What are Moral Panics?

MECS1000 – Week 20

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- British Sociologist Jock Young – first published reference to 'moral panic' (1971)

- Young suggested that 'the moral panic over drug-taking resulted in the setting up of drug squads' in police departments (Thompson 1998: p. 7)

- Moral panics involve the interaction of the media, public opinion and the authorities

Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972)*

- Cohen's work focused on a series of social disturbances in Britain involving Mods and Rockers: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r61ks18Bd7I

- 'Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests…Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten…at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself.' (Cohen, cited in Thompson 1998: pp. 7-8).

Cohen's Five Stages of Moral Panic

1. Something or someone is defined as a threat to values or interests
2. This threat is depicted in an easily recognisable form by the media
3. There is a rapid build-up of public concern
4. There is a response from authorities or opinion makers
5. The panic recedes or results in social changes

- ABC News on 2011 Riots: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkEFriZdqv8
- David Cameron on Britain's 'broken society':
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88adH_uaUhs

Morals, Folk Devils and Panics

- ***Moral*** – suggests that there is a threat to something that is ethically important to our society

- ***Folk Devils*** – those things or people that threaten society's moral fibre and are regarded as 'evil'

- ***Panic*** – an exaggerated or irrational response

Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (1994)

Aspects of Moral Panic:

- Concern
- Hostility
- Consensus
- Disproportionality
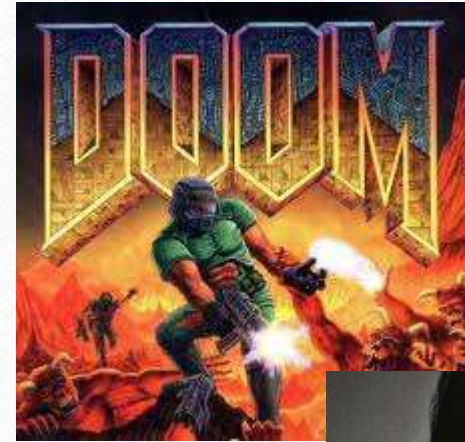- Volatility

Moral Panics and Young People

The James Bulger Killing (1993)

- *Child's Play 3* = Folk Devil
- *The Sun* urged readers to 'Burn Your Video Nasty'
- MPs called for bans on violent films
- http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/2623743/Sick-film-Childs-Play-has-been-linked-to-various-crimes.html

The Columbine High School Massacre (1999)

- Fuelled debates about the influence of violent movies, music and video games

- Killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were reported to be fans of Marilyn Manson and the video game *Doom*

- Manson has since suggested in Michael Moore's film *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) that attention to him served to distract attention from America's lax gun control laws

Media Effects

- Do 'crime and violence in the media fuel crime and violence in society'? (Briggs and Cobley 1998: p. 260)

- Payne Fund (1928) – established to study the impact of movies on young people

- British study on the influence of movies on young offenders (1951) – 141 of 38,000 case studies (or 0.4%) were influenced by cinema attendance

- Studies in America (1950s and 1960s): 'For some children under some conditions, some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children under most conditions television is probably neither harmful nor particularly beneficial' (Schramm *et al.* 1961 cited in Briggs and Cobley 1998: pp. 260-261)

- Albert Bandura, Stanford University, suggested that children were vulnerable to copycatting of violent media images: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zerCK0lRjp8
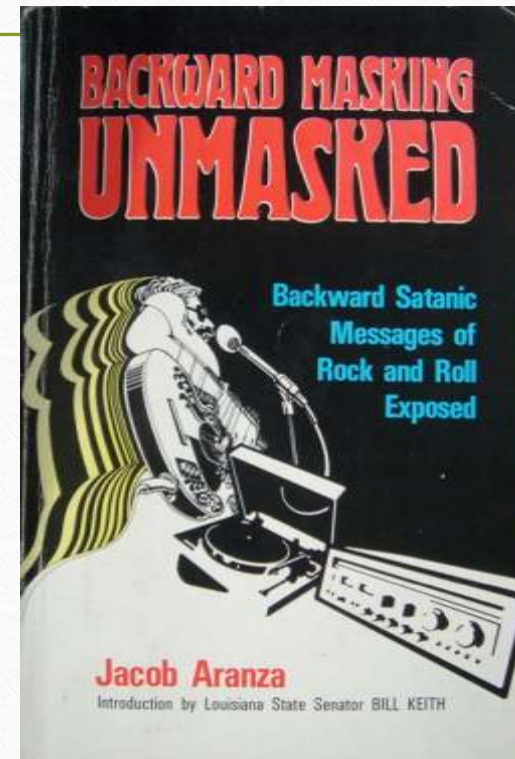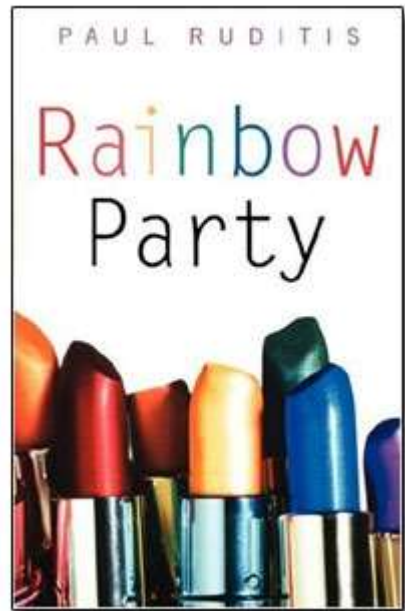
Gay Batman

- Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954)

- Concerns about homosexual themes in Wonder Woman and Batman comics

- Comics Code – self-regulatory guidelines that banned any suggestions of 'sexual abnormality' and to preserve the 'sanctity of marriage'

Backmasking

- 1985 - Judas Priest accused of hiding subliminal messages in their songs (audible if played backwards)

- Accusations also levelled at Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd and Queen

- More recently, Rihanna, Beyoncé and Justin Bieber have been accused of 'backmasking'

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVnDoaE4F0I

Rainbow Parties

- Claims made on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that rainbow parties were prevalent among American teens (2003)
- Simon & Schuster issued a novel for young adults to warn teenagers of the danger
- *New York Times* study was unable to locate anyone who had attended a rainbow party

Policing Moral Values

- 1980s and 1990s – Prominent campaigns to regulate children's access to music, magazines, etc.

- Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics on cd's

- Recent calls in *The Sun* for age restrictions on music videos and banning certain videos before the watershed

- Conflicts with *The Sun*'s Page 3?

- Controversies over *The Sun*'s coverage of Reeva Steenkamp murder?

Consequences?

- 'The explosive incident will always get more attention than the duller, more complex bigger picture. And when we let that happen, everyone loses.' (Cree 2013)

- The innocent can be victimised (Lord McAlpine in the Jimmy Savile affair)

- Regulations can be out of proportion to the level of the threat (the Holocaust)

- Threats can be grossly exaggerated

- Moral panics simplify complex problems and distract from other (and often far more important) factors.

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