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BEHIND THE VIDEO 'NASTY' CAMPAIGN

by Terence DuQuesne

The complete, inside story of the campaign which culminated in the passage of the Video Recordings Act 1984 will probably never be known. ^{But} what is already clear is that the measure represents an unprecedented onslaught on our freedom of choice: videotapes are to be subjected to arbitrary prior censorship by a government-appointed authority. More stringent criteria will be applied for videos viewed at home than for films seen in public. Various authors have pointed out ~~the~~ arbitrary and capricious character of this new law, the fact that it is certain to have a chilling effect on genuine creative endeavour in ^{the} visual media, and the repressive nature of the powers to be conferred on police officers under this Act, including that of intrusion into our homes, ~~without a warrant on 'reasonable suspicion' that we might possess illegal tapes.~~

One of the factors which seems to have propelled the re-election of Mrs Thatcher's administration is a widespread perception that crime was increasing. Except in the case of muggings, whose incidence has risen, this view is not borne out by the evidence: the proportion of violent crime has, so far as we can tell, remained at about 7 per cent of the total. But public alarm is easily engendered, and the government lost no time in attempting to capitalize on ^{it}. Leon Brittan, when he was appointed to be Home Secretary, went on record as seeing his "major duty to restore public confidence in law and order." When a Bill to restore capital punishment was defeated in parliament, a similarly symbolic measure was felt to be required. This, the Video Bill, would serve both to appease public concern about violence and ^{would} set a precedent in imposing harsh forms of censorship. Despite all evidence to the contrary, a supposed association between visual (and other) 'pornography' and violence was ~~found~~ ^{used} by the cabal of reactionaries ~~to justify~~ ^{to justify} the initiation of the 'research' on video-viewing which led to the Bill's successful passage. A ^{spurious} concern about the welfare of children - especially from working-class homes - was the principal ~~reason~~ ^{vehicle} by which the idea of video censoring was sold to the public at large.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how ^{parliament and public were} ~~public were duped into~~ ^{duped in connexion with the} introducing and supporting the Video Recordings Act, and to record some of the grosser dishonesties which were perpetrated by its supporters. Hundreds of column-inches ~~in almost every newspaper~~ have been devoted to praise for the Act and ^{to} sensational features on 'videos and violence'. ^{yet} ~~but~~ only a handful of articles have appeared ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ which ^{serious} questions about the research ~~on which this was premised~~ ^{to the measure's enactment,} or about the new ^{law's} wider implications.

The Parliamentary Video Group Enquiry, so called, commissioned a report by Dr Clifford Hill, entitled Video Violence and Children, the first section of which was published just as the Bill entered the committee stage ⁱⁿ of the Commons. The enquiry, ⁱⁿ sounds official, ^{on superficial examination, is intended to look} authoritative. The report, ^{would appear to have an equally authoritative imprimatur,} like a White Paper.

In reality, the 'parliamentary enquiry' was ^{no} ~~no~~ Select Committee, but a small ad-hoc ^{group of moralistic} ~~body of reactionary~~ peers and MPs. But the kind of deception implicit in ~~these titles~~ ^{its} was characteristic. The group first met in June 1983 and was addressed by ~~Dr~~ Raymond Johnston of CARE (aka ^{the} Festival of Light). ^{He} presented a paper on the perils of video viewing in which he said: "It is a disturbing fact that children between the ages of 6 and 15 are regularly hiring violent, pornographic and occult horror ~~videos~~... Serious mental disturbances and behaviour problems have resulted." Needless to say, no evidence was adduced to support this extraordinary assertion, which--let us remember--was made before ~~the~~ research on the subject had even begun.

Dr Clifford Hill, a retired divine, who was also present at the meeting, joined Johnston in condemning the Obscene Publications Act 1959 as being far too weak to deal with this menace: the Video Bill would, of course, be an important step in the right direction.

The research in this case was to be conducted in conditions of total secrecy, and it was funded by unnamed organizations and persons 'sympathetic to the cause'. ~~The situation~~^{It} was just as if members of the Flat Earth Society had been asked to research the dangers of space exploration.

A semblance of academic respectability was required, however. To this end a prominent media researcher and Methodist minister, Brian Brown, was named as the project's associated director. Brown's prestigious Television Research Unit at Oxford Polytechnic was in effect borrowed by Hill, in his capacity as director of the video survey. ~~In the event,~~ ^{between June and November 1983} Much of what transpired ~~happened~~ without Brown's knowledge: letters to head teachers outlining the work were sent under his name, on his notepaper by Hill. These were followed by questionnaires which, when analysed (again by Hill, and without Brown's knowledge) purported to show that 40 per cent of pre-teen British children had watched a video nasty. In Video Violence and Children a direct link is claimed between video-viewing and violence, despite the fact that no evidence on this subject was sought. The '40 per cent' figure appears to have been extrapolated from responses given by THREE (3) children to these questionnaires, as far as Brown could discover. He and others have pointed out that written questionnaires of the kind used by Hill are intrinsically unsuitable for administering to young children. No attempt was made by Hill to check this pilot survey in any way--by re-testing the same pupils, by use of control groups, or by any other means. It now emerges that ^{part of} Hill's highly emotional report was, ~~at least in part,~~ already written BEFORE the questionnaires were even completed; and it is interesting how his analysis of them yielded the same result as that indicated by Raymond Johnston before the work commenced.

The first part of Hill's report was published on 23 November 1983, a highly strategic date, and just in time for the Committee Stage of the Video Recordings Bill. Needless to say, the newspapers had a field day with the shock-horror '40 per cent' figure, and the pseudo-research was widely quoted during the debate in parliament. It is interesting that Hill attempted to get this published by a reputable London publisher, who quite properly rejected it. The imprint on the report, Oasis Productions, does not appear in any publishing directory known to me, and perhaps it did not exist until a colophon was required by Clifford Hill. Readers may draw their own conclusions from the fact that Video Violence and Children was not published by an academic, or even a reputable general press.

~~Partly because litigation against Hill is pending, it is not possible to explain here all the tactics employed by him, as the cuckoo in Oxford Poly's nest. But these definitely included those cited already, as well as a distinct written threat (or promise) from Hill to Brian Brown, the mysterious disappearance of original questionnaires, attempts to smear Brown, and the substantial financial loss to Oxford Polytechnic of £30,000, otherwise inexplicable.~~

The research itself is so readily confuted, ~~that it scarcely seems worthwhile to do so.~~ However, Guy Cumberbatch and Paul Bates of Aston University tried to replicate Hill's data on children's video-viewing habits. They found that children admitted to watching totally fictitious tapes whose titles had been incorporated among the selection of real ones for control purposes. These workers also tested the response of a large number of students to a celebrated 'nasty', and found the overwhelming reaction to be one of boredom.

During the debate on the Video Bill in parliament, members were shown a composite 'nasty', in the form of 20 minutes of simulated rape and mayhem spliced together from several different videos. No matter about style, plot, or context. One could well imagine the result of a montage of gory scenes from the films of Hitchcock, Buñuel, or Peckinpah. The works of many celebrated directors would be grist to the censors' mill. And the theatrical response of some MPs to the compilation-tape shows that the campaigners got exactly what they wanted.

By 23 November 1983, the damage was done. The appearance of part One of Hill's report, immediately followed by lurid press reports, ensured the success of the Video Bill. For one thing, scarcely anyone, in parliament or outside, had time to discuss the provisions of the measure OR the Video Group's report. It was so easy for MPs on all sides of the House simply to say "Oh yes, of course we must protect our children. The research shows watching videos can lead to violence. So how can we oppose the Bill?" That was the soft option pursued by the vast majority of MPs and peers. In the ^{Upper Chamber} ~~House~~, only Lords Houghton and Jenkins had the courage to stand up against this massive onslaught on individual freedom, masquerading as it did as something else altogether. The hypocritical, censorious, facile, shallow speeches of their opponents make sickening reading. Not many people wanted to appear to be other than for motherhood and against sin.

What must be remembered, now that the infamous Video Act has been passed, is that the research on which it was predicated has been repudiated in detail by media researchers. Unfortunately, the public tends to recall only the assertions, rather than subsequent denials. The Methodist and Roman churches have dissociated themselves from Hill's report. The Revd Brown and others have shown the specious, tendentious nature of the enquiry, and others have refuted the purported association between watching videos and perpetrating violence--an association which 30 years of media research has failed to demonstrate. Clifford Hill has chosen not to counter, not to reply to accusations of fraud, manipulation, and ~~bed~~ bending of evidence. He ^{has} brazened it out: for him, evidently the end justifies the means.

Practically any of us could be directly affected by the Video Act. Police officers are empowered to enter our homes ~~without warrant~~ in search of prohibited videos; and if anyone offends the act's provisions, swingeing fines may be levied. Such individuals face double jeopardy in that they may still be prosecuted also under the Obscene Publications Act. All this because the moralistic minority of sex-obsessed puritans have conned us. Make no mistake: this is the shape of things to come, unless we make the voice of reason heard.

*Theresa Anderson
5/1/85*

 (NOTE: An excellent account of the campaign's ideology, with detailed refutations of the Hill report, is BARKER M (ed.) The Video Nasties. Pluto Press: London 1984. £3.50 Note also that ^{application}

The National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications, 15 Sloane Sq. Chelsea, London SW3 6JD
 video censorship is being conducted by Sloane Court West