

## Latent Content of Television Viewing

This is the second of two papers by Fred Emery on this topic. The first contains a critical overview of the relevant literature from which a broad theory is developed. From this are derived the hypotheses which are tested empirically in the second paper.

To explore the latent meaning of television viewing and test the hypotheses of the theoretical study (Emery, 1959) a Western-type film was selected for showing to pre-adolescent boys on the grounds that it would be likely to create a high degree of attention and interest and thus magnify whatever effects there might be. Before selecting the particular film an analysis was made of the themes, characters and major actions of some hundred recent Western films as revealed in published synopses. This analysis showed two major types of Western: those in which action centered on the simple conflict of a good man and a bad man and those centered on a trio consisting of two men, one more socially powerful than the other, and a woman. The latter type of film, which might well be described as "Oedipal," constituted two-thirds of the sample. It was expected that the effect of a Western film would be related to the basic pattern it followed and the manner in which this pattern was worked out.

With these considerations in mind, *The Lone Hand* was selected. This film is not a typical Western. It differs significantly in that:

- it displays both of the typical patterns—the good-bad centered on the adult hero and the Oedipal centered on the child hero
- both patterns are worked out in an atypical fashion. The good-bad conflict has the formal successful outcome but the outcome follows more or less accidentally after the prolonged victory of evil. Throughout the body of the film the adult hero has renounced good and there exists no positive adult hero. The triadic conflict in this film has the quite common unsuccessful outcome (unsuccessful in that the hero renounces his Oedipal strivings) but is worked out with more than the usual amount of violence towards the hero. The qualities of a nightmare are involved in one

\*A shortened and rewritten version of the second of two original papers—*Human Relations*, 12:215–32, 1959.

particular sequence on a cliff face in which the child hero is attempting to escape being killed by a shadowy figure who he thinks is his father.

These differences were considered important to our study. The first made it possible to study what personality factors lead a child to experience the film as one of the patterns rather than the other. The preponderance of "evil forces" (although there was not a single censorable act of sadism or lust) made it more likely that the audience would show some changes. The presence of the boy as the story-teller and as a central character added to the likelihood of the audience becoming involved and also provided an alternative hero for identification.

A large number of techniques were considered for measuring psychological changes in the audience. The final selection was dictated by the hypotheses underlying the study. It was held that within the normal range of personality differences to be found in four school classes of boys (43 boys in all), even though of similar age (10 to 13 years) and from homes of similar socio-economic status (lower-middle and working class), *there would be no consistent shift in the direction or degree of aggression*. This hypothesis was contrary to that put forward in the experimental studies of Siegel (1956), Maccoby (1956), and Albert (1957). Each of these had predicted, in line with Feshbach's (1955) "Hypothesis of equivalence of forms" that there would be a reduction in expression of aggression and anxiety about aggression due to watching films of violence. Their own studies had failed consistently to show such effects and it seemed most unlikely, on psychological grounds, that such a prediction could be made without specifying certain personality factors. It did seem feasible to predict that viewing the film *would increase (at least temporarily) the child's feelings of being confronted by a dominating and hostile environment*. This prediction was based on the assumption that the child in identifying himself with either hero in the film (or with both at different times) will vicariously experience the anxieties, frustrations, temptations, etc., of the hero and will also experience the environment in much the same way as it confronts the hero. Thus, if the hero experiences a harsh, depriving environment then so to some extent will the person identifying with him. If the hero adopts a defiant, aggressive stance toward this environment so, to some extent, will the person identifying with him. However, when one considers how the film experience might carry over into the person's ordinary life, the immediate problem is the lack of congruence between this life and the manifest world of the film. In the film world one may in identifying with the hero strongly wish to draw a gun on and kill the villain, but in the real world there is no such villain, no gun, and an absence of the concerns impelling the film hero to violence. It is in the latent content of the film that one finds a certain congruence and hence the greatest chance of carrying over into real life. Although the actions and concrete circumstances of the Western film are markedly different from those

of everyday life they still involve basic features such as the general relations of men to their own actions and desires, to other men, and to the social environment at large. It is very likely that it is because of the manifest differences that the film can work out these basic problems and yet retain and entertain its audiences.

On these grounds more specific hypotheses were set up about the psychological changes likely to be produced by *The Lone Hand*.

### *"Heroes" and Themes*

*The Lone Hand* contains the two themes:

- good versus evil (a dyadic pattern basically composed of super-ego versus id type forces),
- young male competing for female with older male (what will be called the "triadic pattern" or Oedipal theme).

The basic psychological problems of boys from 10 to 13 in the Australian culture (as in American, British and most such societies) are those of controlling their own asocial tendencies and directing their interests and energies into socially approved activities (Piaget, 1932; Havighurst, 1952). This problem is persistent and significant because, at this period, children are being coerced into work relations at school; they are being forced to order their lives and control their own desires in terms of the "performance principle" of a work-centered repressive society (cf. Marcuse, 1956). Internally, this problem will be reflected in a conflict of super-ego, ego and id type forces (cf. Chein's definitions, 1944).

On the other hand, the Oedipal problem will not be characteristic of boys at this age. Generally speaking, this type of problem will have been resolved at or about the school-starting age and will not be relevant again until adolescence.

It was predicted that viewers would tend to prefer those themes that are most similar to their own basic problems. In this instance the specific prediction was that *the boys would interpret the film in terms of the good-bad theme, not the triadic theme.*

To test this hypothesis the boys were asked, on the morning immediately following the televised viewing (it was not possible to fit this test into the afternoon's experimental session owing to the length of the film) and again a month later, to write down the story of the film as they would tell it to a friend who had not seen it. They were further instructed to keep the story to about a page in length and to mention only those things that they thought important.

These instructions were adopted because previous experience had shown

TABLE I Attributed Themes (First Recall)

<i>Theme</i>	<i>No. mentioning theme (N = 42)</i>
Good vs. bad only	18
Both	8
Triadic only	2
None	14

that many children of this age could recall almost every incident after twenty-four hours. The notion of "what they would tell a friend" may have introduced a bias toward conformity.

These selective recalls were analyzed for evidence of the two themes. The first theme was regarded as present in a recall if the points were made that "Zachary turned outlaw, and then caught the outlaws": the second theme of creating and maintaining the family circle received very few adequate mentions so it was decided to regard this theme as present in a recall if Sarah received any mention in an active role. Even though this scoring procedure tended to overestimate the second theme, the hypothesis was upheld. It might be asked whether the method of first recall (basically selection not recall) affects subsequent recall in that without this, the other matters might well have persisted better in memory (in fact, a slight reverse tendency was observed).

In keeping with this is the fact that by the second recall only five boys mentioned any one of the four incidents that were central to the working out of the Oedipal theme:

- Zachary's outburst of rage against his son
- The pursuit of Joshua on the cliff face by a man he believed to be his father
- The boys releasing the pigeons into the church with the threatened consequence of breaking up the Zachary-Sarah relation
- Sarah leaving the home

There can be little question but that these had a strong impact at the moment of viewing. The first two incidents and the last involved strong dramatic tensions and the third was the main item of comic relief (this impact is reflected in the photographs taken of the children at the critical point of each incident). The reason for ignoring these incidents in the recall seems, therefore, to be not simply failure to notice but subsequent rejection of them as not fitting in with the first theme.

It was predicted that a boy who is having difficulty in maintaining an adequate balance among his id, ego and super-ego forces will be primarily

concerned, at the phantasy level of film-viewing, with identifying with Zachary and vicariously experiencing the satisfaction of achieving such a balance rather than with submitting to the induced forces of the film, toward identification with Joshua, and experiencing additional challenges to his adequacy: i.e., *the more unbalanced boys will tend to identify with Zachary.*

Evidence of "unbalance," in the sense used above, was sought in the extreme scores (top and bottom quartiles) of extrapunitive and ego-defensiveness and low scores in the Group Conformity Rating (GCR) as measured by the Picture-Frustration Test. (Note that there are some serious doubts about the consistency of the GCR measure, see Lindzey and Goldwyn, 1953/1954.)

As predicted, extreme scores on extrapunitive were significantly related to selection of Zachary as primary identificant ( $p < .01$ ;  $p < .05$ , with age held constant as age correlated with choice of hero and the older boys' tendency to have extreme scores on extrapunitive). Low GCR scores were related to selecting Zachary ( $p < .05$ , age unrelated to GCR score). Ego-defensiveness showed no such relation.

Despite the evidence for this hypothesis there may well be other explanations. One possible alternative is that Zachary is selected not because of the latent problems of the viewers but because of the appeals of the manifest level of the successful Western man of action—shooting, riding and fighting (cf. Elkin, 1950). These features are in fact what the boys said they liked about Western films in general but no particular value can be placed on such "reasons." In line with this hypothesis, of "interest in action" *per se*, one might expect that those who are most extraverted would tend to identify with Zachary. Taking regularity of contact with peers and engaging in active pursuits (as against reading, viewing and other passive pursuits) as evidence of extraversion there is no evidence in this sample that it is related to selection of "hero."

The evidence so far considered suggests that personality factors will affect choice both of heroes and of themes. In this respect also it suggests some of the ways in which individuals may protect themselves from film content that would otherwise be psychologically disturbing.

### *Psychological Changes*

Three main hypotheses were postulated:

1. that viewing *The Lone Hand* would produce no consistent shift in the sample of the direction or degree of their aggressive tendencies (as measured by the Rosenzweig Picture-Frustration Test);
2. that viewing *The Lone Hand* would, at least temporarily,
  - (a) create the feeling of being threatened by a powerful and hostile environment, and

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- (b) encourage the viewer to take an "active posture" toward these "dangers";
- 3. that the memories of *The Lone Hand* would tend to be assimilated to a stereotype of the Western action film.

The first hypothesis was not a central proposition in the theory held by the author as most likely to account for psychological changes in the viewing situation. It was given major importance because it has been *the* hypothesis that has guided recent experimental work in this field (Maccoby, 1956; Siegel, 1956; Albert, 1957). Despite the theoretical guise that this hypothesis has been given, it appears to have come from the "common-sense" belief that films displaying violence have somehow or another contributed to or modified the display of aggression by children in modern societies. Two formulations have been current and are reflected in the experimental studies: (a) that viewing films of violence vicariously satisfies aggressive tendencies and thus serves as a "safety valve" (Siegel and Maccoby); (b) that such viewing arouses aggressive tendencies (Albert). It is sufficient at the moment to note that the related experimental studies failed to show any such consistent relation between viewing films of violence and aggressive tendencies. Theoretically it is difficult to see how one could predict any such consistent relationship without specifying those personality factors of the viewer which mediate between viewing and subsequent psychological changes, a point that Maccoby makes in considering the contradictory results of her two experiments. It may well be that these personality factors are so distributed in samples such as those used as to cancel out the different individual responses.

The Picture-Frustration Test (Child Form) (P-F) was administered to each group one week before viewing and again within ten minutes after viewing. Scoring was according to Rosenzweig's categories. To minimize effects of bias no scoring was done until all records, both "before" and "after" tests, were to hand. Each of the twenty-four test items was then scored right through all records—this minimized the effect of scoring bias on the "between-test" and "between individual" difference. The order of analysis of the twenty-four items was randomized so as to avoid a systematic bias between the earlier and later items in the test (the type of item differs between the first and second half of the test). Although cumbersome and rather time-consuming, these procedures were deemed necessary in the absence of another person to do a lengthy check analysis. It seems reasonable to assume that errors arising from the scorer's idiosyncrasies and from temporal shifts in his judgments were so distributed as not to affect the significance of the differences reported below.

Comparison of the "before-after" scores on the P-F revealed a small but significant increase in extrapunitiveness (mean "before" score = 13.4; mean "after" score = 14.5;  $t=3.06$  [Edwards, 1950:286]; for  $df=43$ ,  $p<.01$ ). How-



ever, this difference is not significantly larger than would be expected if no viewing had occurred. Repeated administrations of the Picture-Frustration Test have consistently shown an increase in amount of extrapunitive behavior of this order (Zuk, 1956; French, 1950; Franklin and Brozek, 1949). The same has been shown in related tests such as Albert's adaptation of the P-F test and in doll play. As Siegel and Zuk have experimentally demonstrated, this phenomenon arises from the testee experiencing the test situation as being increasingly permissive of aggressive expression. Siegel states that "the young child becomes accustomed to looking to adults for cues as to what behaviour is appropriate or acceptable, particularly in a situation which is unfamiliar to him. From a permissive adult's behaviour, the child may legitimately conclude that aggression *is* acceptable in a play session, and, therefore, he will give increasing expression to his own aggressive motivation." Evidence of this process was observed in this study. In each of the "before viewing" administrations several boys asked whether the instructions meant that they could really write down anything or whether the teachers would see what they had written. In the second and freer entertainment situation only one boy of the three groups asked a similar question and the language used in the test was noticeably "freer."

Thus *there are no grounds for rejecting the first hypothesis.*

As this finding is in line with those of Siegel, Maccoby and Albert it seems unnecessary to center any further studies on the aggression hypothesis in this crude form: it may be possible to resurrect it when something more is known of the psychological processes involved in viewing particular themes.

The second hypothesis is based on the argument that a boy who identifies with either the boy or the adult hero in this film will tend to experience a shift in what has elsewhere been described as his silent framework. It is suggested that as "self-cum-hero" the viewer is unconsciously living out his problem of controlling his asocial tendencies in a social environment that threatens to punish lack of control and rewards successful control (the other theme in this picture, the Oedipal one, is not considered because it apparently did not exist for the sample). In this film the problem is depicted in such a way that the asocial forces appear to be of unmanageable proportions; even Zachary, the adult hero, explicitly renounces the "performance principle" and spends the greater part of the film in active alliance with the asocial forces. The "successful" moral outcome to the film is depicted as a chance occurrence and hence, while it gives further force to the repeated suggestion that this "alliance with evil" is an unsatisfactory solution to the problem, it does little to modify the impression of the great strength of the asocial forces. Thus the direction of shift in the silent framework of these boys was expected to be in the direction of *increasing (at least temporarily) their feelings of being threatened by a powerful and hostile environment.* As measured by responses to a Thematic Apper-

TABLE 2 Effect on Circumstances Depicted in TAT Story

"After" story judged as:	No. of cases	
	Judge A	Judge B
Worse	34	31
About the same	5	8
Better	5	5

ception Test picture, it was predicted that *the stories given immediately after viewing would differ from those given immediately before viewing in depicting the story hero as subjected to a more powerful actively hostile environment*. At the level of consciousness it was predicted that the underlying shift would be reflected in the increased expression of a negative mood in the "after" stories (i.e., increased pessimism).

These predictions were in line with the effects that Crandall (1951) experimentally demonstrated in his study on "Induced Frustration and Punishment-Reward Expectancy in Thematic Apperception Stories." The TAT was selected after consideration of a number of alternatives on the grounds that any shift was likely to be at the unconscious level and hence would be detected only by a projective test. This test provides evidence of how an individual unconsciously relates himself to others and it also provides an indication of the prevailing consciously felt mood (this latter being one of the conscious reflections of the psychological changes induced by viewing). As this study was concerned only with exploring the hypothesis only one TAT card was used, 13B, showing a little boy sitting on the doorstep of a log cabin. Further cards could not have been used without discarding the P-F test needed for testing the first hypothesis.

Several levels of analysis of the "before" and "after" stories given by the boys supported the hypothesis. At the simplest level, each pair of stories was compared by two psychologists (working independently, without knowledge of which was before and which after, and with the order of presentation randomized). The comparison was based on "Which of the two stories depicts the boy in the worse circumstances?"—judgments of equality were allowed. This shift can be taken as some evidence of a change in the unconscious attitude of an individual: it being assumed that the TAT story is a projection of the individual's own "silent framework" (Table 2).

The nature of the shift is partly elaborated by the classification of the stories shown in Table 3.

This clearly supports the prediction that viewing would create, at least temporarily, the feelings of being faced with a more powerful and hostile

TABLE 3 Responsibility for Outcome in TAT Stories

	<i>As willed by hero</i>	<i>As willed by others</i>	
		<i>For hero</i>	<i>Against hero</i>
"Before" story	17	6	18
"After" story	5	5	31

3 stories unclassifiable. For  $a \times b$ ,  $\chi^2 = 7.45$ ;  $p < .01$

environment. Significantly more frequently the fate of the hero of the story is seen as determined by outside forces, regardless of what he does.

It is difficult to get from these same stories an independent measure of mood, since the same features partly contribute to the first judgment. The following table should therefore be judged in this light. This gives some evidence of a shift in mood that supports the earlier prediction of increased pessimism.

It should be noted that no significant difference in effects existed between those identifying with Zachary and those identifying with Joshua. This may simply be due to the levelling-out effect of the more unbalanced boys, who might be expected to be more influenced, identifying with Zachary and hence avoiding the potentially stronger impact of the film. This might be tested in a study of a film having only one hero. Alternatively, Albert (1957) has suggested, regarding his own failure to observe any relation between identification and aggressiveness (changes in extrapunitive behavior), that the relation exists at an unconscious level and acts too slowly to be observed in a single film. It is doubtful whether Albert's measured differences in aggressiveness are psychologically meaningful or his questions on identification direct enough.

As suggested by Hypothesis 2(b), the film was not expected to have an entirely one-sided effect. In heightening the awareness of, and concern for, the dangers inherent in man's relation to himself and his fellows the film also depicts a solution—a posture that the individual can take *vis-à-vis* his hostile environment. This *posture of action* is reiterated throughout, and as "self-cum-

TABLE 4 Number of Stories Mentioning at Least One Unit of Positive Behavior (Gratification, Succorance, Etc.)

	<i>Mentioning</i>	<i>Not mentioning</i>
"Before" stories	20	24
"After" stories	7	37

( $\chi^2 = 7.7$ ,  $p < .01$ )

hero" the viewer vicariously experiences the need for and the ego-defensive value of the posture.

Unfortunately no *systematic* evidence was collected regarding this hypothesis. It was not even clear what psychological tools would be of use.

Some incidental evidence appears in the TAT stories. Although there was a general change toward perceiving the environment as hostile and dominant, *the hero was depicted as more active*. In 10 of the "before" stories and in 22 "after" stories the boy was depicted as actively trying to change or defend his situation. Consistent with the first hypothesis, the increased activity was not that of uninstigated aggression (aggression against an adult figure occurred in 15 of the "before" stories and 18 of the "after" stories).

*The Lone Hand* is probably different in emphasis from the stereotyped Western in that it gives rather more emphasis to the hostile environment and less emphasis to the posture of action. It has in common with all Westerns this stereotyped pattern of endlessly and repetitiously saying "Beware" and offering always the same answer, not "take care" but "take action." *This similarity should lead to the memory traces of The Lone Hand being readily assimilated to the existing stereotype* (Hypothesis 3). Comparison of recall one day after and a month later gives some support for this hypothesis. At the final recall the story had been boiled down to "a man who joined the outlaws then caught them." As already noted, only five boys mentioned any one of the four incidents that were central to the Oedipal theme and to that extent not typical of the stereotyped, good versus evil Western. An analysis of the number of times each incident was mentioned in conjunction with the older incidents (using McQuitty's [1957] method of simple linkage analysis) revealed that the core pattern of recalled incidents was the ambush of the wheat wagon and the ambush of the mule train, with the latter as the connecting link to recall of other incidents. This stereotyping can be expected to lessen the effects due to peculiarities of the particular film. Where, as in this case, there is a rather heavier emphasis upon environmental threats, the anxiety that might thus be temporarily generated would tend to be offset by these memory changes (just as in the viewing situation the more unbalanced boys protected themselves, to some extent, by identifying with Zachary).

On the other hand, the similarity of these films should enable each to contribute to those cumulative psychological effects associated with the stereotype. Thus it may be that the problem of "cumulative effects" is primarily a question of the establishment of unconscious assumptions about one's relation to the world and of adopting postures of the sort implicit in the stereotyped themes. The present study was not primarily designed to throw light on the nature and effect of these stereotypes, but some data were collected on attitudes to the various themes and media. It was predicted that those boys most "addicted" to the Western theme (as expressed in preferences for films, com-

ics and television) would be more ready to adopt the posture of the hero. This prediction was upheld in that these boys showed significantly more increase in ego-defensiveness (as measured by the P-F) after viewing than did the other boys ( $p < .01$ ). It is not clear what "readiness to adopt" means in this context: among the alternatives it may be that the addicts identify more thoroughly or that the same degree of identification sets off stronger existing internal psychological processes. There is some evidence for the former hypothesis in that these "addicts" were significantly less inclined to see their outside world as more hostile and dominating after viewing (as measured by the TAT story:  $p = .06$ ). That is, it would seem that the stronger pre-existing stereotype enabled them more readily to offset the environmental threats by making with the hero the appropriate postural changes toward greater ego-defensiveness. This ego-defensiveness is not aggressiveness but the tendency to take defensive action. As Ichheiser (1950) has made clear, this behavior is frequently interpreted by others, from their own standpoint, as aggressiveness. While the heightened ego-defensiveness may not persist for long after viewing it does seem likely that the potency of this posture (habit-strength) would tend to become slightly stronger relative to other alternative postures. Further work on this problem would probably entail a close study of the reactions of specially selected samples of addicts to their favorite theme and some more adequate conceptualization and measurement of the notions of silent framework, stereotype and posture.

### Summary

The following may be regarded as the main findings of this study:

- That the psychological significance of Western films is due primarily to *latent* themes of an Oedipal or good versus bad (super-ego versus id) type and not to the manifest themes.
- That pre-adolescent boys will be attracted by the good versus bad pattern.
- That viewing a film involves some selective processes (of identification and of interpretation) whereby the viewer defends himself from anxiety-arousing aspects of the film.
- That certain temporary changes may be brought about in the way in which an individual sees himself in relation to his social environment.
- That these changes do not appear to involve systematic changes in aggressive drives.
- That in line with changes in his self-perceptions the individual will tend correspondingly to adopt the posture or pose of the hero.

These findings cannot be regarded as firmly established, but the evidence justifies their adoption as working hypotheses for further studies.

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