

Moral Choices in the Art of Popular Culture

In this, the first issue of the thirty-second year of *Studies in Popular Culture*, we include, as usual, the work of scholars representing a wide array of disciplines and subjects. The issue contains writing on Clive Barker's horror; on Walt Disney musicals; on an internet political diva; on Charlie Chaplin; on the best-selling *Left Behind* religious fictions; on Bob Dylan's music; and on the body image of a popular television vampire. The disparity of topics is striking. But running through these essays is a thread that can be seen in many popular culture studies—the question of moral choices.

It is true that some popular culture studies can be morally neutral; a statistical audience analysis giving findings of changes in audience over the course of certain years, for example, might seem close to purely objective. But then comes the question of deciding the implications of the statistics. And in many cases, questions of moral implications arise even sooner.

This is not to suggest that popular culture is automatically the equivalent of the immoral; far from it. We at *Studies in Popular Culture* and in the Popular Culture Association in the South certainly do not take that stand, though we are aware that for some, wickedness and popular culture are synonymous. “Kill Your Television,” the bumper stickers say. (I would like to print up one that says “Read Your Television.”) But the scholars of popular culture in general, and certainly the ones in this issue, are very aware that moral choices inhere in the act of creating and absorbing popular culture.

In the issue's first essay, Marnie Jones examines the extremely popular *Left Behind* series, which includes years of best-selling novels (including a “Kids” series) and now videogames as well. Through specific textual citations (as well as analysis of contexts), she demonstrates elements of surprising violence in the books and games which, for many, represent American Christianity—but which, Jones argues, show “a reaction against American values.” The subject of the next essay, Ann Coulter, purports to be all about American values, as a female representative of conservative politics. But Lindsey Ives argues that Coulter sells herself through becoming “both the sex object and the idealized self, allowing viewers to satisfy both lustful and hostile impulses”; and she does so by turning political discourse into a blood sport. On a very different blood sport, vampirism, Lorna Jowett argues that an interestingly moral representation can be found in Joss Whedon's *Buffy* spin-off, *Angel*. The essay focuses on not only the body of the titular character but also a

wide selection of other males in the series. She maintains that the series “offers not just one monolithic version of masculinity but a continuum of masculinities” and thus “alternative masculinities [that] are so much more attractive than [the] conventional.” In other words, the series offers choices. The complexity of choices in the role we play is central to Katherine Weiss’s discussion of playwright Sam Shepard and Bob Dylan’s collaboration on “Brownsville Girl.” They explore the fluidity of identity as part of American freedom, she suggests—in opposition to rigid, stereotyping iconography: “the mythic heroes of the West and icons such as Dylan, for Shepard, aid us in our quest to be American, but to keep these myths and icons from remaking themselves is the very corruption that can destroy us.” Both physical corruption and moral corruption are at the heart of the horror for Jonathan Bassett, in his study of Clive Barker’s *Lord of Illusions*. “Terror management”—specifically, terror of death—clearly has moral implications. And Bassett convincingly suggests that in *Lord of Illusions*, “what is to be avoided is allegiance to any world view that attempts to negate death anxiety at the cost of infringing on personal freedom and the welfare of others.” The immorality of sentimentality and the immorality of inauthenticity are topics raised by Marc Napolitano. Although he recognizes the abiding question of adaptation (does fidelity equal quality?), he clearly makes the case for the greater artistic integrity of film musicals which are unified to the narrative, rather than strung together on the fence posts of star voices. Finally, Richard Ward asks us to consider the struggles that a screen icon himself underwent in creating his work: Charlie Chaplin’s representations of “high art” in his films tell us much about his struggles to have his own work considered as art, and the moral demands implicit in that quest for himself and his characters.

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