

Media insulate us from the truth

By Rory O'Connor

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Did you ever wonder what the media is trying to protect us from when they decide against allowing the use of certain images and words? Ever wonder if they may be more interested in protecting themselves – or the powers that be – instead of us?

Take those admittedly graphic images of charred bodies of Americans killed recently in the Iraqi hellhole of Fallujah. An Editor and Publisher survey showed that only seven of the 20 highest circulating newspapers displayed photos of the bodies on their front pages. Eight opted instead for a photo of a burning SUV. The Daily News showed Iraqis beating an SUV. The Arizona Republic and the Los Angeles Times showed Iraqis dancing in front of and atop a burned vehicle.

No bodies – but dancing Iraqis? Beating an SUV? Even in our car-crazed culture, using one as a stand-in for a human body seems inexplicably bizarre. What strange censorious logic led to those editorial decisions?

Similar questions arose again last week. This time the “offensive content” was words, not images. (Think Bono on the Golden Globes, or Howard Stern on Clear Channel, instead of Janet Jackson at the Super Bowl.) And think PBS, not CBS.

This latest skirmish in our unending culture war involves an independently produced documentary, “Every Child Is Born a Poet,” which explores the life and work of the renowned Piri Thomas, whose autobiographical novel *Down These Mean Streets* chronicled his coming-of-age in Spanish Harlem.

Thomas’s 1967 classic was hailed for its unflinching look at ghetto life and racism in America. It was also decried for obscenity, and banned from schools and libraries by the Supreme Court in the early 1970’s.

The decision was later overturned and the book hailed as a landmark in modern American literature for its sensitive treatment of issues like poverty, youth violence, imprisonment and racial identity. Language – always direct, often rough, and sometimes ‘obscene’ – is at the core of it. As Thomas intones at the film’s beginning, “Words can be

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bullets or butterflies. The truth uplifts, while lies destroy. So, say what you mean and mean what you say.”

So, imagine filmmaker Jonathan Robinson’s surprise when he was told – only twenty-four hours before broadcast – that his work would be censored and a host of ‘offensive’ words integral to his artistic vision would be bleeped out. Not just George Carlin’s infamous ‘Seven Dirty Words,’ but others as well, not mandated by the FCC, but deemed dangerous by the pusillanimous programmers of PBS, in the name of protecting the audience.

“Obviously, they kept me out of the loop, and tried to keep this quiet,” says Robinson. “After all, what could I do in 24 hours?”

Every one of the offending words was a literary excerpt. “Piri’s work is important and powerful precisely because of his use of language,” notes Robinson. “For someone who’s an artist like Piri, the use of obscene language is not gratuitous — it’s integral to his art.” The words are integral to Robinson’s art as well, and certain scenes in his film make no sense without them.

“We seem to be going backwards,” Robinson concludes. “Without the right words, we can’t really talk about what’s going on.”

To which I can only add – without the right images as well. But then, maybe that’s what we’re being ‘protected’ from.

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