ask him why he plays this game he says, "Just have fun and kill stuff."

Computer and video games offer all the essential features that we know are likely to result in "flow" experience of intense and enjoyable involvement and a high level of concentration: closely matched skills and challenges in the activity and rapid feed back regarding one's performance. The games give the player nearly instantaneous feedback as to whether the last activity (shot, jump, run, or whatever) was successful. In computer play, as with sports, musical performance, and many hobbies, the feedback is quick and clear, and insofar as it is often

occurring at the height of one's own personal level of performance, it is no wonder the games are extremely engaging. (Kubey, 1996, page 243)

It is interesting to note that several students in the surveys rated a good game as one that is a challenge and lasts a long time and many of the games that they listed as their favourites contained no violent imagery: Tetris, FreeCell, Solitaire, SimCity etc.

Although I feel that my research just begins to get at the issues surrounding violent imagery in games I think that it is perhaps not much different than my brother's game, except for Kevin, the blood was real.

Other Considerations: Direct Questions

In addressing the question of whether they are affected by the violence they see in movies, the girls claimed that they were not, but Drew said, "Yeah, little bit." He and his friends "play around a bit" pretending to do the "moves." *The Matrix* is a highly stylized film in which fighting scenes, in particular a practice session between Morpheus and Neo, almost has the feel of choreography. In the discussion with the focus group the students all thought that these scenes were really "cool." The scenes also had the look of computer games. It is these scenes that Drew and his friends try to imitate. Drew assured me that no one gets hurt.

Chris and Jane felt that young children, ten and under, should be restricted from watching certain types of programs which contain too much violence and certain types of violence. One of their reasons was the way it made younger children act, in this case Jane's younger male cousin, who will "fight with his younger sister and make her cry". (It seems it makes Drew and his friends act out too.) They also felt that perhaps those students under thirteen should not be allowed to play games like *GTA* because they might

not understand that it is just “make-believe.” Chris felt that it is important for children to exhibit a certain level of maturity for some programs and she states she will be very careful with her own children. She then tells of her mother’s own out of touch anti-video game attitude. Her dad has to sneak them into the house. Drew’s take on age restrictions is similar, but he held off of advocating restrictions, except for some games and he pointed out that there already restrictions on films. He feels that it is all right to watch certain programs and play certain games if “you can handle it.” “If you can’t handle it then just wait.”

The idea of being able to “handle it” or being mature enough to understand that it is only make-believe is fascinating. This is exactly the reason so many adults feel that it is necessary to restrict the viewing of all children. While Chris and Drew feel thirteen is old enough for some things and too young for others, adults are saying that sixteen is old enough for some forms of violent imagery and too young for others. Jane and Chris are fifteen and feel so much more mature than those students in grade eight, those thirteen-year-olds. Is it simply human nature to be protective and paternalistic with those younger than ourselves? Is it human nature to feel, “I can handle the violent imagery, I know it doesn’t affect me, but I am not sure about you, perhaps you don’t get it”?

The imagery that did affect Chris and Jane actually surfaced through the question pertaining to which television programs they found too difficult to watch. It was not one program in particular but in fact any program that dealt with rape. They described an episode of *Beverly Hills 90210* and made reference to the type of crimes they deal with on *Law and Order*. The nighttime soap opera and the “based on real life” crime show both deal with sexual assault in a realistic style. It is important to note though that on

Law and Order the crime is always dealt with after it has been perpetrated. The actual crime is never shown. In Jane's description of the rape on *Beverly Hills 90210* she says you see "the hitting, and the yelling and the ouchy" all from the neck up. She says she pictures herself as the victim. The same "what if" questions the students asked in relation to *The Matrix* they ask here. What if we destroy the world with pollution? What if I get raped? When I asked her if she turned off the television she said no, for she had to see how it ended.

Zilman (1980) has proposed an explanation for the pleasure produced by the resolution of suspense. He has argued that the physiological arousal is produced by the anticipation of threatened negative outcomes and that, the process of excitation transfer, this arousal intensifies the enjoyment of the happy ending that such programs usually provide. (Cantor, 1996)

The problem for Jane though is that there was not a "happy ending" as the character was raped and the story may or may not be resolved in subsequent episodes. Such is the nature of soap operas and life. In *Law and Order* there are no happy endings either but there may be a type of resolution through the justice system. For Drew the most disturbing program on television is the news. He said that he found the images of "wars from other countries" most disturbing. These are images that are real over which he has no control.

Looking at various forms of popular culture the students in my focus group made connections to their lives and society in relation to larger moral and ethical issues. I would suggest that *The Matrix* and *The Simpsons* and *Grand Theft Auto* do have a profound effect on adolescents. Through popular culture it may be that young people are

preparing themselves for adulthood. In observing and interacting with those forms of popular culture that depict violence perhaps they are attempting to come to terms with it, to try to understand it from a variety of viewpoints (from the good guys, the bad guys, and the victims) and to have some control over it.

Language of Construction: Evidence of Analysis

In a conversation with a friend who teaches film and cultural studies at a small but respected community college, I suggested to him that my data indicated an awareness on the part of the students of the notion that popular culture, in the form of television and movies is constructed, that it represents the imagination and views of a particular person or group of people. My friend was skeptical of this.

In many instances throughout the data the students use the word "they": "**they** make you wonder," "**they** show the picture," "**they** incorporate comedy," "**they** stretch it," "**they** didn't show you the nudity part." The obvious question is who are **they**? It is also a question that I should have asked the students but I think I can assume that by "they" the students meant those people who create the programs that they watch. This raises questions in relation to notions of culture being created by others for a particular audience. While this is the case with many forms of culture it is unsettling to consider one adult group creating culture for adolescents that other adult groups reject. One could ask if popular culture would look significantly different if adolescents were actively involved in its creation (Duncum, 1990). This question assumes that they are not but perhaps it is with their choices as consumers that they create their culture. When I ask Jane about the nature of the entertainment in *Grand Theft Auto* she replies "They know what teenagers like." And if you ask them they will tell you.

CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION

Over the course of this study I have found that the meaning the selected group of adolescents derive from violent imagery found in television, movies and games is contingent upon the context in which that imagery is structured in relation to their own life experiences. The violent imagery does not serve one purpose but rather a multiplicity of purposes. It entertains, it scares, it perplexes, it defines right and wrong, it challenges, it creates empathy, it comments, it elicits compassion, it highlights social issues, it provides a form of justice, it saves the world from zombies and allows adolescents the opportunity to interact with violence in ways that they hope and in many cases know, they will never encounter in real life.

The meaning that they derive is specific to the student in relation to the specific form of popular culture that they are encountering. To the unaccustomed adult eye it all looks the same, bad and therefore harmful, and out of love and concern for our children we attempt to shield them from the violent imagery. In doing so I fear we deny them the opportunity to come to terms with the real violence in our society and the world. From my research, adolescents coming to terms with violence does not mean they are mindlessly accepting violence or glorifying it but rather, they are involved in a sincere and legitimate investigation of violence and all that it entails through visual cultural forms. Philosopher and curator Phillip Monk (1988) sees violent imagery depicted in the news as a way of setting boundaries:

A community uses violence, creates an economy of violence to mark limits. And if the raw newspaper photograph, while signaling violence cannot adequately

effect it, in a failure to effect the reader, then violence must be directed to where it helps construct another image. (p. 30)

It would seem that for adolescents the “raw newspaper photograph” or the news footage does not adequately effect the proliferation of violence so that violent imagery has been directed towards the consumption of images within popular culture in order to “mark the limits.”

One of the questions raised by this study concerns the implications for educators interested in the use of popular culture in the art classroom. This question implies its existence in classrooms, where teachers are open to student choice but are concerned with the nature of the imagery. Art educators must be educated to the complexities of popular culture and they must allow the students the role of educators. My own experience bears this out. I have encouraged personal image collection only to be shocked by the imagery. I then qualified my encouragement of student-centered imagery by saying, “Collect images that are of interest to you but they must not have depictions of sex, violence, alcohol, drugs and none of that anime stuff either!” We must let go of our notions of what is appropriate in the art classroom in order to allow the students to explain which imagery is of interest to them, in which contexts and why. While Duncum advocates “looking over their shoulders” (1999) I advocate a face to face conversation, where questions are asked, not in order to deconstruct the imagery from a teacher’s position of paternalistic authority but to understand it from the perspective of the student, who has probably never been given the opportunity to articulate his or her views from a position of expert. As I found with the students in the focus group some of them were not totally aware they had these thoughts until they had the chance to say them out loud. This can

not be taken on lightly and educators must do this with honesty and sincerity as it could be misconstrued as patronizing and voyeuristic (Giroux & Simon, 1987). On one hand this is really no more than a facet of multi-cultural education (Chalmers, 1996) and therefore requires a willingness and sensitivity to the imagery and those involved with it. More significantly this process of dialogue with students represents a constructivist position.

Constructivism emphasizes the experience of the learner as integral to the making of meaning and problem solving. The social, emotional and cognitive experiences a child brings to the classroom are considered part of the learning process. (Simpson, 1996, p. 53-4)

It is my position in this study that the students I interviewed do find meaning in the popular culture they watch because they are able to see the connections (real and imagined) with their own lives and they are involved in this process outside of the classroom. Allowing students to share their knowledge validates that knowledge. Pepin (1988) states:

The first thing that must be understood is that the better part of students' cognitive activity is not directed toward assimilating various types of school knowledge but rather to ordering their overall experience and to constructing their own relationship to that which is other—including school taken as both a whole and in terms of specific and situational aspects. The subject constantly strives to construct the world in both situational and overall terms, in such a way that he or she may integrate that world and assume a viable position within it. (p. 189)

The implications for art educators concerned with and opposed to the use of popular culture is that we deny ourselves significant cultural forms which offer insight not only into the students' interpretations of popular culture but also a tool by which to determine the means to transfer (Erickson, 1998) these skills to other forms of visual culture. Educators should be honest with students when confronting the issues that they find disturbing and offensive to their own political and socioeconomic sensibilities for it is only in open dialogue that students hone their own sensibilities. We should also be honest with ourselves in acknowledging that our perceptions of these various forms of popular culture are usually not based on first hand experience but rather on bits of information that we garner from various sources. I feel that part of the problem may stem from the same issues surrounding the notion of age restrictions that the students in the study highlighted. We, ourselves, may in fact be involved in various forms of popular culture but we do not think that adolescents are mature enough to "handle it."

In regards to theory in the discipline of art education I feel this study affirms the work of those educators who advocate the use of popular culture in the classroom (Barrett, 1994; Bersson, 1986; Blandy & Congdon, 1993; Duncum 1990; Giroux, 1987) but I also feel that art education needs to re-examine its attitude towards popular culture as it is looked upon, for the most part, in a contentious manner. This is not a situation peculiar to educators but one reflected in our culture as a whole. The pervasiveness of popular culture has the dual effect of being both overwhelming and numbing. Should we be surprised that the same teachers who speak out against the sexist, violent imagery in popular culture are those who book the VCR the week before Christmas holidays so that the students can watch *The Mummy*, or *South Park*? More research needs to be done in

examining educators' attitudes and uses of popular culture, both personally and professionally.

More research also needs to be done concerning the ways in which conversations around popular culture could take place in the classroom in order to facilitate a collaborative process of examining culture in ways which acknowledge and validate student expertise and teacher expertise. Such a study would lend itself to action research and has implications for re-configuring the teacher/researcher as student/teacher/researcher with the students taking on the same role. Another aspect of this study that would benefit from further examination is the notion of transfer of knowledge. I have suggested in this study (in agreement with Erickson, 1995, 1998 and Simpson, 1996) that there are possibilities for transfer of knowledge from one form of culture to another, in this case from popular culture to visual art and art history. Certainly if my students can find meaning in popular culture by examining notions of reality and fantasy, empathizing with characters, and recognizing social issues then surely they can do the same for Bosch, Kahlo and Wall. Upon reflection on my own practice I would have to concede that this is not a straightforward process. In a comprehensive paper on the notion of transfer King Beach (1999) identifies transfer as "consequential transition," further identified as: lateral transition, collateral transition, encompassing transition, and mediational transition. From the perspective of the educator it would seem that transfer from popular culture to visual art and art history would be described as lateral transition, "between two historically related activities" (p. 114), but in fact mediated transition which attempts to "project or simulate involvement in an activity yet to be fully

experienced” (p. 118) might be necessary as students’ involvement with popular culture far out weighs their involvement with classroom art.

I feel it is appropriate for me to reflect on how this study has affected my own practice. Most significantly I feel that my belief in my students’ ability to negotiate the popular culture they partake in has been confirmed by the results of this study. Working with young people over the last ten years has led me to believe that they understand the images they see as constructions within various contexts and that they understand those images in ways that are appropriate to their own experiences and within the larger context of the society they live in. That said there has always been a part of me, the part that is an adult and parent, that worried what if those who claim that violent imagery is detrimental are right, what if I am adding to what appears to be a glorification of violence by including the study of *Terminator 2* and *Apocalypse Now* in my art classes? For me the in-depth look at this issue confirms that the rhetoric (Dyson, 2000; Mander, 1978; Postman, 1985) surrounding media violence is one steeped in well intentioned but misguided concern, a patronizing concern born mostly of fear for the well-being of our children.

A position of looking at popular culture in the classroom as a legitimate form of visual culture requires a trust and acknowledgement of students as responsible and thoughtful members of our society. It requires shifting the emphasis in the classroom from one of dissemination of knowledge from teacher to student to one where culture is shared and discussed and seen as a viable and exciting part of our lives.

So what role, if any, do art educators have in all of this? The British Columbia Ministry of Education addressed this issue in 1997 with the development of the *Visual Arts 11 and 12: Media Arts* integrated resource package. The document states:

Popular music, TV, film, radio, magazines, computer games and information services – all supplying media messages – are pervasive in the lives of students today. Media education develops students' abilities to think critically and independently about the issues that affect them. Media education encourages students to identify and examine the values contained in media messages. It also cultivates the understanding that these messages are produced by others to inform, persuade, and entertain for a variety of purposes. Media education helps students understand the distortions that may result from the use of particular media practices and techniques. (p.C-10)

I would suggest that some of my students are already there and that as educators by believing that it is our responsibility to make them aware of "distortions" we are engaging in an implicit or "hidden curriculum" (Eisner, 1979, p. 75). It may be inferred by students that they have been wrong about the ways that they have interacted with popular culture, they may infer that it is an inappropriate form of culture and they may infer that educators have the knowledge and it is theirs to give to the students.

To this end educators must develop an attitudinal shift which allows them to rethink the strategies now employed in an art class. Perhaps it is necessary to take some of the emphasis off of the making of art and place it on the discussion of visual culture, which includes film, television, computer graphics, art history, and contemporary art. As was shown in this study, when given the opportunity to discuss visual culture students

interpret what they see intelligently and thoughtfully, cognizant of social, personal, political and philosophical contexts. Creating the environments for such discussion is essential for as Angeline pointed out most people do not analyze what they watch, which does not imply that they do not understand what they watch. I got the impression as she talked that the experience of giving voice to her thoughts was liberating for her. To this end film discussion groups, not unlike seminars classes or book clubs could be formed where students form small groups based on common interest in various film genres. The teacher would act as a participant. Unlike traditional group work in a class, the emphasis would be on open-ended discussion, not on collecting facts to present back to the class as a whole.

A strategy for making connections between various forms of visual culture more apparent and allowing for a more teacher controlled situation would be to adopt broad based themes. Using the theme of “cultural icon” I have had students look at a variety of images, for example, the *Mona Lisa*, *The Terminator*, *Blue Boy*, and *Citizen Kane*. Students then study advertising and programs such as *The Simpsons*, which make reference to the images. A hands-on component can be included which has the students create one cultural icon from another. For example the Mona Lisa becomes Spock from *Star Trek*. Ultimately the point of including popular culture in an art education program is to allow students to see all forms of visual culture as a vital and necessary part of their lives.

My hunch is that when these students are adults and look back on their youth, they will recall events and stories from their **real** lives. They will tell their own stories of their brothers, sisters, parents and friends. It will be those experiences that they will

recognize as shaping their lives. They will, most likely, remember movies and television programs in relation to their experiences and many may even find that reflecting on *The Simpsons* offers them insight into their lives that they had not considered, much the way the *Coyote and Roadrunner Show* did for me. Twenty years from now they may be reminded of *The Matrix* and tell the story of being involved in their art teacher's project. It is likely that they will have difficulty in recalling the specifics of the film but they may recall the room, the pizza and that their conversations were tape-recorded, that their thoughts and opinions were important. The film provides the reason to have the conversation. *The Matrix* and every other form of culture, whether it is popular culture or fine art helps us to understand the complexity of our lives, our society, our world. The fact that violent imagery exists in films, on television, in electronic games, in opera, in Shakespeare, in Beowulf and in the paintings by Goya should really come as no surprise for culture, like life, can be difficult and is worth the effort.

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Youth and Violent Imagery Survey

Male/ Female

Age _____

Circle the answer that most closely applies to your viewing habits.

1. Number of hours spent watching television in one week:
 0-5 5-10 10-15 over 20
2. Number of hours spent watching owned or rented films on video in a week.
 0-5 5-10 10-15 over 20
3. Number of hours spent playing video and computer games in a week.
 0-5 5-10 10-15 over 20
4. Number of movies watched in a theatre in an average month.
 0-1 1-4 over 5
5. Number, in order of preference, the type of television programs you like to watch. (# 1 being the most preferred).
 ___ Comedy
 ___ Soap Opera
 ___ Police Drama
 ___ News
 ___ Talk Shows -Late Night
 ___ Talk Shows -Daytime
 ___ Nature
 ___ Cartoons
 ___ Educational/ Information
 ___ Science Fiction/ Space
 ___ Action Drama
 ___ Fantasy
 ___ Other (_____)

_____ / _____

Do not write in this space.

Answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you do not wish to answer a question simply leave it blank.

6. List your three favourite television programs.

7. What in your opinion makes a good television program?

8. List three video / computer games that you like to play.

9. What in your opinion makes a good video / computer game?

10. List the three best movies you have seen in the last year.

11. What in your opinion makes a good movie?

12. Of the movies, television programs and games you have listed did any contain violence? If so which ones?

13. In your opinion, what purpose (if any) does the violent imagery serve?

14. Do you believe that people your age should be restricted from viewing programs and movies, which contain violence? Briefly explain your view.

Please find enclosed two copies of this consent form. Sign both acknowledging receipt of the form, and whether or not you agree to allow your child to take part in the focus group. Keep one copy for your records and return the other to me. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Yours truly,

Karen Coflin

Student Participation Consent

I wish to take part in this study by participating in the focus group.

Signed _____ Date _____

Parental / Guardian Consent

Choose only one:

I consent to my child's participation in this study.

Signed _____ Date _____

I do not consent to my child's participation in this study.

Signed _____ Date _____