Is pop culture poisonous?

Cornel West is a great friend of TIKKUN, an inspired American progressive, and one of my heroes. His new book, written with Sylvia Ann Hewlett, The War Against Parents, was excerpted earlier this year by TIKKUN, and contains some very important arguments about the need to change U.S. laws and culture to support parents and parenting.

However, the chapter in the book titled "A Poisonous Popular Culture" echoes a long parade of attacks on modern entertainment from thinkers and political figures on the Left including Amitai Etzioni, Maya Angelou, and Maryann Medzian, as well as Democratic politicians Senator Joseph Lieberman, ex-Senator Paul Simon, and Congressman Ed Markey. With the exception of a few caveats attacking racism, homophobia, and patriarchy, leftist attacks on entertainment are in perfect sync with similar attacks from cultural conservatives such as Allen Bloom, William Bennett, Robert Bork, and former Vice President Dan Quayle.

Although Quayle coined the phrase "cultural elite" to condemn a supposed cabal of entertainment executives that would make TV character Murphy Brown a single mother, the truly unified elite is a bi-partisan sociological elite consisting of politicos, academics, religious leaders, and journalists who unanimously condemn popular entertainment culture despite the obvious enthusiasm tens of millions of Americans have for various forms of show business. College-educated, upper-middle class or above, and mostly middle-aged, this elite is convinced that their collective taste is not merely aesthetically more enlightened than that of the masses, but morally superior as well.

I do not propose to defend every compact disc, movie, or television show. Like any other community of thousands, there are plenty of evil, stupid, and amoral people in the entertainment business, and among a hundred million or so regular U.S. consumers of popular culture there is plenty of bad behavior. There is nothing wrong with moral criticism of entertainment - indeed, that is precisely what the best critics bring to their work. The fans, executives, and artists alike who care most passionately about art and entertainment invariably include moral criteria in
their discussions and arguments about show business.

As a parent of two myself, I don't doubt that interviews with parents turn up criticism of entertainment. Plenty of kid-focused entertainment irritates me (especially those toy commercials!). I'm all for serious discussions of how to regulate what children are exposed to at various ages, and I'd be happy to pay more taxes for more educational TV programs like "Bill Nye the Science Guy."

The problem with elitist attacks on entertainment like Hewlett and West's "A Poisonous Popular Culture" is that they are based on sweeping generalizations that disregard both the artistic context of entertainment's creation and the cultural context of its consumption.

The epitome of this know-nothing approach to entertainment-bashing was Senator Bob Dole's attack on popular music and movies as part of his 1996 presidential campaign. In response to questions after a speech in which the senator attacked by name several films and albums, an aide to Dole immediately and sheepishly admitted that the senator had never seen or heard any of the stigmatized works himself but had relied on researchers. Dole's attack was quickly triangulated by Clinton and Gore, who, also having neither seen nor heard any of the supposedly offensive works, nonetheless agreed with him. (Disclosure: I was Chairman of Warner Bros. Records at the time of Dole's speech, which also attacked parent company Time-Warner.)

Besides calling popular culture "poisonous," the otherwise genteel Hewlett and West, and the people they choose to quote, refer to "rudeness and crudeness," and "a parent-hurting entertainment media." They state flatly, "The entertainment media has moved from celebrating to denigrating parental role and function," and that "Hollywood feeds off psychobabble, narcissistic individualism, and market-driven hedonism," Politicians are attacked for failing to act more vigorously in regulating "television ... or the internet for that matter ... yielding to pressure from the entertainment industry."

Apparently, it is not enough to attack certain entertainment products; the people who produce them must also be demonized. Isn't it possible that some artists and entertainment executives share the morals of Hewlett and West but simply have different opinions about entertainment? For example, Hewlett and West devote several hundred words to an attack on the film, The Santa Clause, because the movie passingly mentions a 900 sex-phone number and one parent blamed the film for the fact that his daughter spent several hundred dollars calling it. Hewlett and West describe the father of the ten-year-old as being "in agony over his daughter's victimization" and "outraged and bitter" at Disney for making the movie. My wife and I have watched the film with our kids several times. To me, it is one of the most positive Christmas films of the last several years. We never even noticed the reference to the sex-phone number and have never met a parent who did.

At the core of sociological attacks on entertainment is the fallacy that art is meant to be taken literally in a manner similar to religious or political doctrine. Entertainment is described as being a conduit for a "message." Thus, Hewlett and
West write: "The media message around parenting is at its most dismissive in contemporary movies where parents are portrayed ... as humbling fools." Also from Hewlett and West: "The overwhelming message from progressive liberal folks in Hollywood is - who needs a husband to have a child?" Comparing the supposedly pro-parent Fifties television to today's, Hewlett and West write: "Forty years later, messages ... are radically different." Describing Oliver Stone's grim, Natural Born Killers, they write: "The message of this movie does not seem to be cluttered up with uncomfortable consequences." Later on: "Given the messages coming out of the media, it is increasingly difficult for men to derive much self-esteem ... from the role of husband and father."

With rare exceptions, the "message" theory of entertainment is totally false. Greek and Shakespearean tragedies are not "messages" that life is depressing. Martin Scorsese has directed films with lots of killing and depressed, morally ambiguous protagonists that are nonetheless regularly listed as among the greatest works of cinematic art. Are the film critics less moral than the sociological elite, or are they tuned in to a poetic truth about the dark side of life that great art can sometimes illuminate to the betterment of its audience? B.B. King, the most acclaimed blues guitarist and singer of the last half-century, is notable, among other things, for conveying tremendous joy despite the "down" linear content of the blues lyrics he sings. Moral people all condemn murder, but moral people of good will may disagree about the morality of a particular murder mystery. I always found the horror classics Dracula and Frankenstein to be kind of creepy, but I do not consider people who love them my moral inferiors.

I am not suggesting that art and entertainment have no impact on culture. The best critics wrestle with the moral subtext of art, as do most passionate fans and the best artists and executives. Hewlett and West's idea of analyzing how the image of parents is expressed in the media is intriguing, but they go about it in a simplistic and absolutist way that states, in essence, that any unflattering depiction of a parent inherently attacks parenthood - and that anyone who disagrees is morally obtuse.

Hewlett and West single out for attack the kid-film comedies Honey, I Shrunk the Kids and Home Alone, both of which our family also has found to be harmless and enjoyable entertainment. Does this mean we love our children less - or does it simply mean that we happen to have different taste in movies? Comedies are not supposed to be taken literally. Except for political satire, the "message" of a comedy is laughter. It's one thing not to think that a joke is funny. It's another to demonize the jokester and to marginalize people who laugh at the joke.

In extending their critique of what teenagers are attracted to, Hewlett and West walk the well-trod ground of entertainment bashers through the ages. Oliver Stone's Natural Born Killers, a favorite target of elitists, is admittedly an edgy movie, and many close friends of mine found it offensive or unwatchable. I respect the sensibility of the film's critics, but, as I see it, to the extent it "comments" on anything, it is an indictment of the news media's exploitation of tragedy, embodied in Robert Downey Jr.’s portrayal of a pompous newscaster. It is hard to see how many truly objective critics of Natural Born Killers could ignore the fact that it is a
black comedy. An impressionistic montage of different film techniques, the film actually includes a sit-com style laugh track for several scenes featuring comedian Rodney Dangerfield. It couldn't be more clear that the film is not meant to be taken literally, but as a poetic cartoon impression of violence, the media, and the U.S.A. circa the 1990s.

A healthy disagreement about a film like Natural Born Killers is appropriate, if somewhat out of date. However Hewlett and West direct their energy not to an analysis of the film, but toward the fact that, tragically, several young murderers have been fans of the film. It is a dangerous and unfair argument to blame the movie for the acts of a tiny percentage of its most unstable fans. Charles Manson "credited" the Beatles. More than one serial killer has quoted the Bible. Many depraved murderers, including John Lennon's assassin, Mark David Chapman, have been obsessed with J.D. Salinger's novel Catcher in the Rye.

Art is not subordinate to politics or sociology. Abbie Hoffman, A.J. Weberman, and other yippets were wrong when they picketed Bob Dylan's house on the occasion of Dylan's thirtieth birthday, complaining that Dylan had "sold out" by writing more personal songs instead of overtly political ones. There's nothing wrong with encouraging artists to have a social conscience, but pressure from left, right, or center to adhere to a party line is at best pedestrian and at worst philistine. With generational myopia, Hewlett and West write as if the most popular television shows of the Fifties were about happy families. They acknowledge that the Fifties TV culture mirrored the bigotry of the time, but lament that the culture revolutions that addressed racism and patriarchy "threw out the baby with the bathwater at the expense of pro-family images." Leave it to Beaver notwithstanding, however, the dominant genre of Fifties TV was the western. In series such as Gunsmoke, The Lone Ranger, Hoppalong Cassidy, The Rifleman, Have Gun Will Travel, Gene Autry, and Roy Rodgers, problems were usually solved with violence. Today's rappers refer to their "posse" in direct homage to western dramas. Ozzie and Harriet was less a "message" of parental respect than a trojan horse for Ricky Nelson, the TV culture's watered down homage to Elvis Presley. Lucille Ball was famous for her slapstick comedy, not for parenting. As for consumerism, the Fifties were the decade of Davy Crockett coonskin caps and the explosion of quiz shows like The Price is Right and Queen for a Day.

Yes, TV was different in the Fifties; there were only three networks, each of which had far more power to affect popular culture than does any entity in today's multi-channel cable-TV universe. Although there were certain cultural benefits to a hierarchal popular culture (Leonard Bernstein's classical Concerts for Young People comes to mind), there also was an artificial homogeneity of culture that was partially responsible for the Fifties alienation that produced Mad Magazine, rock and roll, counter-culture movie stars such as James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Marilyn Monroe, and the literary explosion of the beatniks.

Literalist critics of sex and violence in kids' entertainment mysteriously forget the darkness and complexity of children's art in ages past. One need only to peruse the

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Tales of the Arabian Nights or the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson or the Brothers Grimm to be reminded of how entertainment fantasy has always differed from idealized family life. Hansel and Gretel, for example, found themselves in the clutches of a witch because of an indifferent father and a cruel, selfish stepmother, and this primal childhood image long pre-dated the scapegoat decade of the Sixties! I think it may be worthwhile to re-think these dark myths - but such a process can only be useful if we recognize how deeply they tap into human consciousness, not if we glibly attack the latest messenger to bring us this ancient psychological news.

Every generation of kids is fascinated by sex and violence and the need to separate themselves from earlier generations. Long before electronic media existed, Mark Twain joked that "My father is so dumb, when I was eighteen I didn't speak to him until I was twenty-one. I was amazed at how much he had learned in those three years." One can deeply respect parents and parenting and still recognize the validity of a complex range of entertainments. One can also recognize the strange transition that parents go through from having recently been children and teenagers themselves to suddenly feeling the burdens of responsibility and the ticking clock of middle age. One can be horrified by teen-age violence, materialism, and other forms of immorality and yet still acknowledges that adult self-righteous resentment of youthful exuberance, rebellion, and folly is not always based on moral concerns. Similarly there is a dangerous snobbishness that pervades elite culture bashing. It is not morally sufficient to simply describe popular entertainment as "poison," based on themes that are as prevalent in opera as they are in daytime soaps. If the murderous protagonists of Richard Wright's Native Son and Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment are more morally framed than those of Master P. and Wu-Tang Clan, elite adult critics should be expected to explain why, not to simply deride modern popular music as garbage. After all, even if one assumes that Hewlett and West are right about every single work they attack, even if the motives of all creators and businesspeople involved with entertainment are totally selfish - there are tens of millions of fans who actually like what they see and hear. If they are to be educated, they first must be understood.

As for the proliferation of four-letter words, there is no doubt that Supreme Court decisions of the Sixties and Seventies decriminalized words that previously were the property of sports coaches and military commanders. Clearly different generations and social groups have their own taste and sensibilities about four-letter words, but mores and morals are not the same. Personally, I think that Eddie Cantor singing about "making whoopee," Jerry Lee Lewis shouting about "great balls of fire," the Beatles harmonizing "I wanna hold your hand," and Nine Inch Nails screaming "I want to fuck you like an animal" are all talking about the same thing.

I believe that the tragic deterioration of U.S. families in recent years has almost nothing to do with entertainment. Canadian citizens receive virtually all of the same entertainment as we in the United States but, absent the devastating legacy of slavery and racism, and with different public policy - including public health care,
better funded public schools, and far greater gun control - Canada has dramatically better statistics in terms of crime, child abuse, etc. Moreover, most art and entertainment have positive effects: creating a shared language, a sense of community, relieving stress, and making people feel less alone in the world.

This is not to say that entertainment is a purely passive reflection of society. Obviously artists and the business people who give them access to electronic media make aesthetic and moral choices. But it is silly not to recognize that the majority of the content of public entertainment is driven by public taste and experience, and that the very evils that Hewlett and West document so eloquently elsewhere in The War Against Parents create the raw material for both the creation and consumption of depressing entertainment. Is it a coincidence that virtually all of the anti-police and "cop killer" rap lyrics of the 1980s came from young African American citizens of Los Angeles who grew up in a community dominated by a Daryl Gates-led LAPD?

Violent entertainment is not, contrary to the hysterical ravings of anti-entertainment social scientists, anything like tobacco. Tobacco contains uniform chemical substances, the effects of which have been demonstrated in tests over decades on thousands of people. No two pieces of entertainment are the same. Reasonable people do not always agree on what violence is. Many pseudo-scientists who study media, counting "acts of violence," include cartoon and comic violence in their tallies. Hewlett and West make the outrageous claim that MTV music videos average twenty acts of violence per hour, and that sixty percent of programming on MTV links violence to degrading sexual portrayals. As someone who watches a lot of MTV and who submits music videos to them on a regular basis, I can say unequivocally that these statistics are grossly inaccurate. Because of the scrutiny they are under, MTV has more stringent standards limiting sex and violence than virtually any other entertainment medium. There is virtually nothing on the channel that depicts violence as explicitly as movies, network television, or literature. Sex on MTV is overwhelmingly, conventionally, (and non-violently) heterosexual and much less graphic than in other media. Aimed at teenagers and people in their early twenties, MTV videos can seem puerile to adults or to intellectual or iconoclastic kids. But it is wrong to confuse subjective aesthetic taste with objective morals.
Can there be a new progressive politics without the participation of young people and non-intellectuals? Do we want to force these constituencies to leave their enthusiasm for their culture at the door of politics? Will this help attract them?

The millions of people who like rap or Oliver Stone movies are not robots programmed at will by demonic entertainment business geniuses. Yes, the market mentality affects entertainment as it does every business (including academia), and greed far too often replaces morality. But the psychological and spiritual levers of change are as likely to be found in the imagination of artists and the inarticulate emotional response to them by various publcs as they would in polemics.

A healthy respect for the nuances and context of entertainment culture can give rise to a moral influence from visionaries such as Hewlett and West - but to have credibility, they must be willing to look at culture with compassion and respect and not with ivory tower condescension.

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