

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**DAVID L. ALTHEIDE, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis*. New York:Walter de Gruyter. 2002, xi + 209 p., Index, \$54.00 (U.S.) paper.**

Altheide presents a powerful and provocative thesis on the social construction of fear. Fear, he argues, has become a pervasive feature of North American society, changing between the mid-1980s to mid-1990s from a focus on particular threats to a generalized, non-specific orientation to life. Parallel to this fear, he suggests, has emerged a pervasive social identification as "victim." Moral entrepreneurs vie with each other to claim victimization status for their particular cause. The concept of "crime" has become inherently identified with fear and victimization. Children have especially become associated with fear, ironically both as victims whose protection legitimately harshly punitive laws, and as victimizers - delinquents, gang members and drug abusers, from whom society needs protection in the form of more prisons and boot camps for the young.

Altheide's text explores the processes and practices through which this fear-driven popular culture has emerged. He places its roots squarely in the organization of mass media, both television and print, and their symbiotic relationship with journalists, politicians, and formal agents of social control, including police and the criminal justice system generally.

In postmodernist society, he argues, mass media stand in for direct experience, as what the mass of people share in common. All media are organizations designed to make profits, oriented to viewer ratings and advertizing revenues. Their preoccupation with entertainment promotes a problem-frame format that favours simplified, predictable morality-tales. Altheide's central thesis is that this entertainment format spills over into news as entertainment or "infotainment," focusing on entertaining, emotive visuals and human-interest stories framed in the same simplified morality-tale format. Events that are extraordinary and rare - murders, kidnapping and terrorism, appear as daily news items. War, especially the Gulf War of 1991, captured by CNN, is condensed into entertainment, with visuals from cameras mounted on weapons honing onto their targets, providing real-time excitement for viewers. Journalism is reduced to commenting on visuals, with military personnel coopted as media spokespersons. The media have become directly part of the criminal justice system and apparatuses of social control, with politicians, police, and criminal justice personnel generally being primary news sources for journalists. They all benefit directly from the pervasiveness of fear, since fear legitimates

surveillance, punishment, and punitive laws as solutions for fear. Secular society looks not to God for salvation, but to the state and formal agents of social control. Fear, in turn, legitimates this state control. Fear proves itself by its own constant repetition.

Altheide's thesis is provocative, emotive, and entertaining. The question that remains concerns the validity of his generalizations. Altheide uses the methodology of "tracing discourse" - searching for keywords across time and topics, to show that use of the term "fear" in headlines and text within selected US dailies has more than doubled since 1985. Beyond these data, however, much of the argument rests on impressionistic and anecdotal sources. There is no systematic comparative evidence that might potentially challenge the thesis. The text risks overgeneralizing the representation of media-news as entertainment. Sources that may present deeper analyses of news are not considered. Altheide's thesis carries the risk that it is itself a variant of popular culture, emphasizing the pervasiveness of fear as self-confirming by weight of repetitive illustration. My hope is that Altheide's thesis will prompt further detailed empirical research into the processes of news construction to test his hypotheses.

***Sylvia Hale St. Thomas University, Fredericton***

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