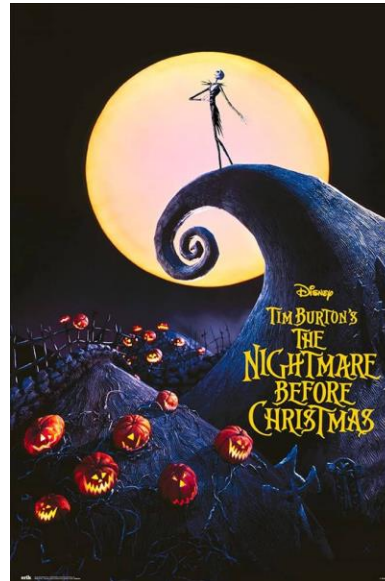
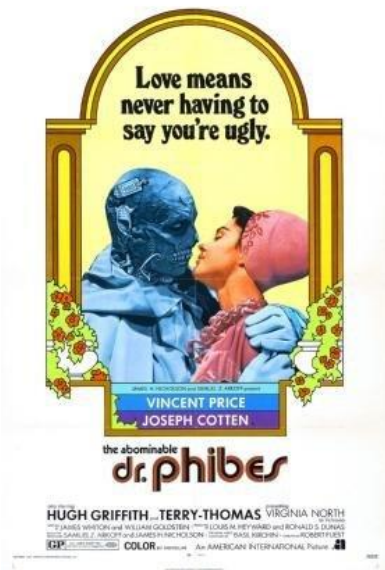
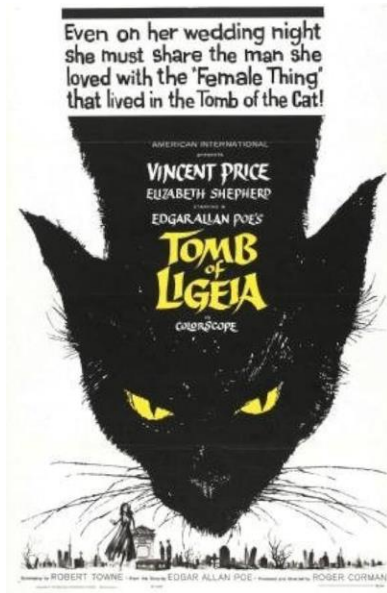


**“EVILS OF IMAGINATION”:
HORROR FICTION AND MORAL PANICS FROM THE
VICTORIANS TO TODAY**

**PRESENTED BY DR. MEGAN BRYAN,
PHD IN ENGLISH FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK, UK**



LIFE'S NO FUN WITHOUT A GOOD SCARE!



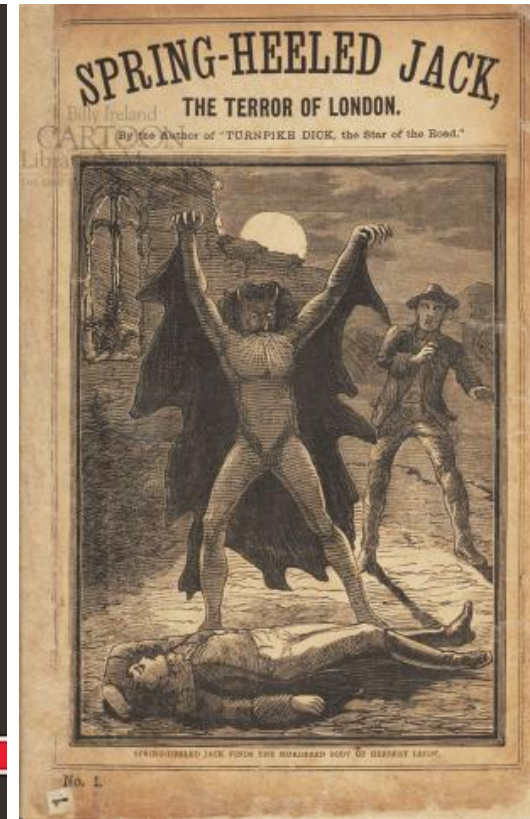
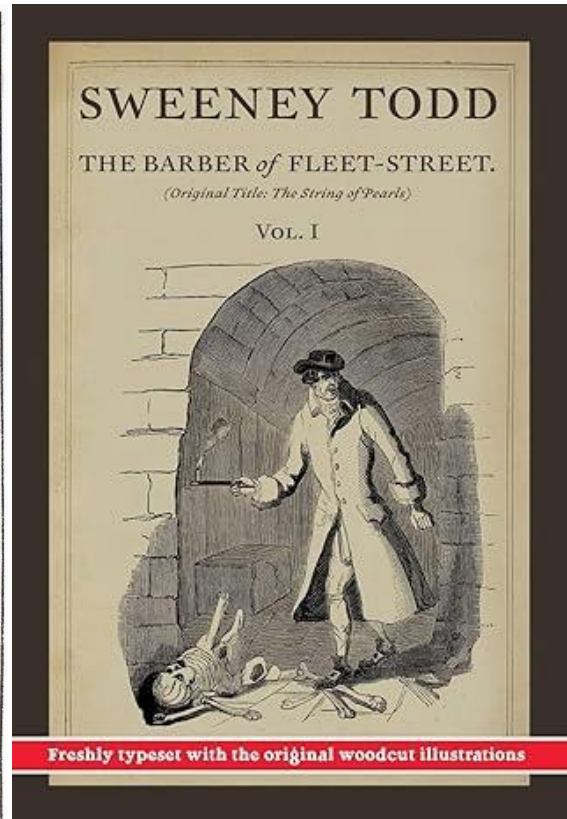
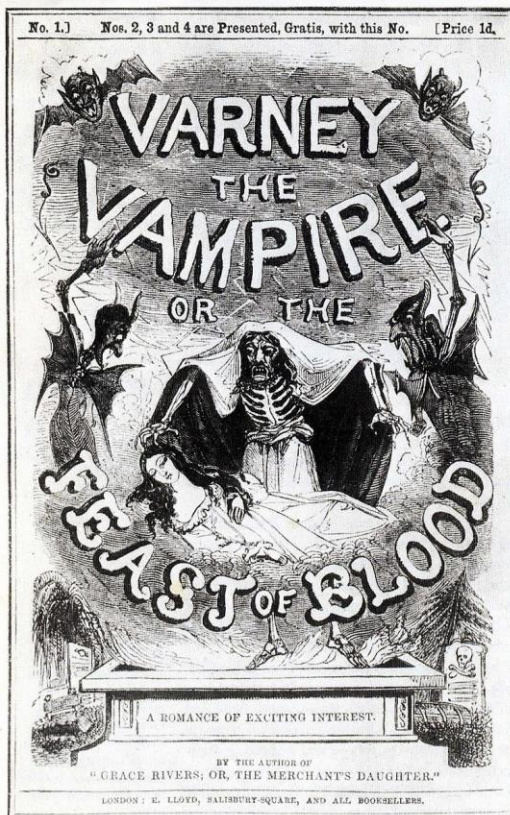
WHAT'S GOING ON AT THE TIME?

- Mid to late 19th century – Industrial Revolution
- 1833 – new legislation restricted the employment of children in factories, followed a year later with a report on the Poor Law outlined the duty of the government to 'promote the religious and moral education of the labouring classes.'
- Unprecedented migration to cities - between 1841 and 1851 alone, some 330,000 migrants flooded to the capital, representing a staggering 17 per cent of London's total population. In the 1850s, a further 286,000 migrants arrived; in the 1860s 331,000.
- With increased population came overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and disease epidemics, along with a rise in crime – fruitful inspiration for horror and crime fiction.

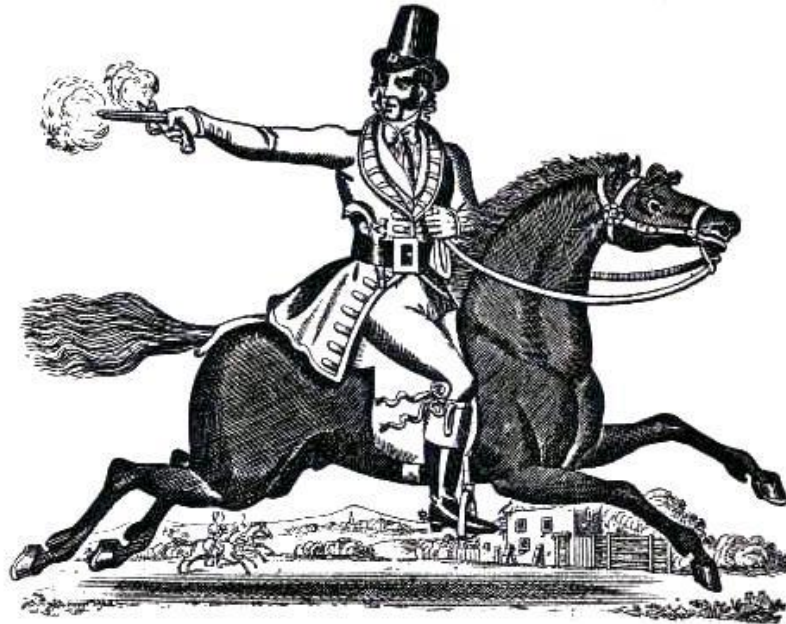


WHAT IS A PENNY DREADFUL?

- “An expressive term for those penny publications which depend more upon sensationalism than upon merit, artistic or literary, for success.” – John Camden Hotten, *The Slang Dictionary, or the Vulgar Words, Street Phrases and “Fast” Expressions of High and Low Society*, 1874.
- AKA “Penny Bloods” – Promised “a penny’s worth of blood in every issue.”
- Multiple issues with familiar figures to tell loosely plotted story, similar to comics today.



HOUNSLOW HEATH, OR THE MOONLIGHT RIDERS (1866)



- Featuring the famous highwayman, Dick Turpin, whose band tortures a prisoner in this scene: “The more he shrieked with pain, the louder grew their shrieks of laughter. They probed him with their swords and burnt the tip of his nose with a red-hot poker, while one of his torturers held back his arms...the two robbers saw the thick and deep-coloured blood roll sluggishly from his nostrils. Then it burst in a torrent from his ears and mouth, and soon his face presented a horrible spectacle to look upon. The blood had completed saturated his hair, until he looked as though he had been newly scalped.”



VARNEY THE VAMPIRE, OR THE FEAST OF BLOOD (1845-47)

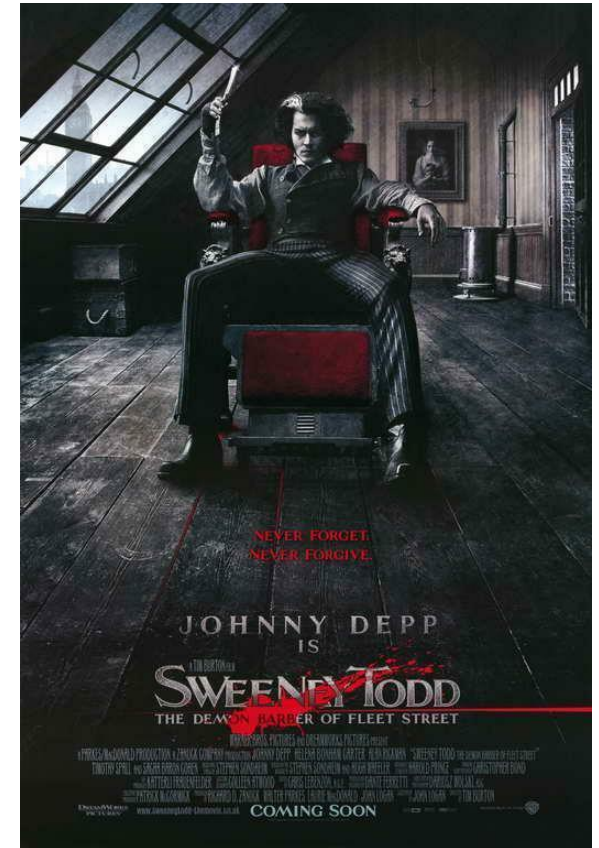
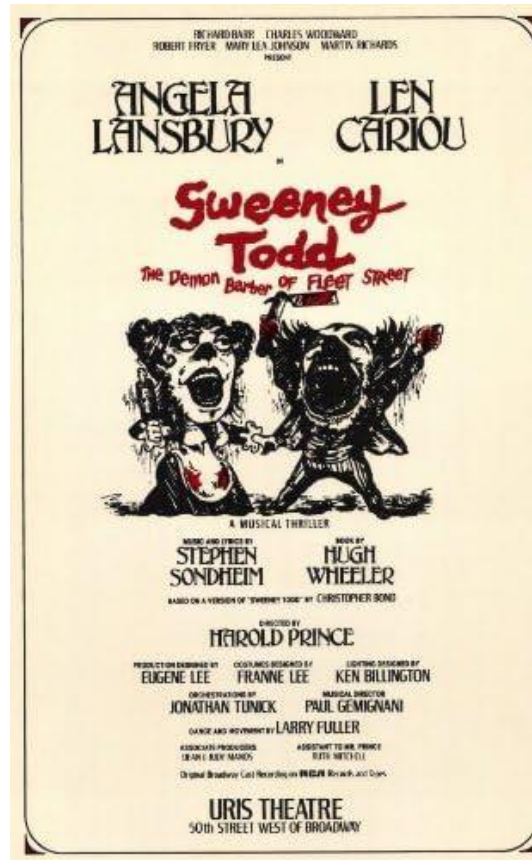
VARNEY, THE VAMPIRE; OR, THE FEAST OF BLOOD A Romance.



- Aristocratic vampire, like Dracula, but before Dracula – Sir Francis Varney, Baronet
- Inconsistent characterization due to multiple authors – lots of blood, gore, and death
- First sympathetic vampire



THE STRING OF PEARLS, OR THE SAILOR'S GIFT, AKA SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET (1846-47)



- Murders customers by dropping them from chair (uses razor to "polish 'em off" when that doesn't work) and has neighbor, Mrs. Lovett bake them into pies. Mistakenly believed to be real.
- Adapted as revenge tragedy into Broadway musical in 1979 by Stephen Sondheim, and blockbuster film in 2007 directed by Tim Burton and starring Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham-Carter (good Halloween viewing!)

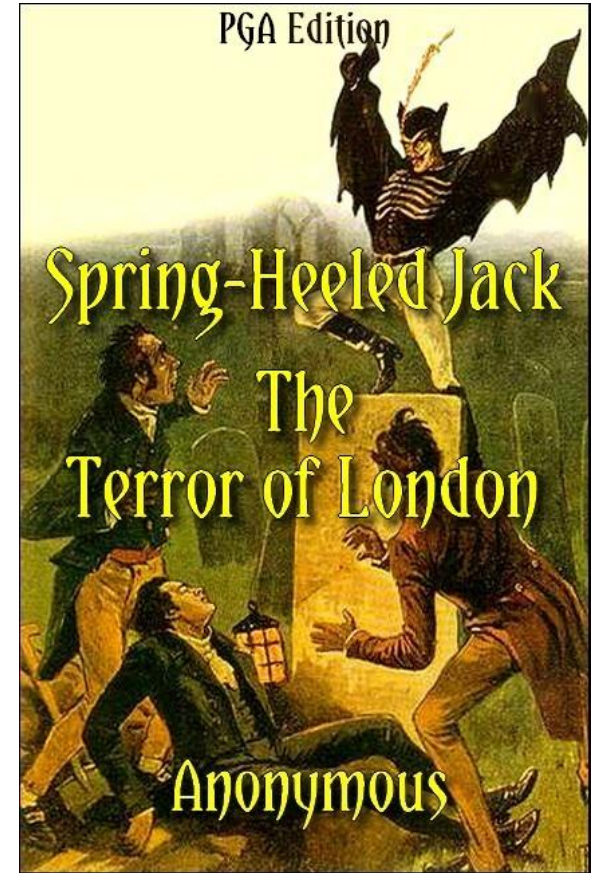
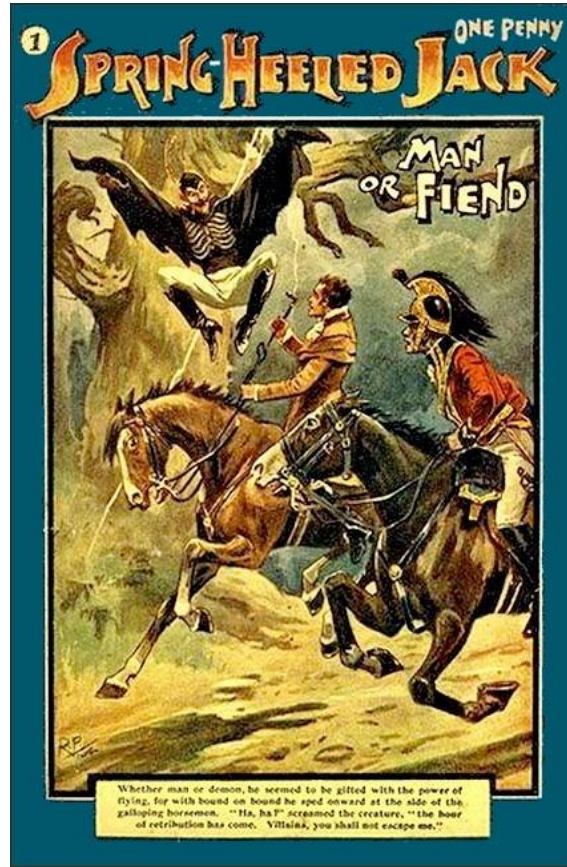


SPRING-HEELED JACK, OR THE TERROR OF LONDON (1840'S THROUGH 1880'S)

144 THE BOY'S STANDARD.
Published Weekly, NOW READY. Price One Penny.
NOS. 1 AND 2 (TWENTY-FOUR PAGES), SPLENDIDLY ILLUSTRATED, IN HANDSOME WRAPPER.



The History of this Remarkable Being has been specially compiled, for this work only, by one of the Best Authors of the day, and our readers will find that he has undoubtedly succeeded in producing a Wonderful and Sensational Story, every page of which is replete with details of absorbing and thrilling interest.



- Based on “true stories” (urban legends) – first sighted in 1837, attacked and assaulted Londoners.
- Said to have a terrifying and frightful appearance, described as “devil-like” with clawed hands, and eyes that “resembled red balls of fire.” Several reports mention that he could breathe out blue and white flames and that he wore sharp metallic claws at his fingertips.
- Like a Batman/Wolverine hybrid, but evil.



THE WOMAN IN WHITE (1859)



Illustration of Count Fosco From "The Woman in White" by J. McLenan, 1860, Harper's Weekly



Michael Crawford as Count Fosco in the London production of "The Woman in White" (2004)

"Fosco is, unquestionably, destined to be repeated to infinitude, as no successful work can apparently exist in this imitative age without creating a shoal of copyists; and with every fresh imitation the picture will take more and more objectionable shades...it seems but too likely Mr. Wilkie Collins, in his remarkable novel, has given a new impulse to a kind of literature which must, more or less, find its inspiration in crime, and more or less, make the criminal its hero."

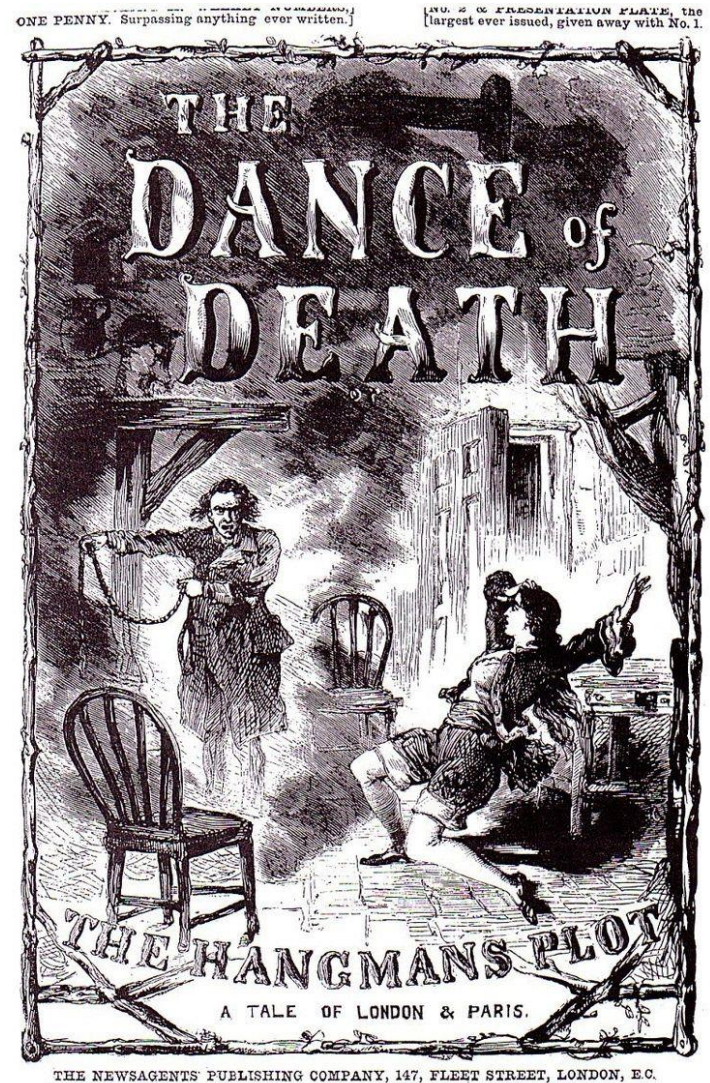
– Margaret Oliphant, *Blackwood's Magazine*, 90, May 1862



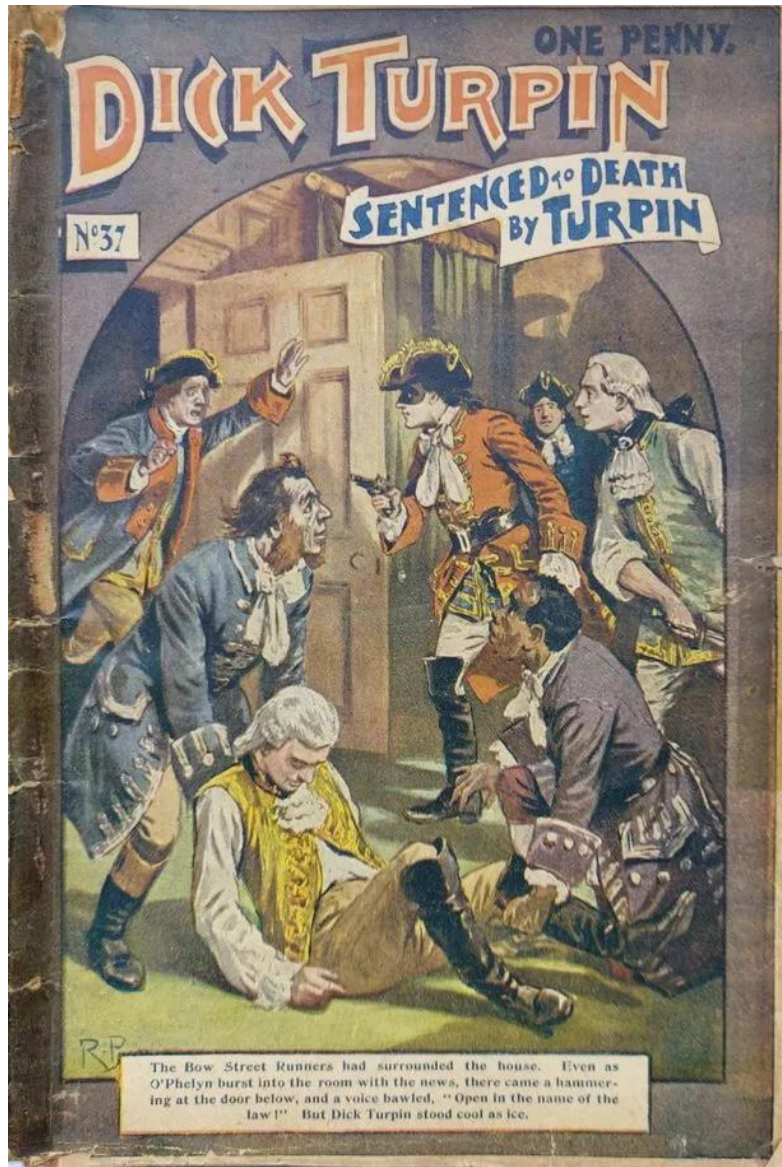
CORRUPTING INFLUENCES AND HARMFUL EFFECTS

- “We have several times called attention in these columns to certain salient points in the natural history of the modern British roagh; we will now say a few words upon one of the principal causes which aid in developing his brutal and ferocious instincts, namely, the literary garbage which is so eagerly devoured by the species, especially in their younger and immature stages of existence. The direct connection between ‘Penny Dreadfuls’ and crime has been demonstrated over and over again by the annals of our own police courts. The mischievous lad who sometime since presented a pistol at her Majesty’s head, and got whipped for his pains, was found in possession of a collection of lives of celebrated highwaymen; and the various gangs of youthful burglars and would-be highwaymen who have lately appeared in the dock have one and all modeled their career upon the heroes of criminal novels. Only the other day a terrible illustration occurred of the actual effect of this gallows literature upon weak minds. A young man, 19 years of age, named Westby, shot his father dead at Nottingham, having first murdered a little office boy...The key to his otherwise inexplicable outbreak of homicidal fury was afforded by the poor mother’s words: ‘My son was very fond of reading, and would sit for hours at his favorite amusement, studying periodicals and sensational literature.’”

– *The New York Times*, December 25, 1881



CORRUPTING INFLUENCES AND HARMFUL EFFECTS



- “The police court reports in the newspapers are alone sufficient proof of the harm done by 'penny dreadfuls'. It is an almost daily occurrence with magistrates to have before them boys who, having read a number of 'dreadfuls', followed the examples set forth in such publications, robbed their employers, bought revolvers with the proceeds and finished by running away from home and installing themselves in the back streets as 'highwaymen'. This and many other evils the 'penny dreadful' is responsible for. It makes thieves of the coming generation, and so helps fill our gaols.”

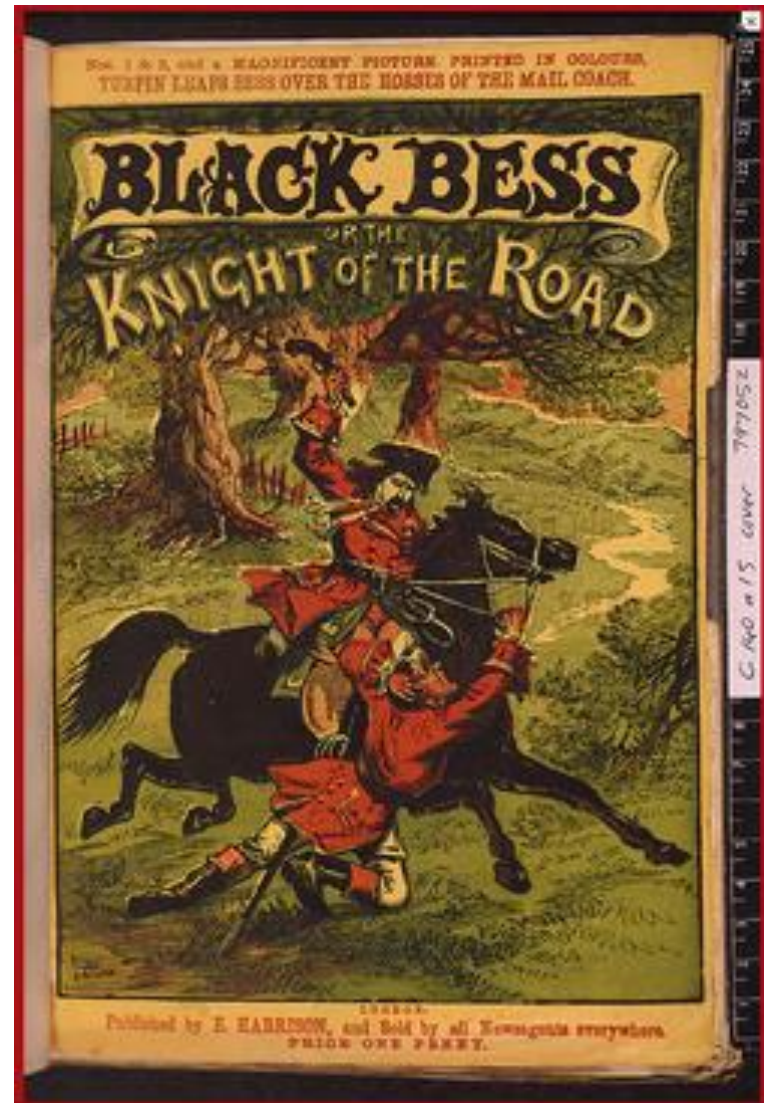
- Alfred Harmsworth, *The Halfpenny Marvel* 1, 1893



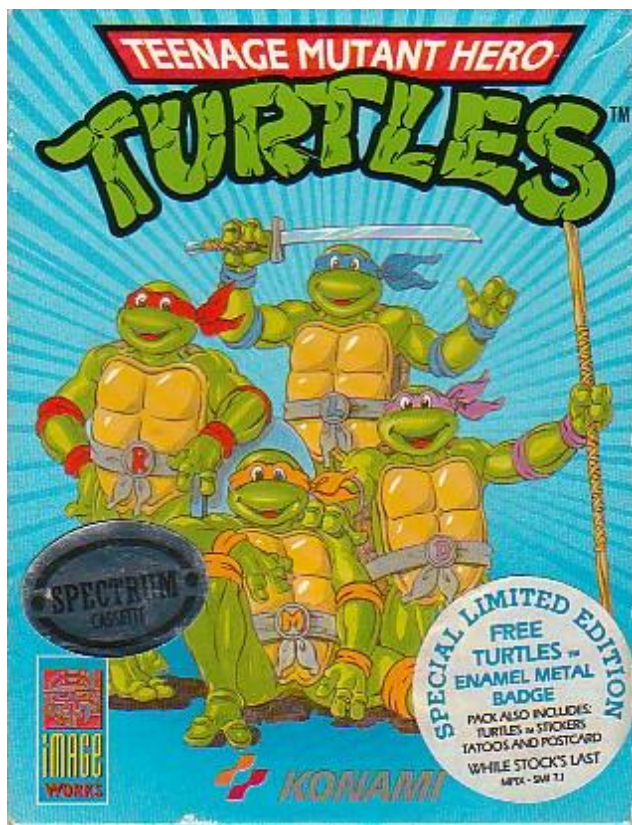
CORRUPTING INFLUENCES AND HARMFUL EFFECTS

- “Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists...Books and works of art exercise a powerful suggestion to the masses. It is from these productions that an age derives its ideals of morality and beauty. If they are absurd and anti-social, they exert a disturbing and corrupting influence on the views of a whole generation...especially the impressionable youth.”

– Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, 1895



TIMES CHANGE – HUMAN NATURE DOESN'T!



- Lord Chamberlain in UK had to approve all plays from 1737-1968 eg “Witness for the Prosecution”
- Also in the UK, Teenage Mutant “Hero” Turtles in 1980s



THE HAYS CODE (1934-68)

- In Hollywood, Hays Code was in effect from 1934-1968
- Replaced by the MPAA film rating system in 1968, which continues today
- Established due to notorious celebrity scandals in the 1920s which led people to believe that the film industry was morally questionable

August 11, 1934

MOTION PICTURE HERALD

11

TEXT OF THE PRODUCTION CODE

tent of the Code appear in two parts—first, a working abstract of the Code which has been widely accepted as the complete Code, and, second, the Code proper, which has been referred to as "Reasons Supporting a Code".

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

PARTICULAR APPLICATIONS

4. **Seduction or rape**
 - a. They should never be more than suggested, and only when essential for the plot, and even then never shown by explicit method.
 - b. They are never the proper subject for comedy.
5. **Sex perversion** or any inference to it is forbidden.
6. **White slavery** shall not be treated.
7. **Miscegenation** (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden.
8. **Sex hygiene** and venereal diseases are not subjects for motion pictures.
9. Scenes of **actual child birth**, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented.
10. **Children's sex organs** are never to be exposed.

III. VULGARITY

3. **Indecent or undue exposure** is forbidden.
4. **Dancing costumes** intended to permit undue exposure or indecent movements in the dance are forbidden.

VII. DANCES

1. Dances suggesting or representing sexual actions or indecent passion are forbidden.
2. Dances which emphasize indecent movements are to be regarded as obscene.

VIII. RELIGION

1. No film or episode may throw ridicule on any religious faith.
2. **Ministers of religion** in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains.
3. **Ceremonies** of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled.

IX. LOCATIONS



Thou Shalt Not, a 1940 photo by Whitey Schafer deliberately subverting some of the Code's strictures



CHANGE THE ENDING!



Rebecca (1940)

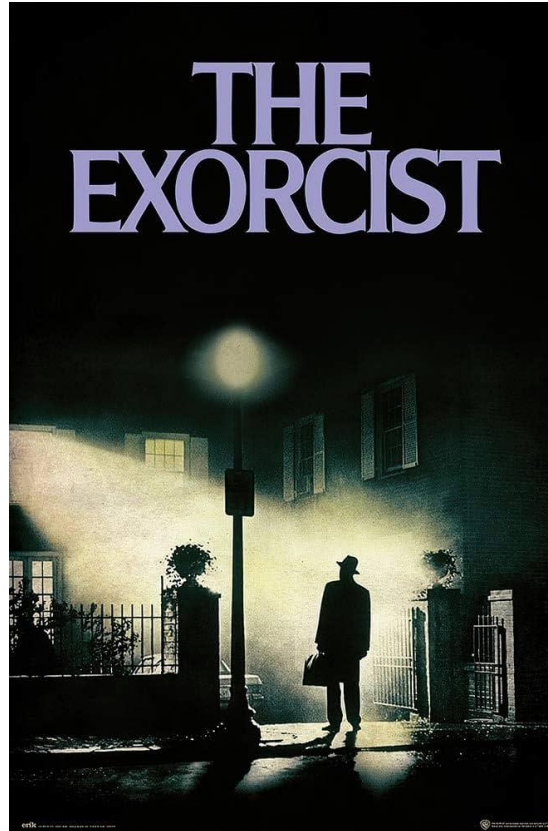


The Bad Seed (1956)



SATANIC PANIC (1980'S-90'S)

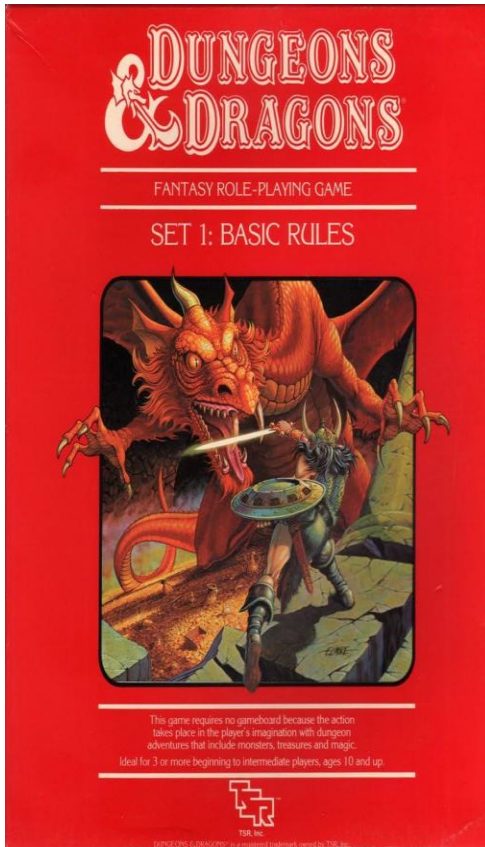
- *Michelle Remembers*, discredited memoir published in 1980
- “Recovered memory” of Satanic ritual child abuse
- Ignited a moral panic of over 12,000 unsubstantiated cases of Satanic Ritual Abuse.



Rosemary's Baby (1968), The Exorcist (1973), and The Omen (1976).

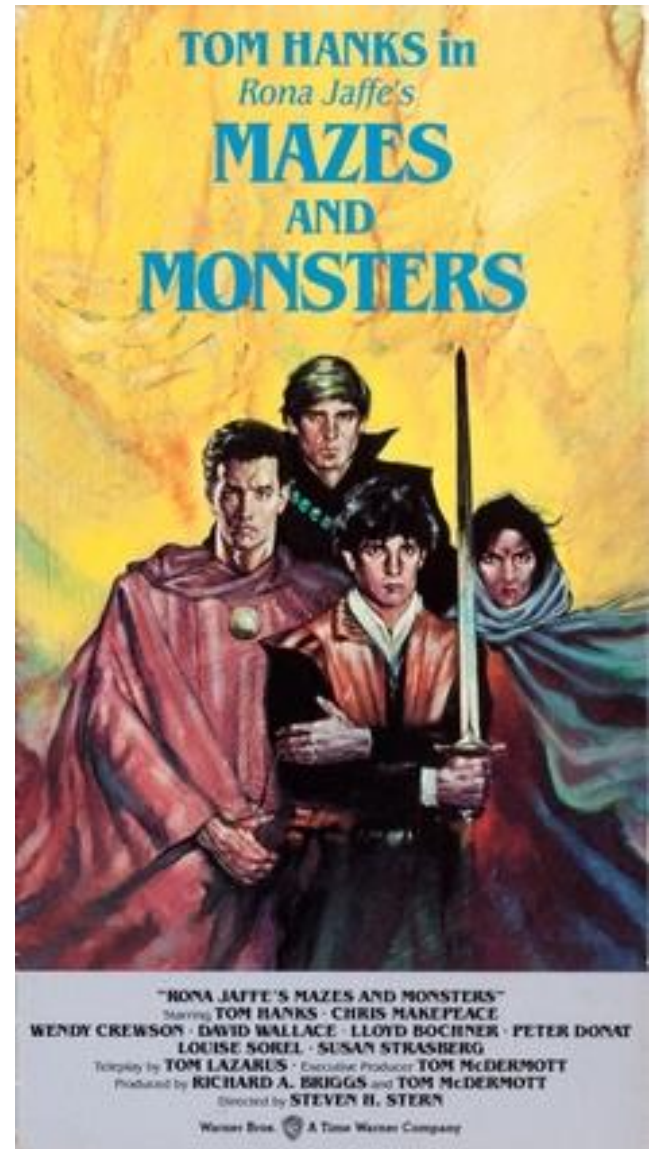


DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS (1974-TODAY)



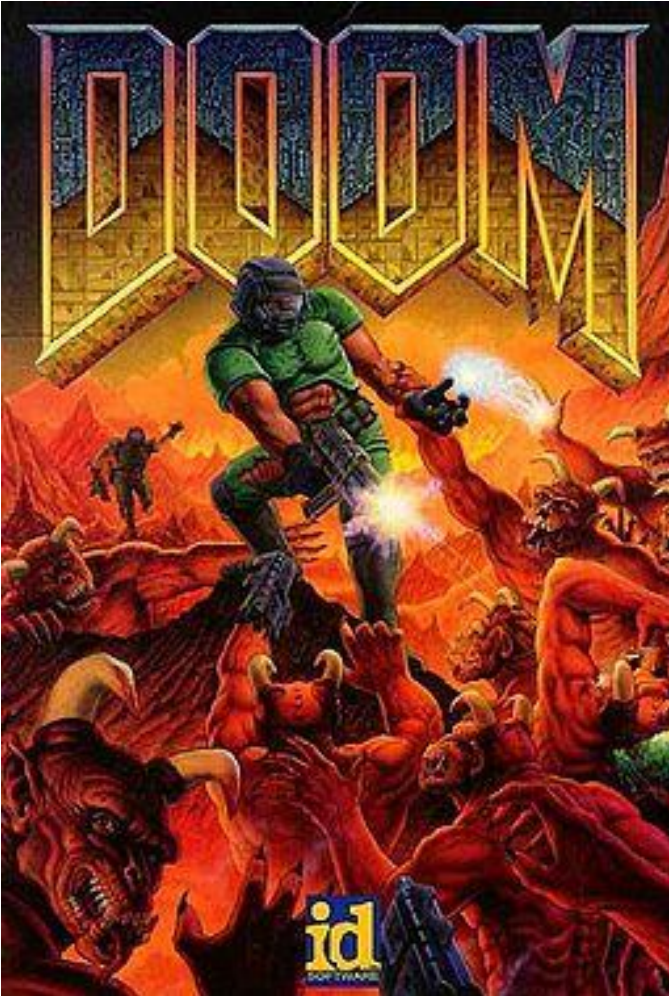
“A fantasy role-playing game which uses demonology, witchcraft, voodoo, murder, rape, blasphemy, suicide, assassination, insanity, sex perversion, homosexuality, prostitution, satanic type rituals, gambling, barbarism, cannibalism, sadism, desecration, demon summoning, necromantics, divination and other teachings.”

– Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons (BADD), 1983



DOOM AND THE COLUMBINE MASSACRE (1999)

- Columbine massacre in Littleton, Colorado – April 20, 1999.
- One of deadliest mass shootings in USA – 13 people killed, and 24 injured



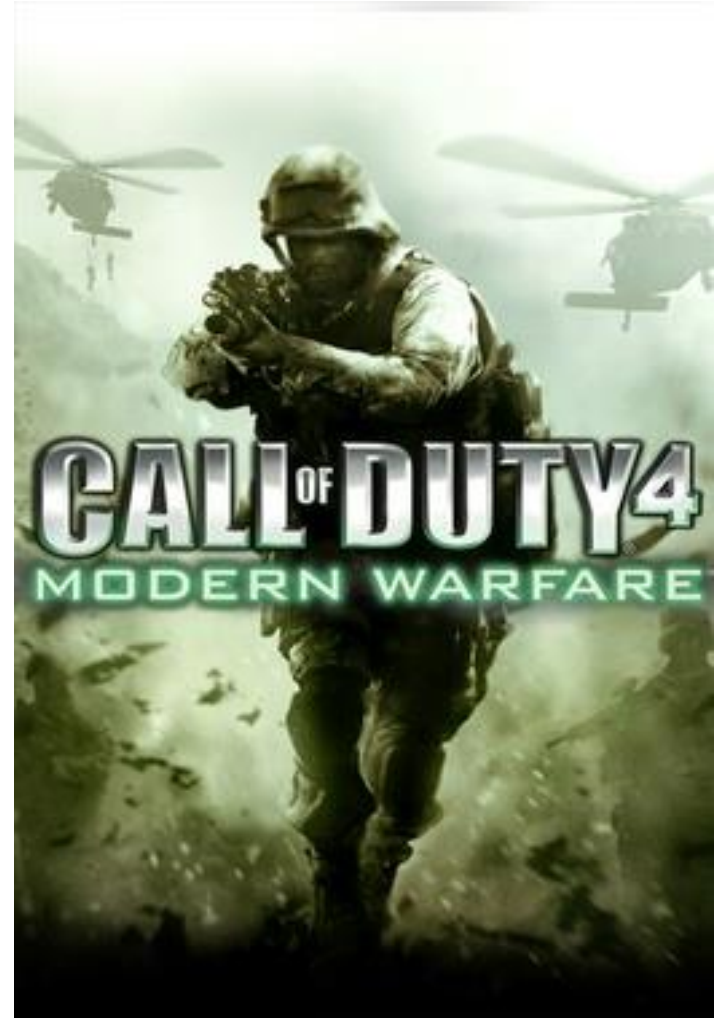
“Video games like ‘Mortal Kombat,’ ‘Killer Instinct’ and ‘Doom,’ the very game played obsessively by the two young men who ended so many lives in Littleton, make our children more active participants in simulated violence...And to the media and entertainment industries, I say just this: You know you have enormous power to educate and entertain our children. Yes, there should be a label on the outside of every video, but what counts is what’s on the inside and what it will do to the insides of our young people. I ask you to make every video game and movie as if your own children were watching it.”

– President Bill Clinton radio address, April 25, 1999



CALL OF DUTY AND UVALDE (ONGOING)

- As recently as July 2025, a lawsuit has been brought by the families of Uvalde victims against the *Call of Duty* video game series accusing them of responsibility for the shooting.
- The lawyer representing the makers of the game has asked for the lawsuit to be dismissed since “first amendment bars their claims, period full stop.”
- She argued that the case has little chance of prevailing if it continues, because courts have repeatedly held that “creators of artistic works, whether they be books, music, movies, TV or video games, cannot be held legally liable for the acts of their audience.”
- The families’ lawyer argued that the shooter experienced “the absorption and the loss of self in *Call of Duty*,” and that the immersion was so deep that the shooter searched online for how to obtain an armored suit that he didn’t know only exists in the game.



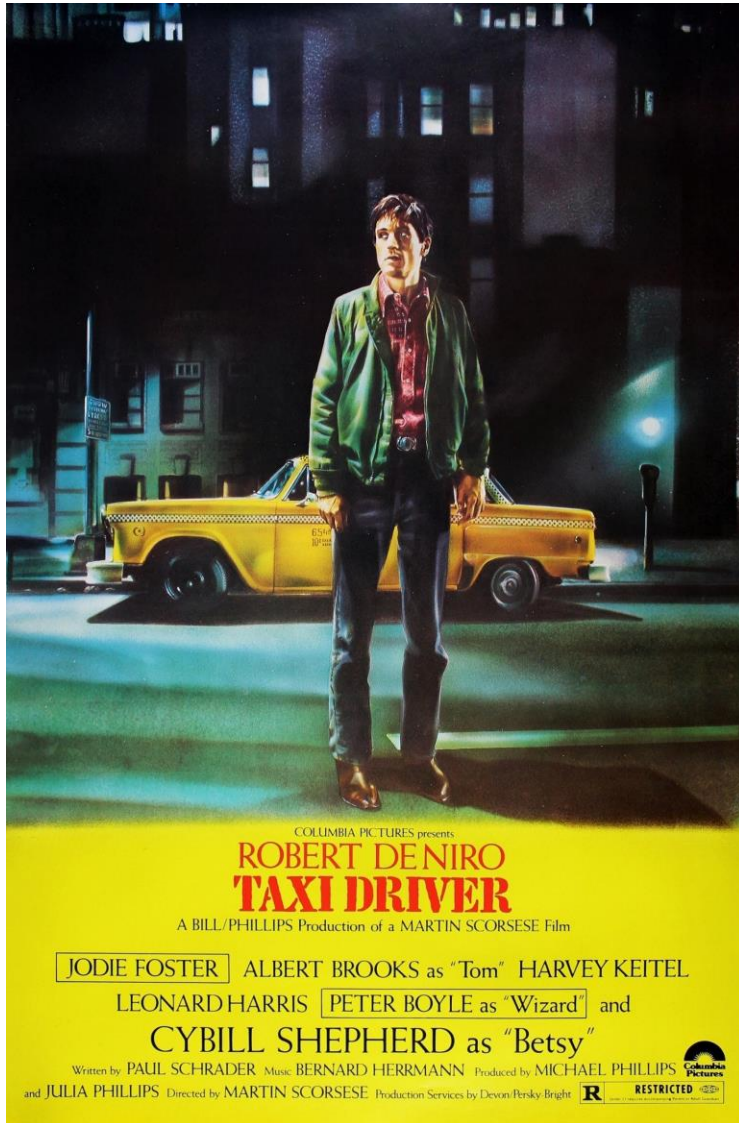
JOKER (2019)

“This [movie] presents a potential risk to DOD personnel and family members, though there are no known specific credible threats to the opening of the Joker on 4 October. Incels are individuals who express frustration from perceived disadvantages to starting intimate relationships. Incel extremists idolize violent individuals like the Aurora movie theater shooter. They also idolize the Joker character, the violent clown from the 'Batman' series, admiring his depiction as a man who must pretend to be happy, but eventually fights back against his bullies. When entering theaters, identify two escape routes, remain aware of your surroundings and remember the phrase 'run, hide, fight'.”

– Notice to military personnel from Department of Defense, September 18, 2019



TAXI DRIVER AND THE ATTEMPTED REAGAN ASSASSINATION (1981)

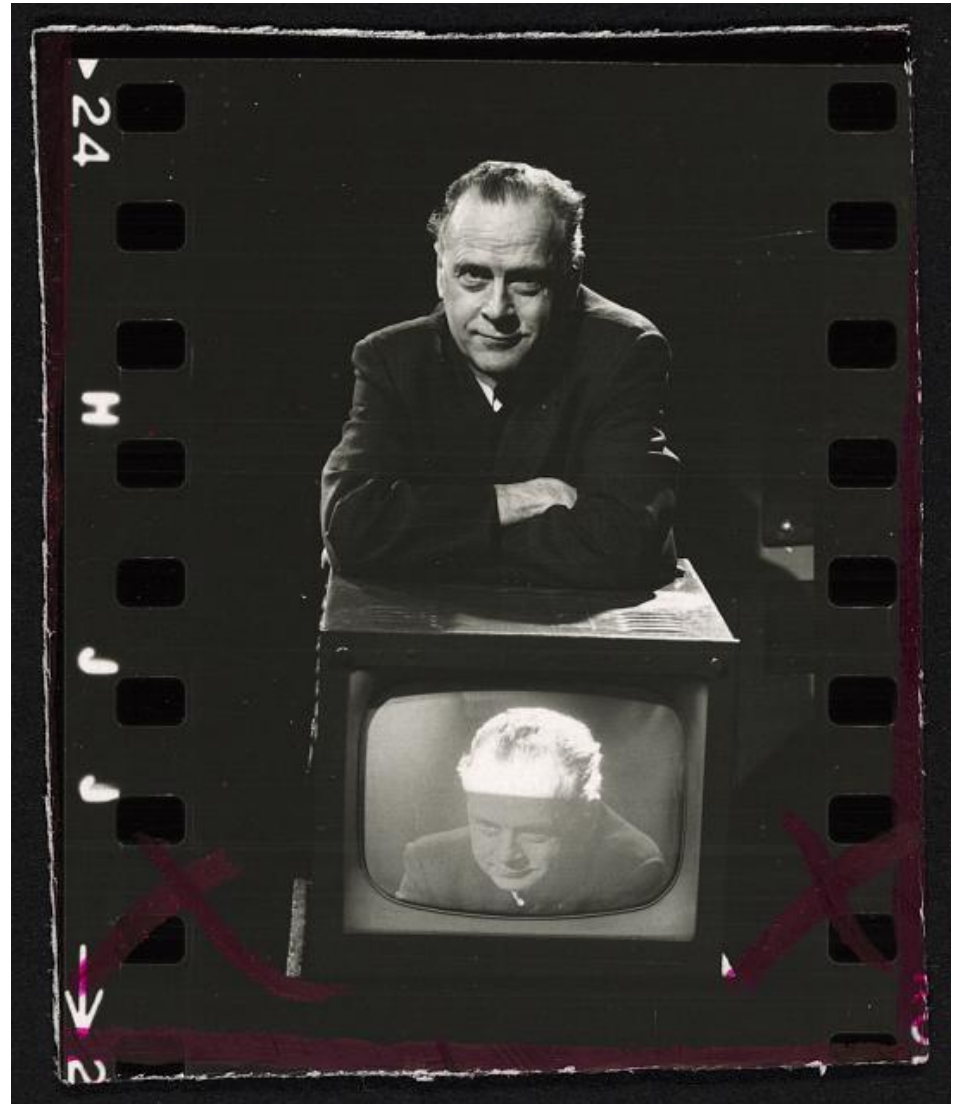


- Shooter obsessed with movie *Taxi Driver* (1976), modeled himself on main character Travis Bickle, played by Robert De Niro, who plots a political assassination and is enamored of a trafficked pre-teen prostitute played by Jodie Foster.
- Shooter began real life obsession with Jodie Foster, stalking her and writing that he shot Reagan to impress her.
- At his trial, the defense closed with a screening of the movie – one of the defense experts stated that the shooter felt “like he was acting out a movie script.”
- Ruled not guilty by reason of insanity – released from psychiatric care in 2016.
- Travis Bickle based on diaries of attempted assassin of George Wallace.



EASY SOLUTIONS TO COMPLEX PROBLEMS — THE MEDIA EFFECTS THEORY

- Marshall McLuhan, English Professor who published *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964).
- “The medium is the message.”
- Utopian views about the way media could transform 20th century life.
- Spoke of a media-inspired “global village” at a time when Cold War paranoia was at its peak and the Vietnam War was a hotly debated subject.
- Although 1960s-era utopians received these statements positively, social realists found them cause for scorn.
- Became a pop culture icon, mentioned frequently in the television sketch-comedy program *Laugh-In* and appearing as himself in Woody Allen’s film *Annie Hall* (1977).
- “Clear prose indicates the absence of thought.”



“TEN THINGS WRONG WITH THE MEDIA ‘EFFECTS’ MODEL” – DAVID GAUNTLETT, 2006

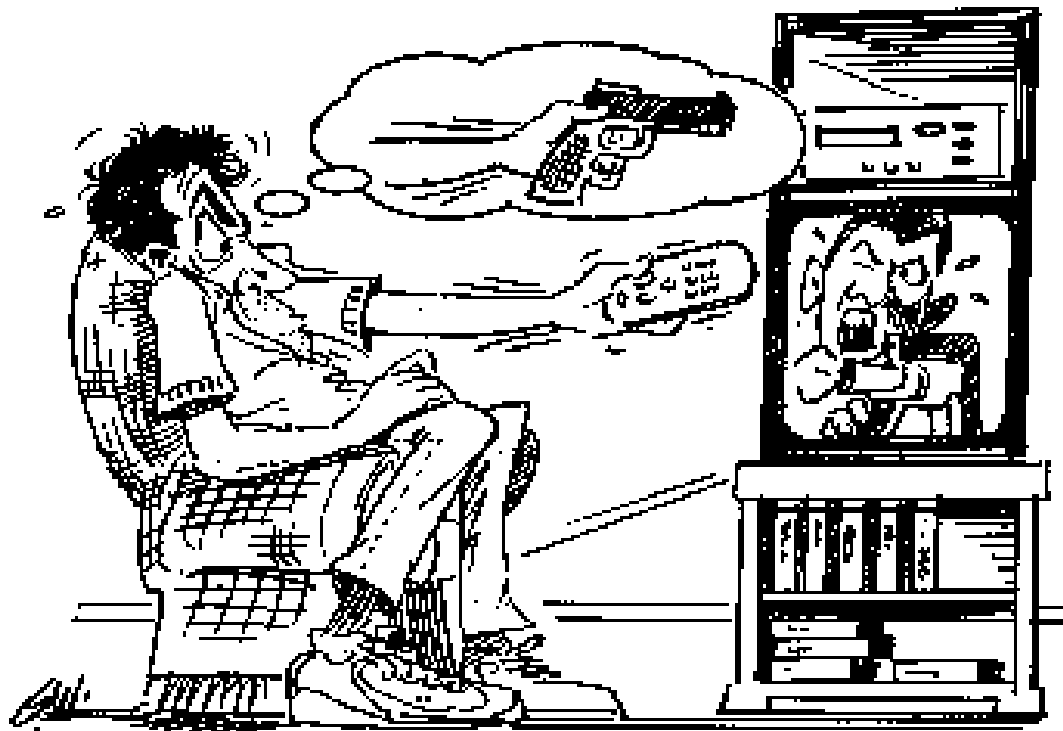
- “If, after over 60 years of a considerable amount of research effort, direct effects of media upon behaviour have not been clearly identified, then we should conclude that they are simply *not there to be found*.”
- “To explain the problem of violence in society, researchers should begin with that social problem and seek to explain it with reference...to those who engage in it: their background, lifestyles, character profiles, and so on. The ‘media effects’ approach, in this sense, comes at the problem backwards, by starting with the media and then trying to lasso connections from there on to social beings, rather than the other way around.”

- “A study in 1994 which interviewed 70 violent teenage offenders found that the young offenders watched less television and video than their counterparts, had less access to the technology in the first place, had no unusual interest in specifically violent programmes, and either enjoyed the same material as non-offending teenagers or were simply uninterested. This point was demonstrated very clearly when the offenders were asked, ‘If you had the chance to be someone who appears on television, who would you choose to be?’: ‘The offenders felt particularly uncomfortable with this question and appeared to have difficulty in understanding why one might want to be such a person... In several interviews, the offenders had already stated that they watched little television, could not remember their favourite programmes and, consequently, could not think of anyone to be. In these cases, their obvious failure to identify with any television characters seemed to be part of a general lack of engagement with television.’”



“TEN THINGS WRONG WITH THE MEDIA ‘EFFECTS’ MODEL” – DAVID GAUNTLETT, 2006

- “In psychology...children are often considered not so much in terms of what they can do, as what they (apparently) cannot. Negatively defined as non-adults, the research subjects are regarded as the ‘other’, a strange breed whose failure to match generally middle-class adult norms must be charted and discussed.”
- “Surveys typically show that whilst a certain proportion of the public feel that the media may cause other people to engage in antisocial behaviour, almost no-one ever says that they have been affected in that way themselves. This view is taken to extremes by researchers and campaigners whose work brings them into regular contact with the supposedly corrupting material, but who are unconcerned for their own well-being as they implicitly ‘know’ that the effects could only be on others. Insofar as these others are defined as children or ‘unstable’ individuals, their approach may seem not unreasonable; it is fair enough that such questions should be explored. Nonetheless, the idea that it is unruly ‘others’ who will be affected – the uneducated? the working class? – remains at the heart of the effects paradigm, and is reflected in its texts.”



“TEN THINGS WRONG WITH THE MEDIA ‘EFFECTS’ MODEL” – DAVID GAUNTLETT, 2006

- “Finally, and underlying many of the points made above, is the fundamental problem that the entire argument of the ‘effects model’ is not substantiated with any theoretical reasoning beyond the bald assertions that particular kinds of effects will be produced by the media. The basic question of why the media should induce people to imitate its content has never been adequately tackled, beyond the simple idea that particular actions are ‘glamorised’. (However, antisocial actions are shown...positively so infrequently that this is an inadequate explanation). The lack of firm theory has led to the effects model being rooted in the set of questionable assumptions...– that the mass media (rather than people) should be the unproblematic starting-point for research; that children will be unable to ‘cope’ with the media; that the categories of ‘violence’ or ‘antisocial behaviour’ are clear and self-evident; that the model’s predictions can be verified by scientific research...that researchers have the unique capacity to observe and classify social behaviour and its meanings, but that those researchers need not attend to the various possible meanings which media content may have for the audience. Each of these very substantial problems has its roots in the failure of media effects commentators to found their model in any coherent theory.”



HARRY POTTER (1990'S TO TODAY!)



“I want children to read literature that is conducive to their age and leave those mystical and frightening texts for when they can discern reality, and when they have first learned to love beauty. ‘Harry Potter,’ ‘Lord of the Rings,’ ‘Game of Thrones,’ ‘The Hunger Games’ and Terry Pratchett, to mention only a few of the modern world's ‘must-haves,’ contain deeply insensitive and addictive material which I am certain encourages difficult behavior in children; yet they can be bought without a special license, and can damage the sensitive subconscious brains of young children, many of whom may be added to the current statistics of mentally ill young children. Buying sensational books is like feeding your child with spoons of added sugar, heaps of it, and when the child becomes addicted it will seek more and more, which if related to books, fills the bank vaults of those who write un-sensitive books for young children!”

– Graeme Whiting, headmaster and founder of the Acorn School, Gloucestershire, UK, 2016



OFFENSE IS THE NEW SHOCK

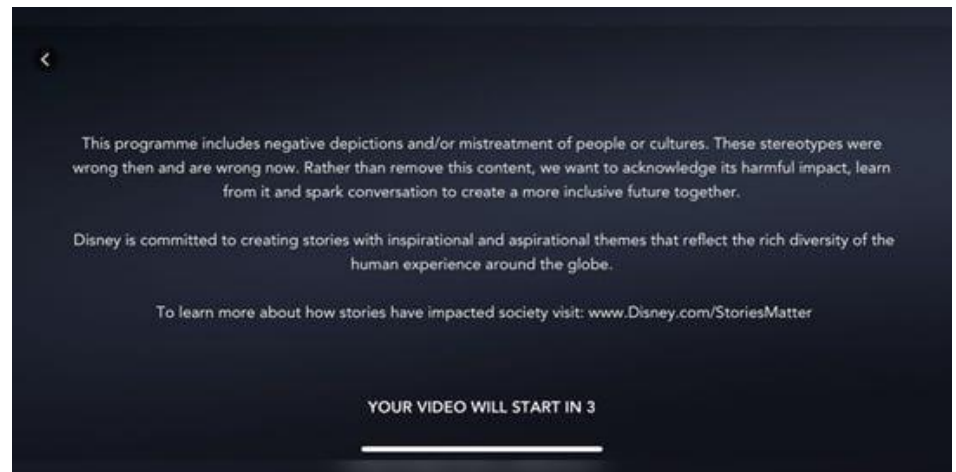
- “These books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong...Ceasing sales of these books is only part of our commitment and our broader plan to ensure Dr. Seuss Enterprises’ catalog represents and supports all communities and families...Dr. Seuss Enterprises listened and took feedback from our audiences including teachers, academics and specialists in the field as part of our review process. We then worked with a panel of experts, including educators, to review our catalog of titles.”

– Statement from Dr. Seuss Enterprises, March 2, 2021

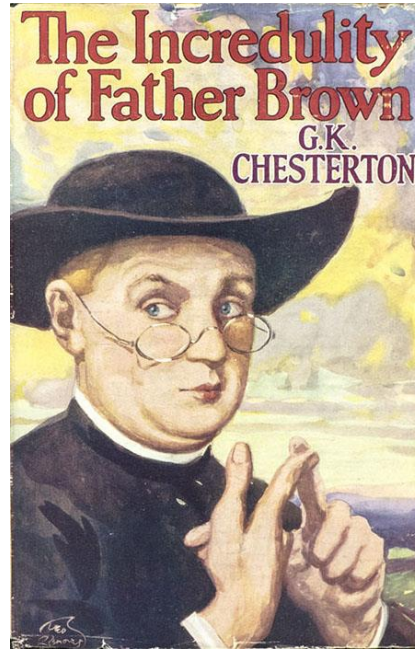
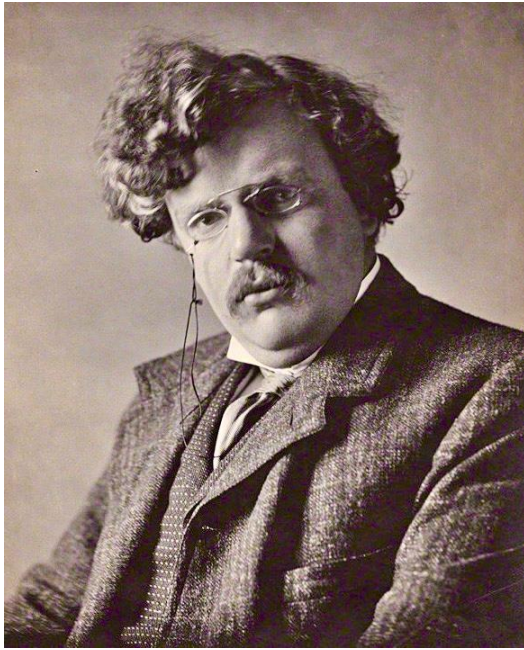
- “Words matter. The wonderful words of Roald Dahl can transport you to different worlds and introduce you to the most marvelous characters. This book was written many years ago and so we regularly review the language to ensure that it can continue to be enjoyed by all today.”

– Text at bottom of copyright page in new edited editions of Roald Dahl’s works, 2023

- “The greatest tyrannies are always perpetrated in the name of the noblest causes.” – Thomas Paine



"IN DEFENSE OF PENNY DREADFULS" — G.K. CHESTERTON, 1901

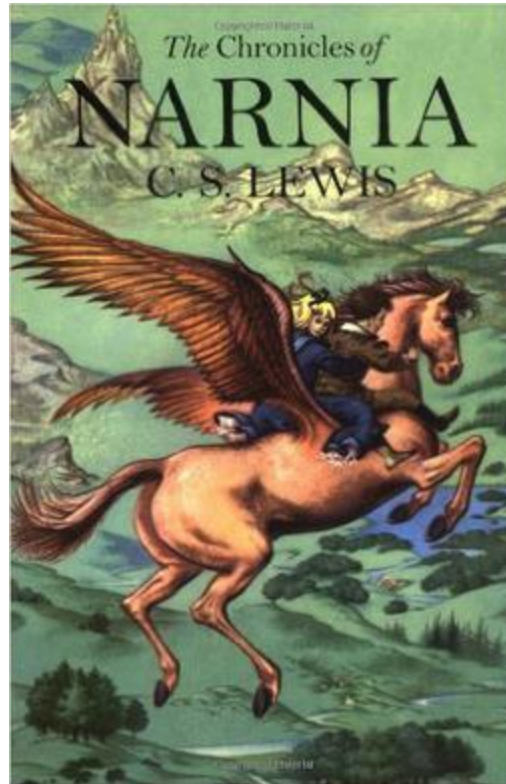


- "Among these stories there are a certain number which deal sympathetically with the adventures of robber, outlaws, and pirates, which present in a dignified and romantic light thieves and murderers like Dick Turpin... That is to say, they do precisely the same thing as Scott's Ivanhoe, Scott's Rob Roy, [and] Byron's Corsair... and a thousand more works systematically distributed as prizes and Christmas presents.... In the case of our own class, we recognize that this wild life is contemplated with pleasure by the young, not because it is like their own life, but because it is different from it. In this matter, as in all such matters, we lose our bearings entirely by speaking of the 'lower classes' when we mean humanity minus ourselves. This trivial romantic literature is not especially plebian: it is simply human."
- "It is the custom, particularly among magistrates, to attribute half the crimes of the Metropolis to cheap novelettes. If some grimy urchin runs away with an apple, the magistrate shrewdly points out that the children's knowledge that apples appease hunger is traceable to some curious literary researches... At any rate, it is firmly fixed in the minds of most people that gutter-boys, unlike everybody else in the community, find their principal motives for conduct in printed books... This is the magisterial theory, and this is rubbish."
- "In former centuries the educated class ignored the ruck of vulgar literature. They ignored, and therefore did not, properly speaking, despise it... To-day, however, we have reversed this principle. We do so despise vulgar compositions, and we do not ignore them. We are in some danger of becoming petty in our study of pettiness... This class of composition [penny dreadfuls] has presumably always existed, and must exist. It has no more claim to be good literature than the daily conversation of its readers to be fine oratory, or the lodging-houses and tenements they inhabit to be fine architecture. But people must have conversations, they must have houses, and they must have stories."



“ON THREE WAYS OF WRITING FOR CHILDREN” — C.S. LEWIS, 1952

- “Those who say that children must not be frightened may mean...that we must try to keep out of his mind the knowledge that he is born into a world of death, violence, wounds, adventure, heroism and cowardice, good and evil...[this] would indeed be to give children a false impression...There is something ludicrous in the idea of so educating a generation which is born to the...atomic bomb. Since it is so likely that they will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage. Otherwise you are making their destiny not brighter but darker.”



- “I think it possible that by confining your child to blameless stories of child life in which nothing at all alarming ever happens, you would fail to banish the terrors, and would succeed in banishing all that can ennoble them or make them endurable. For in fairy tales, side by side with the terrible figures, we find the immemorial comforters and protectors.”



THE POWER OF EVIL



CHRISTOPHER LEE IN HAMMER FILMS' "DRACULA" (1958)

"The first time you see Dracula, he is at the top of the stairs and in silhouette. The audience, the ones you want to laugh, start to laugh because they think they're going to see fangs, the eyes, and everything else. Dracula comes downstairs into close-up and they see this handsome, charming and totally attractive man. This was done with a purpose, not just to kid them but to show that the whole idea of evil is very attractive. It's one of the great cards that evil holds!"

– Terence Fisher, director of *Dracula*, 1958



THANK YOU! QUESTIONS?

