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## Don't blame the devil this Halloween

By Thomas M. Sipos

web posted October 10, 2005

On December 7, 1982, Richard Delmer Boyer of El Monte murdered an elderly Fullerton couple, stabbing Francis Harbitz 24 times, his wife Aileen 19 times. During trial Boyer blamed his actions on drugs and horror films. Apart from consuming whiskey, speed, marijuana, and cocaine on the day of the murders, he said that while visiting the Harbitzes (his employers), he'd experienced an LSD flashback of *Halloween 2*, rendering him unable to distinguish between reality and the slasher film. Boyer was convicted in 1984 and again in 1992 (the first conviction having been overturned on appeal).

Boyer's excuse follows a long tradition of blaming the media in court. In 1928, Robert Williams killed his maid, saying he'd been possessed by a vision of horror actor Lon Chaney from *London After Midnight*. More recently, after the 1999 Columbine massacre, victims' families sued Time Warner, Palm Pictures, and 11 videogame makers, accusing *The Basketball Diaries* and the videogames Doom, Duke Nukem, and Redneck Rampage of contributing to Harris and Klebold's school shootings. *The Basketball Diaries*, the videogames Quake, Doom, and Castle Wolfenstein, and porn websites were also blamed for a less famous 1997 school shooting by gunman Michael Carneal.

Blaming the media rarely works in court, largely due to our First Amendment. Yet blaming Hollywood is no less rational than other "devil made me do it" defenses, whether the devil takes the form of drugs, guns, or psychological "syndromes." It's not that the devil in question hasn't influenced or facilitated the violent crime. It's that...so what?!

Media -- like drugs and guns and cars and much else -- can kill. Advertisers spend tens of billions yearly thinking that their 30 second ads will influence our behavior. Activists present media awards for positive plugs. Minority groups monitor the media to discourage negative portrayals of their constituents. Clearly, everyone believes that media influences behavior, so it's disingenuous whenever some media executive or star whines, "Hey, if you don't like it, just change the channel!" They only believe that until it's their pet group that's being gored.

The issue is not whether media affects behavior (of course it does), the issue is liberty. And that includes the freedom to consume whatever media -- and ingest whatever drugs, and possess whatever firearms -- one wishes. The flip side is

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responsibly. Rapists and murderers shall not be permitted to blame porn sites or slasher films or guns or psychological "syndromes" for their violent crimes. Even if drugs were involved. You don't ban horror films just because Boyer thought he was reenacting *Halloween 2*. Nor do you ban cars just because Texas housewife Clara Harris intentionally ran down and killed her husband. Nor do you ban drugs or guns just because some individuals misuse them.

Sure, Rosie O'Donnell may disagree. She's said that if banning guns "saves even one life" it'd be worth it. Yet banning all cars (emergency vehicles excepted) would result in vastly more lives saved -- but at what cost to liberty?

Unfortunately, Americans increasingly shun responsibility. They demand freedom, but when they misuse their freedoms they're quick to blame drugs (legal and illegal), guns, postpartum depression (Andrea Yates's excuse for murdering her children), videogames, porn sites, slasher films, Adopted Child Syndrome, Chronic Lateness Syndrome, UFO Survivor Syndrome (I'm not making those up; visit <http://faculty.ncwc.edu/toconnor/405/405lect02.htm> for dozens of "syndromes" used in American courtrooms so far), anything to evade blame.

Victims and their families often oblige criminals' ridiculous excuses, seeking the deeper pockets in the ensuing lawsuits. Lawyers and therapists likewise support this nonsense, the latter earning money as "expert witnesses" and scribblers of the next trend in psychobabble books. Worst of all, government is quick to intervene, eroding our freedoms in order to ban or regulate something else for the "safety of the children."

Do you wish to be free? Or do you just like the way it sounds when politicians say "freedom"? Because if we are to preserve our liberty, if we are to prevent government from transforming our society into a padded playpen for adults, where bad things are confiscated by the teacher but no child is punished for being bad, then we must demand that everyone take responsibility for their actions.

If the devil is omnipresent, if people are weak and prone to syndromes and easily forced by Satan to do bad things, then it follows that the state must be likewise omnipresent to protect us weak mortals. Conversely, free people can be trusted with grown-up things, like drugs and guns and explicit lyrics, because they control their own demons. [ESR](#)

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