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# Boobs, boxing, and bombs: Problematizing the entertainment of Spike TV

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## ABSTRACT

*Spike is the only television network in North America “for men.” Its motto, “Get more action,” is suggestive of pursuits of various forms of violence. We conceptualize Spike not as trivial entertainment, but rather as a form of pop culture that erodes the gains of feminists who have challenged the prevalence of normalized hegemonic masculinity (HM). Our paper highlights themes of Spike content, and connects those themes to the literature on HM. Moreover, we validate the identities and lives of men who cannot or refuse to subscribe to the pressures of hegemonic masculinity.*

Spike TV is an entertainment brand dedicated to men. It is a destination that inspires men through bold, action-packed original entertainment.

- Cabletelevision Advertising Bureau, 2008

Television is one component of a vast and expanding media complex that masquerades as harmless entertainment. Bourdieu (2006) argued that on television, everything becomes very ordinary and that television, “smooths things over, brings them into line, and depoliticizes them” (328). Though much of television is often characterized as harmless “junk” or pablum (Postman 1985), we, in line with media critics such as Kellner and Share (2007) and Leistyna and Alper (2007), find that such perspectives are naïve and pave the road for corporate influence on society, with little resistance. Dismissing television, particularly its junk, as mere entertainment obscures its power to influence societal norms of ideology and behavior (Steinberg 2007). Rather than being harmless, television constitutes what Potter (2003) describes as a “process of influence” (53) in society, meaning that its effects are incremental, perpetual, and varied. Bridging from Bourdieu, we insist that television, even as pablum, operates as a form of mass education and thus must be taken seriously and read critically.

According to Giroux (1999) and Macedo (2007), media, including television, have become the primary venue of education, eclipsing family and school. Media shape values, meanings, and norms (Giroux 1999; Kellner & Share 2007). We contextualize media in general and television in particular as a form of *public pedagogy* (Giroux 1999), which Kellner and Share (2007) describe as “the influential role that broadcasting and emergent information and computer media play in organizing, shaping, and disseminating information, ideas, and values” (3). Drawing from Hall’s work on cultural studies (see, for instance, Hall 1980), Giroux argues that pedagogy is foundational to cultural production, as practice and politics. For Giroux (2004), media are components of broader cultural politics that have been co-opted by corporate power, shaped by neoliberal, market-driven ideology. He describes public pedagogy as “a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain” (497). Media, then, bear influence on society not only by shaping ideas and perspectives, but also by doing so in the context of broader, increasingly concentrated corporate interests.

Framed as public pedagogy, media’s escalating connection with violence and aggression is worrisome since it has the potential to influence cultures of violence in contemporary society (Bushman & Anderson 2001; Huesmann 2007). Media conveys and implicitly idealizes particular ideas, ideologies, norms and values. This includes violence as a way to assert power and control over others. Since Katz (in Jhally 1999) points out that men perpetrate the overwhelming majority of physical violence in contemporary North American society<sup>1</sup>, we cast our critical eye on Spike in its commodification of masculinized violence as entertainment. We focus on Spike because it has claimed to be, as its former slogan stated, “the first network for men.” We contextualize Spike as public pedagogy and theorize how Spike’s programming might be implicated in the broader culture of normalized violence at the hands of boys and men.

While acknowledging that women and girls also subscribe to the ideology of a culture of masculinization, this paper focuses on the hegemonic masculinity (HM) of boys and men as reinforced through popular media. Connell (1995) defines HM as a “culturally idealized form of masculine character” (p. 83). Although a contested concept, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out that masculinities are dynamic, and thus understandings of HM must shift in accordance with understandings of gender dynamics and social hierarchy. Importantly, historically as well as contemporarily, HM is not “normal” in the sense that it is enacted by a majority of men, but it is indeed normative:

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities.

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<sup>1</sup> murder (85%), physical assault (90%), domestic violence (95%), dating violence (95%), child sexual abuse (95%), and rape (99.8%)

Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (832).

Further, while men of colour, gay men and women may perform aggressive forms of masculinity, they tend to lack institutional and social power that reinforces HM (Chen 1999).

### *Entertaining Spike*

Spike is an American television network that premiered in 1983 as *The Nashville Network*, becoming Spike TV in 2003. In 2006, its name and motto were both changed; the network became "*Spike: Get More Action.*" According to the Spike website, the network is part of a broader MTV Networks family of brands, which is itself a part of the Viacom multinational media conglomerate, that includes MTV, VH1, Nickelodeon, Comedy Central, TV Land, CMT, Spike, and Logo. "As one of the largest global television networks," it boasts, "MTV Networks reaches over 1 billion people worldwide" (<http://spike.com/about/>). The primary viewing audience resides in North America and the targeted demographic is young men aged 18-34. According to the research firm Borrell Associates, this demographic is highly prized by advertising and entertainment executives, yet are somewhat hard to reach because they do not tend to read newspapers or listen to radio and they tend to have short attention spans (Moresco 2008). However, as Spike's advertising and executives no doubt know, this demographic does watch TV and surf the Internet. With both its television and Internet forms, Spike seems to have tailored their programming accordingly.

A perusal of the Spike website ([spike.com](http://spike.com)) and television programming reveals a buffet of superficiality that men purportedly desire. These "wants" range from sexual titillation induced by such shows as *Playmate Show and Tell*, where Playmates provide advice on topics such as: "How to throw a Super Bowl party," "How to get your girlfriend into video games," and "How to buy lingerie for your girlfriend" to meat-focused cuisine glorified by the program, *Food Dude*, where men are introduced to recipes such as "Hawaiian Cheesesteak," "Cold Pizza Sandwich," "Chili Con Corndogs," and "Dirt Pie." Other so-called desires include advice column-esque programming such as *MANswers*, where men opt for advice on questions like: "What are your chances of getting laid today?" "How do blondes make you dumber?" "How much beef jerky can you get from one cow?" "What's the secret to improving your urinal aim by 80%?" And, "How cold do you have to be to freeze your balls off?"

Media such as Spike glorify and sensationalize violence but deflect their complicity in perpetuating cultures of normalized male violence by hiding behind the veneer of “entertainment.” We suggest that the veneer of “entertainment” disguises the harmful effects of media disseminated violence and thus is a central factor in perpetuating and ideologically justifying the violence of men. The belief that “it’s just entertainment” is an ideological position that maintains the status quo of normalized male violence, free of thought or consideration of consequences. Spike emphasizes brawn and hyper-masculinity over introspection, analysis, and critical thought (Akers 2005). In the case of Spike, such anti-intellectualism is one of the central factors that underlie the network’s emphasis on strength, force, brutality, and bravado (Akers 2005). The argument that television bears an influence upon society means necessarily that television is fundamentally educational even while networks such as Spike are anti-intellectual.

Guided by Kellner and Share’s (2007) claim that media “require the development of critical media literacy to empower students and citizens to adequately read media messages . . . to be active participants in a democratic society” (3), we cast a critical lens upon Spike as a purveyor of particular kinds of messages that reflect, perpetuate, and construct particular kinds of social relations. We view Spike as a venue which valorizes particular performances of masculinity at the expense of others, repeatedly and normatively, endorsing these privileged performances. A quick glance at Spike programming, for instance, reveals a multitude of ways in which violence is legitimized through men’s “entertainment”, normalizing the subjugation of women and justifying violence as a reasonable and, at times, necessary response to conflict. Such social relations are evident in the motto, *Get more action*. We discuss how this *action* occurs in three significant domains, sex, sports, and violence (metaphorically, boobs, boxing, and bombs) which are normalized through encouragements for men to *get more* of each.

### *More boobs*

At first glance, the encouragement to “get more” boobs may not be readily apparent as a form of masculinized violence; however, through the lens of *dismember-ship* the link becomes glaringly obvious. We define *dismember-ship* as a gendered practice that describes the manner in which the physical dismemberment, ritual and symbolic consumption of women’s bodies continues to maintain men’s privilege and women’s subservience. Similarly, we define objectification to be a social relation by which women are used for men’s pleasure, and through which specific sexualized body parts are displayed and consumed, as though a ritual of symbolic cannibalism. The parallel quest to “get more” sex is also masculinized violence in the form of male dominance over women as the phrase “nail her” is commonly used to describe sexual conquests of heterosexual men over women. This terminology was not lost on the promoters of Spike who chose a name that

harkens a phallic symbol of strength and might. Spikes, leather, chains and whips are accessories strongly associated with sex that is laden with violence and domination. Spikes are, after all, objects that are long, hard and used for violent penetration to forcefully hold something in place.

In both its online and television forms, combined with advertisements of products sold by the companies that sponsor the network, sex clearly abounds – or *should* abound, if one is a *real* man. Their brand of sexuality is a particular kind of male adolescent heterosexual sexuality that is fascinated, if not obsessed, with breasts. It is fixated almost entirely on the heterosexual pleasure of men; it is a sexuality that portrays women as sexual objects fulfilling the sexual pleasures of men. In the animated series *Stripperella*, for instance, Erotica Jones is a secret agent and a stripper who looks like and is voiced by Pamela Anderson, quite possibly the quintessential example of a breast-enhanced woman. Whether stripper or superhero, Erotica's breasts, always on display through thin, tiny pieces of material that stretch around her curves and enhance the outline of her nipples, are used to compel men to lose complete control of their salivary glands. Their eyes pop out; their tongues droop and drip. Other women are literally thrown aside by men who want to ogle Erotica for as long as they can. Erotica is meant to personify adolescent boys' masturbatory heterofantasies, even if she exists only in cartoon form.

*Stripperella* is only one example of men's dominance of women through the selling of (enhanced) body parts, such as breasts. Objectification of women in men's entertainment is not new. Print media technologies opened the floodgates to a range of men's magazines such as *Playboy*, generating enormous profits for Hugh Hefner, among others. This type of *dismember*-ship has been big business ever since, capitalizing on the fetishization of breasts. Spike adds to such normalization through TV and web venues that are easily accessible and this normalization carries over into schools. Pascoe (2007) describes how many young men comment openly on the breasts and anatomy of female classmates. Remarks about young women's "racks" are often made in a way that is intended to be flirtatious, even erotic, even if to the detriment of young women and their sense of being in a classroom. Such subject-object relations have become normalized through repetition and social expectations about boys' and men's heteronormativity (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005). Pascoe (2007), building on Rich's (1986) *compulsory heterosexuality* claims that *compulsive heterosexuality*, "a constellation of sexualized practices, discourses, and interactions" (86), operates to maintain gender inequality. This normalization project compels many young women to "quietly put up with boys' daily practices of compulsive heterosexuality" (105) or to treat such attention as normal or even flattering. By contributing to this normalization project, Spike compounds the socialization of norms that teach boys and men that girls and women are passive sexual objects whose value is measured by the praise and attention acquired from boys and men.

### *More boxing*

Another key aspect of Spike programming is sports. Spike does not broadcast events such as hockey, basketball, and football games that might be shown on *The Sports Network* (TSN). Instead, Spike offers a new and wildly popular form of competition that merges wrestling with martial arts known as *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC), adding to sports cultures that idolize and help construct HM (Messner 1990). We have chosen to discuss UFC (and its various forms) apart from other kinds of violence on Spike (the focus of the next section) because of its popularity and how it is prominently promoted on the Spike network and website.

UFC is a form of wrestling that, circa 1993, originally had few rules and was branded as *no-holds-barred*. Fighters battle each other inside eight-sided steel cages. Today, promoters strive to position UFC as a legitimate sporting event by incorporating more regulations and branding it more innocuously as *mixed martial arts*. The label “mixed martial arts” has enabled the proliferation of UFC-style clubs for children. According to Shimo (2008), the numbers of mixed martial arts clubs is increasing in Canada, and children are often able to start when they are as young as eight, and even as young as three. In most of British Columbia, mixed martial arts are, as Parry (2009) characterizes them, “underground endeavour[s] where rules are sometimes optional, blood flows freely, and fighters go unpaid to get around the law” (A15). Mixed-martial arts have eclipsed boxing and wrestling as the most popular combat sport of young men (Lafayette & Hibberd 2006).

UFC matches are typically violent, brutal, and bloody. During the so-called Freedom Fight 2005 in Montreal, for instance, one fighter “was head-butted: he broke his nose and had a tooth knocked out. The blood spewed into the audience and dripped into one spectator’s beer. Photos of the golden brew mixed with red blood were popular among fans . . .” (Shimo, 53). Concerns about safety aside, UFC is highly popular and has become big business. Its recent mass popularity has been fueled by its dissemination on cable television through networks such as Spike (Cheever, 2009). In addition to pay-per-view and Spike, UFC is also endorsed through multi-million dollar advertising alliances with companies such as Anheuser-Busch (Fighting for beer drinkers 2008). UFC promoters generate millions of dollars from what has been described by US Senator John McCain as “human cock fighting” (Shimo 2008). Clearly, many parents do not see it that way. Given its popularity, its profit generation through pay-per-view and children’s mixed martial arts clubs, and significantly, its prominence on networks such as Spike, it seems that UFC has become mainstream, unlike the practice of actual cock fighting which remains underground.

In the film *Wrestling with Manhood: Boys, Bullying and Battering* (Jhally 2002), anti-violence educator Jackson Katz describes the business interests of sports such as UFC, and how so-called entertainment is linked to violence in society perpetrated overwhelmingly by boys and men, including sexual assault of

women and domestic violence. UFC does not “cause” such violence, but rather contributes to, and capitalizes upon broader social norms about boys, men, and what it means to be masculine. Such meaning is especially resonant with boys and young men, most of whom struggle to figure out their masculine heterosexual identity and what it means to be a “man” (Pascoe 2007). UFC normalizes violence in a way that appeals to many adolescent boys and men, especially. It does not do so single handedly, but rather as one component of larger social, normative, and economic interests. In addition, the UFC designation, “Ultimate” Fighter Championship, presents elements of competition, dominance, and success through violence and subjugation of one’s opponent. This is akin to *American Idol*-style humiliation and elimination, except enacted in a ring rather than onstage, and typically drawing blood rather than tears. The competition is framed so that if men and adolescent boys can meet the challenge that is brought by fighting, they can be not only the best, but the *ultimate* fighter. Interestingly, the UFC name reflects the glorified representation and positioning of HM that connects manhood with violence and dominance despite the fact that UFC frequently conveys implicit homoeroticism; fighters are often naked except for small gloves, shoes, and snug-fitting shorts and rippled muscle is bountifully displayed in close-contact holds and positions. Skin-to-skin contact among muscular men seems to be socially acceptable only in the context of aggression and domination.

Like other Spike programming, UFC should not be casually dismissed as benign entertainment. A broad spectrum of sports, including UFC but also hockey and football, that appeal to boys and men are typically aggressive, competitive, violent in character, and endorse domination of boys over other boys, and men over other men. Hegemonic masculinity is currency that organizes hierarchies of boys and men and sport is one of the tools by which it is expressed and maintained. So-called “real men” are celebrated through such sports, implying that other men are somehow less than real and worthy of contempt. By contrast, sports outside this genre, such as gymnastics, are often minimized in their value and associated with heterosexist slurs and stereotypes (“pussy” “wimp” “faggot”). Even within this genre, disapproval of HM practices such as fighting bring about these same slurs. Recently, arguments in favour of banning fighting in NHL hockey have been described by sports commentators such as Mike Milbury and Don Cherry as the “pansification” of hockey (Houston 2009). More generally, sissyphobia is Bergling’s (2001) term that describes “a phenomenon whose existence is undeniable: a fear and loathing of men who behave in a less manly than desired, or effeminate, manner” (3–4). Sport, in mainstream conception and as reinforced by Spike, is not only about fitness and self-discipline. It is not just about lofty philosophical inspirations to “be all you can be.” Such descriptions are socially appealing, yet they disguise how sports, especially of the UFC-style varieties, draw from and repeat the social scripts of HM as individualized dominance. The dogma that only the best will be the victor harkens social Darwinism expressed as power, violence, and ruthlessness, packaged up together as entertainment.



Giroux (2002) describes a broader context in which current masculine violence as entertainment is proffered. Although he refers to the 1999 film *Fight Club* specifically, we draw from his analysis for our purposes related to Spike and UFC. He says of *Fight Club* that:

“...it defines the violence of capitalism almost exclusively in terms of an attack on traditional (if not to say regressive) notions of masculinity, and in doing so reinscribes white heterosexuality within the dominant logic of stylized brutality and male bonding that appears predicated on the need to denigrate and wage war against all that is feminine . . . [and against] the rise of a culture of consumption in which men are allegedly domesticated, rendered passive, soft, and emasculated (259 – 260).”

Evidently, persecuting that which is considered feminine has the potential to reap large profits. As consumption, Spike and its parent company MTV have invested heavily in masculinist programming, of which UFC is merely one piece, and have gained financially for doing so.

#### *More bombs*

A third theme of Spike programming that we have chosen to highlight is violence in films and various television shows. Aside from UFC-style shows, many other shows on Spike hinge on violence as entertainment in TV shows such as CSI, DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), 1000 Ways to Die, and Real Vice Cops Uncut. Violence in television shows and movies, such as those broadcast on Spike and, contributes to the social script of aggression, domination, and revenge in male perpetrated violence. Spike offers a bountiful supply of blow ups, shootings, and other sorts of carnage and mayhem categorized under the domain of “action” entertainment. Far from benign, such action has social and political implications. As Kaufman (1990) observes, Arnold Schwarzenegger declaring, “Consider this a divorce” as he shoots and kills his wife in *Total Recall* (Verhoeven 1990) is presented as justifiable homicide, that she deserved what she got. Such “she had it coming” justification is also evident in audience reaction to films such as *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980) where, in at least one screening, men cheered in the audience as Jack Nicholson’s character attacked his wife, who was depicted as whiny and irritating, with an ax (G. Walton, personal communication, 2009). Media critic Jackson Katz comments in Jhally (2002) that media culture typically portrays girls and women as deserving of domination and abuse at the hands of men. In combination with television, video games, and music video media, such violence against women becomes a social narrative that normalizes misogyny and degradation of women, and perpetuates the notion that women should be sexually

available, but entirely disposable, to men.

Movie and television violence, in forms such as action films, has also been considered as a reflection of broader social and political contexts. Reynolds (2007) for example, notes that [many] of the muscle men action movies of the 1980s served to bolster masculine spirits after the debacle of Vietnam . . . and the consequent Vietnam syndrome. In fact, these muscular heroes helped to rewrite our memories of the politics of Vietnam and reconstruct a more “honorable” masculinity (343).

According to Giroux (1999), the *Rambo* franchise (Kotcheff 1982) and other Hollywood action movies epitomized larger-than-life violent masculinity that collectively restored American macho heroism and demonized Vietnamese people. In the Hollywood rewrite of the Vietnam war during the Reagan era, “[c]hemical warfare, forced settlements, and the burning of villages on the part of the U.S. military were written out of history [and replaced by] a vision of masculinity that resonated with the conservative image of national identity and patriotism that informed the Reagan years” (151 – 152). Such compulsion toward masculinity on a broad, nationalist scale seems to have spilled over into George W. Bush-style “wars” on drugs and terror that has endorsed thuggery, brutality, and domination over compromise, diplomacy, and communication. Such films are routinely shown on Spike and other networks, as unproblematic and consumable entertainment.

### *Beyond Spike*

Our tongue-in-cheek characterization of Spike as “boobs, boxing, and bombs” is meant to convey Spike-style masculinity as caricature rather than as gendered essentialism of boys and men. Even as caricature, however, Spike draws on, replicates, and normalizes dominant social narratives of masculinity that endorse sexism, control, and dominance and it does so for a mass, contemporary audience. Not all boys and young men have the same interests, aptitudes, identities, or inclinations (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003), yet Spike programming gives the idea that men are all the same and have the same shallow, heterosexist interests. It compels boys and men to adopt the “tough guise” to mask any hint of emotional or physical vulnerability (Jhally 1999) and encourages homogeneity in gender performance among men.

Social support for HM forces boys and men who do not meet the standard to hide their so-called “feminine side” by posturing in such a way that helps them fit in rather than to appear different. Normalized masculinity also perpetuates a social and learning environment where students fear participation in activities outside conventional gender roles in classrooms and school because they fear persecution. Skinny boys and those not considered tough are usually the last to get chosen for sports teams. Boys who participate in marquis athletics programs such as football and basketball try to get “big”. In this context, big implies becoming more physically muscular and, as a result, more dominant. This dominance

presents itself in the physical form but also in terms of conduct in the hallways and the non-physical space that young men who emulate these norms take up. While these young men end up larger in their muscularity, their presence also gets bigger, more imposing. In short, they take up more social space. Conversely, adolescent boys who do not exhibit these attributes are ridiculed and emasculated for being skinny wimps. Such a culture of persecution, name-calling and intimidation leads many boys to fear further violence (Wessler 2000/2001). Boys who demonstrate normative representations of masculinity usually have little to no interaction with boys who do not, other than to bully and ridicule them.

The power of Spike is that it adds to the chorus of public pedagogy that educates boys and men to perform gender in ways that conform to the normalized dominance associated with conventional hegemonic masculinity. This is a familiar narrative of dominance in which contemporary society has been marinated. HM is fundamentally rooted in fear rather than strength. This culture of fear as discussed by Pascoe (2007) is omnipresent in secondary schools and creates a system of repercussions for young men who act in ways outside their perceived gender category and its corresponding behaviour expectations. Simply put, it exploits fear of not measuring up to rigid expectations of gender. This fear is aptly captured by The Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz*:

Yeh, it's sad, believe me, Missy,  
When you're born to be a sissy  
Without the vim and verve.  
But I could show my prowess, be a lion not a mou-ess  
If I only had the nerve.  
I'm afraid there's no denyin' I'm just a dandelion,  
A fate I don't deserve. [by Harold Arlen (music) and E.Y. Harburg (lyrics)].

Without his courage as a symbol for masculinity, he is a “sissy” and “just a dandelion” (read dandy lion). The idea that masculinity must be performed for and validated by other men in perpetuity goes a long way to explain the persistence of masculine bravado among boys and young men. Spike endorses such bravado, if even in caricatured and ridiculous form, privileging some men and marginalizing others. Spike reflects and magnifies dominant ideologies about how men should act and what they should think in its fundamental and corporate driven endorsement for men to *get more*; and, at the same time, it essentializes “guys” as socially irresponsible, anti-intellectual, misogynist, homophobes. In short, it is socially regressive, peddling brute and destructive masculinity for profit.

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