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**What the !#&\* have values got to do with anything!  
Young people, youth culture and well-being**

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**Richard Eckersley\***

**When does freedom of speech and artistic expression become abuse of a precious right?**

Several years ago, in the summer of 1996-97, I was caught up in a passionate debate about obscenity in rock music lyrics. It began with an article I wrote for *The Australian* in which I argued that the extreme violence and obscenity in some rock music was perhaps - I was fairly tentative about this - one of the many ways in which the mass media were contributing to the creation of a culture of disillusion and demoralisation.

While I focused on one aspect of youth culture – rock music (which itself embraces several sub-cultures) – my purpose was to explore popular culture in general, some of its defining characteristics, and its impact on young people. In essence, my argument is that beneath the swirls and eddies of youth cultures runs the mainstream of modern Western culture; that this mainstream culture powerfully shapes youth culture and strongly influences young people; and that core elements of this culture threaten our well-being, especially that of young people, at both the personal and social level.

In a lengthy discussion on ABC radio the day this article appeared, Toby Cresswell, editor of the youth magazine, *Juice*, said I was a boring old fart tut-tutting about a bit of harmless rebellion by young people: just another re-run of the eternal conflict played out between conservative old fogies and spirited youth.

I posted the piece on YARN, the youth affairs research network on the Internet, and invited comment. Many supported my position (most privately). But I also came under strong attack from some who stressed the importance of freedom of speech and artistic expression, the relative nature of values, the virtues of cultural pluralism and diversity, and the legitimacy of youthful protest. A couple noted that obscene and misogynistic lyrics have been part of commercial rock music for decades, so what was new?

Barney Langford, artistic director of the 2 Til 5 Youth Theatre in Newcastle, NSW, argued that my article was “the latest in a long list of paranoid reactions to rock music and its influence upon young people”. He showed a good knowledge of rock history, and gave valid examples of past instances where adults worried about the impact of rock music on children and of the difficulty in deciding where to draw the line between what is considered acceptable and what is not.

Barney said: “Obscenity is relative. I find the treatment meted out to the Lost Generation and their families and the ideology which underpinned it obscene. Similarly I find the recent upsurge in bigotry and racial intolerance obscene, as is the Prime Minister's capitalising upon that bigotry and intolerance. I even find the overtly jingoistic and exploitative sentimentality of ‘I still call Australia home’ an obscenity, and the proliferation of golden arches is an obscenity I encounter on a daily basis. But that's me. Each person's response is different. Obscenity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. And this is fine until one person's or a small group's subjective idea of obscenity is imposed on the rest of us.

“Who draws the line between political/social comment and obscenity?... You see what we're seeing here is not a challenge to moral values, but an affront to an individual's aesthetic values. What is perceived as obscenity in the form of JJJ and Nine Inch Nails is just another set of aesthetic values; no better or worse than the aesthetic values held by a whole range of individuals and groups who inhabit this wide brown land of ours. They're just different. It's one of the major dividends which we get from having a diverse society.”

In reply, I said: “If Barney believes this - if each person's response reflects ‘just another set of aesthetic values’ that is ‘no better or worse’ than someone else's - why criticise the PM for doing nothing about Pauline Hanson's remarks? Why attack my point of view, especially with such outrage that I should express it? He implies I am attempting to impose my ‘subjective idea of obscenity’ on the rest of you. Isn't he doing the same in criticising it? Aren't Nine Inch Nails, Time Warner and Triple J imposing on us a subjective idea of what is obscene (or not obscene)? Isn't our society defined by an imposed and dominant set of values that promotes rampant individualism, materialism and consumerism? Sets of values cannot be insulated and isolated from each other; they interact, compete. That's what a dynamic society is.

“My set of aesthetic values allows me to try to persuade others of my point of view. Barney, on the other hand, betrays his in attacking mine because he believes one set is no better or worse than another. If we believe this, on what basis do we seek to change things, to right what we perceive to be wrong? If we believe this, why discuss anything, do anything? How do we avoid political and moral stagnation?”

Cultural relativism taken to this extreme is as wrong-headed as the other extreme - attempting to impose a single, uniform set of values on everyone - and, paradoxically, achieves a similar, dangerous result. The cultural authoritarian suppresses debate; the cultural relativist makes debate pointless. We often appear to assume there are only the two options, ignoring the rich ground between them. It is important we have the right to express different points of view, but when we argue that all points of view are equally valid and, by implication, that all should be allowed to prevail, then we have seriously lost the plot.

Both extremes undermine meaning because they devalue values and beliefs, which define how we relate to each other and the society and world in which we live. ‘Personalised’

values become another means by which the individual and his or her 'rights' are elevated above all other considerations. And they become another means by which the individual, inadvertently, becomes estranged from others, cocooned in personal opinions that need no external validation or justification.

In investing so much meaning in the individual 'self', we have left it dangerously exposed and isolated because we have weakened or lost the enduring personal, social and spiritual relationships and attachments that sustain us and give deeper meaning and purpose to our lives. Instead, our personal expectations rise ever higher - and often beyond reach - and even when attained, often fail to satisfy. In this and other ways, modern Western culture is failing to provide an adequate framework of hope, belonging, meaning and moral values in our lives, so weakening social cohesion and personal resilience. Among the consequences are low thresholds of boredom, emptiness, even despair - moods we hold at bay through the pursuit of distraction. It is no accident or surprise that consumerism thrives in such a culture.

The costs of modern Western culture are particularly evident among young people. They are most at risk because they are at that stage of life where they are confronting the questions whose answers culture powerfully influences: Who am I? What do I believe? Where do I belong? What is the purpose of my life?

The suicide rate for males aged 15-24 has more than tripled over the past 50 years, and among females in this age group it has about doubled (although it does not show the sustained increase seen in the male rate) (Eckersley 1997a, 1998). Although suicide remains a very rare event, it represents the tip of an iceberg of suffering, with recent studies showing that a fifth to a third of young people today experience significant psychological distress or disturbance.

Thus while tragedies such as suicide arise from intensely personal circumstances, they also represent the extreme end of a spectrum of responses by many young people to modern life. These range through degrees of depression, drug abuse, delinquency and suicidal ideation etc to a pervasive sense of alienation, disillusion and demoralisation (traits more likely to be expressed in passivity than through anger or anti-social behaviour).

Surveys of youth attitudes suggest many young people today are mistrustful, cynical and fatalistic; wary of commitment; outwardly confident but inwardly insecure; alienated and disconnected from society. They believe that life should be fast and fun; they are on their own; options should be kept open; governments are incapable of solving our problems; and they themselves are powerless to change things.

A 1996 international 'Teenmood' survey (I'm grateful to Mojo Australia, a member of the Mind and Mood consortium which undertook the study, for lending me a CD-ROM about it) reveals a global teen generation characterised by four moods: alienated, cynical, experimental and savvy. Of the first two moods, the study says: "Changes in traditional structures and values have resulted in global teen alienation from family and

society....Deep cynicism is the global teens' main defence against a lack of benchmarks, role models or credible authority. They don't trust adults; they don't trust the government; and (they) suspect that everyone has their own agenda."

Today's teens, it observes, expect little or nothing from the future. Of Australian teens, the study says in part: "(they) are not excited about much in life....(they) express a lack of direction....a sense of boredom exists because they feel there is not much to do or much they can afford....they're uncertain and apprehensive about the future....they feel life is harder and more competitive than in their parents' day."

In a similar vein, the Australian Commission for the Future (1996) found that young people believed Australian society lacked leadership, vision, clear morals or values, and had become a spiritual vacuum. The study also notes: "Youth seem unusually apathetic about the future. They are not negligent or ignorant of the challenges; they just feel powerless to do anything about it. It is a sense of being disenfranchised and disengaged, awaiting the outcome of events rather than anticipating a role in them."

The Australian Catholic Bishops' 1998 final report on its three-year consultation, *Young people and the future*, warns of "a malaise which is denying young people hope" (Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference 1998). "That malaise, though difficult to isolate and describe precisely, can best be described as a crisis of identity and meaning.... The danger to young people is not themselves, but the culture in which people live today. This largely nihilistic culture, dominant with negativity and images of rancour, hedonism and rage, has submerged the virtues of faith, hope and love."

There are other, more positive portraits of young people that emerge from youth studies and surveys, but the picture presented by the above examples is legitimate, if not complete (Eckersley 1997b). A recent study of young people's expected and preferred futures for Australia revealed a surprising capacity for idealism and altruism (Eckersley 1996). But the marked contrast between their dreams and expectations suggest a tension between the real and ideal in the hearts of young people today. They appear to be adopting attitudes and values they believe are demanded by the world they live in and the future they expect, not those needed to achieve the world they want.

The images of the world and ourselves that we see reflected in our culture - including, and perhaps especially, in the mass media - are of profound significance to us. They shape who we are and what we become. Those images should reflect important realities, but they should also reveal of what we are capable. They must combine realism and idealism, inspire as well as educate and entertain. They should never be so bleak that they demoralise and discourage us. Images of ourselves that dwell on human vices and failings ultimately destroy us.

I don't know which factors contribute most to our present culture of disillusion and meaninglessness. It may be that television is more important than rock music or youth literature (another area in which I have debated these issues); that fiction is less important than depictions of 'real life'; and that the media's promotion of a superficial, materialistic

and self-centred lifestyle does more harm than media violence. It may also be, as I suggested in *The Australian* article, that music provides a context to obscenity and violence that is different from that of film or literature. But any factor, taken in isolation, is easy to dismiss as insignificant relative to everything else. Taken together, however, they constitute a powerful, ubiquitous and often destructive influence.

Critics of this perspective sometimes give the impression that the greatest – even only – cultural hazard is to limit freedom of expression, that cultural content itself does little or no harm. If we accept this, then we must also believe that it does little or no good, that it is a marginal part of our lives. This is surely wrong. Culture shapes society and profoundly influences our lives. It has the capacity to do great good – or great harm. To say this is not necessarily to call for stricter censorship; I think the issue is far too subtle and complex for such a crude tool. But the media and other cultural forces – especially those directed at young people – should be subject to vigorous discussion about their roles and consequences – both good and bad - and that discussion reflected in media content.

As a society we must take responsibility for these consequences, and strive to ensure that the balance favours the positive. The risks of our failure to do this are a continuing cultural degradation, or a backlash that seeks the imposition of harsh and excessive control. Either outcome threatens young people and their well-being.

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working on aspects of progress and well-being. This paper is a shortened version of his contribution to *Australian Youth Subcultures: On the Margins and in the Mainstream*, edited by Rob White and to be published this year by the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.

## NO SURRENDER TO ROCK OF RAGES

**Parents often feel they are waging an undeclared war against the media for influence over their children's development.**

**Richard Eckersley**

My 10-year-old son got into trouble at school recently for telling another boy, in a heated exchange, to go suck a mate's cock. The boy reported him, he was put on detention for a week and the school rang my wife. Head bowed, my son explained to me that evening that he had wanted the other boy, who had said the same thing to him before, to know what it felt like to have someone say that to you.

The other week I heard on Triple J a song by Regurgitator that goes, "I've sucked a lot of cock to get where I am". I commented on it to my 16-year-old daughter. "It's figurative, dad," she said with a smile.

Did she find it offensive, I asked. No, because it wasn't said seriously, she replied, but there were some lyrics she didn't like, mentioning Nine Inch Nails. I asked her later to give me an example. This is a line from one of their songs: "I want to fuck you like an animal".

Nine Inch Nails' lyrics featured in a stormy meeting last year in New York between executives of Time Warner, the world's largest media company, and William J Bennett, co-director of the conservative advocacy organisation, Empower America, and his liberal ally, C DeLores Tucker, the chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women.

According to *The New Yorker* magazine, when the history of the fracas over media violence in the US is written, the meeting will be seen as pivotal. Tucker handed around copies of the lyrics of a song by Nine Inch Nails and asked Michael Fuchs, chairman of the Warner Music Group, to read them aloud. (At the time Warner Music half-owned the Interscope label on which Nine Inch Nails records.) Tucker asked three times and each time Fuchs refused. One of the Empower America delegates then obliged. This, in part, is what he read:

"Got me a big old dick and I/ I like to have fun/ held against your forehead/ I'll make you suck it/ maybe I'll put a hole in your head/ you know, just for the fuck of it/ I can reduce you if I want."

My first reaction on reading this was of surprise and dismay that this sort of stuff gets airplay. I remembered a youth researcher telling me several years ago that parents would be outraged if they knew the lyrics of some of the songs their children listened to. Then I thought, well, you get this language in any number of films or books these days; how is this any different?

Maybe there is no difference, and maybe it doesn't matter. The bad language seems to run off the kids like water off a duck's back. *I recall a support group for Pearl Jam during their tour last year - the Meanies, I think it was - screaming in one of their numbers, 'suck my cock, suck my cock'. If people reacted at all, they just laughed. A quarter of a century ago, at the Wallacia pop festival near Sydney, I heard a vocalist or two spatter their songs with the odd f-word, and I don't think it left me morally impaired.\**

There is a powerful temptation just to accept the moral ambiguity and ambivalence of society's attitudes to obscenity (and to so much else) as part and parcel of the postmodern world we live in.

My son, presumably, is learning to make some sense of a moral code which says that what is unacceptable at school and home is somehow okay in public broadcasting.

But maybe we shouldn't yield to this temptation too readily. Maybe there are real costs - and important differences between film, literature and music. First there is a question of access. Any child can tune in to Triple J (or any other radio station that plays this type of rock). Film guidelines may not mean much these days, but they do give parents the chance to control the films their children see.

But a more important difference concerns the context of the language. In film and literature, the obscenity is (mostly) part of a fictional narrative; it is easier to separate it morally from our personal lives and behaviour. This distinction may be harder to make in the case of music because it forms a more diffuse and integral part of our life, especially that of young people.

Obscenity encourages disrespect and disregard for others. It is usually used in abuse, often to add emphasis and menace to what is being said. As the Nine Inch Nails' lyrics show, the line between obscenity and violence is often very fine.

After the Time Warner meeting, Bennett wrote to the corporation's chairman and CEO, Gerald Levin (who had walked out of the meeting): "My recommendation is fairly straightforward. Time Warner should stop its involvement with and support of gross, violent, offensive and misogynistic lyrics. Anything short of that is, I think, an abdication of corporate responsibility."

Bennett and Tucker are continuing their campaign. They say Time Warner sold its stake in Interscope after months of intense public pressure. But they claimed this year that Time Warner - along with other major corporations such as Sony, PolyGram, EMI and BMG - were still marketing "vile and vicious music".

I have singled out rock music because it is often overlooked in the debate about the media and their impact, which has focused on television violence. It also demonstrates the extent to which our society now accepts the commercialisation and commodification of just about everything, from the most depraved act to the most intimate, from the most sublime joy to the most appalling suffering.

Permitted in the name of freedom of artistic expression, this cultural debasement is driven by the pursuit of profit. Its costs include a pervasive and corrosive cynicism, pessimism and alienation, especially among the young.

Like many parents and teachers, I suspect, I often feel I am waging an undeclared war against the media for influence over my children's development. Where we fight, I think we mostly win. But many adults have surrendered, worn out by the relentlessness of the struggle, the media's power, the many other demands on their time and energy, and their own moral confusion.

It should not be this way.

*\* Italicised section edited out in the published version.*