

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Sex and violence in a runaway culture

Should SpongeBob SquarePants really have appeared in a "pro-homosexual" video? Should Buster the bunny have fraternized with lesbian couples in Vermont?

Liberal-minded Canadians are having a good chuckle about the latest culture war raging in the United States. Since Janet Jackson's famous "wardrobe malfunction" at last year's Super Bowl, in which the pop star flashed a breast at hundreds of millions of television viewers, conservative groups have been crusading against licentiousness in popular culture.

Judging by the targets they pick, they roundly deserve to be laughed at. In the Buster incident, the new Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, criticized an innocuous episode of the show *Postcards from Buster* in which the animated rabbit visits children with lesbian parents. PBS, to its shame, decided not to distribute the show. SpongeBob offended conservatives when he and a host of other animated characters appeared in a music video designed to celebrate tolerance and diversity. If that got them going, what they will say now that Marge Simpson's chain-smoking sister Patty has come out of the closet?

It's easy to titter about all this from sane, tolerant Canada. There go those crazy Americans again, we may think to ourselves, getting themselves all in a knot about nothing. But to dismiss the U.S. culture war as meaningless would be a mistake. In their passionate, often overwrought way, Americans are debating something quite important, and it is as relevant to Canadians as it is to them.

The Janet Jackson debate exposed more than a flash of skin. It revealed a deep seam of unease about the direction North American culture is taking. Parents in particular are rightly worried about the shocking violence, obscene language and constant sexual innuendo that have become a feature of prime-time television. You don't have to be a member of the Mor-

al Majority to worry about what your 10-year-old thinks when she hears genitalia jokes on *Will and Grace*. You don't have to be the Church Lady to object when your 13-year-old rocks to rap lyrics that demean women and glorify casual violence. In a plugged-in world of cable, Internet, DVDs and CD players, it's not easy to monitor everything your child sees or hears.

It's not only parents who worry, either. Anyone who thinks seriously about culture has to be at least a bit concerned about the coarseness and vulgarity of so much popular entertainment. It's no accident that so many U.S. voters cited "moral values" as the decisive issue in their voting choice. People of all kinds, liberals and conservatives, feel uncomfortable about the crumbling of the old verities that they see reflected every night on their TV screens.

Liberals are wrong to brush off such concerns. They fear, quite legitimately, that protests about media permissiveness will lead to censorship. Frank Rich, a columnist for *The New York Times*, claims the Janet Jackson incident "has unleashed a wave of self-censorship on American television unrivalled since the McCarthy era." To people like him, the post-Jackson fuss is simply a right-wing backlash led by Bible thumpers and bigots.

But it is more complicated than that. Most people concerned about media content do not hanker for the days when *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was banned and TV couples had to sleep in separate beds. They don't hate homosexuals and they don't mind seeing gay people depicted on TV. But when they see a man's head being blown off by a shotgun on the screen, or hear a rapper boast about beating up his women on the radio, they wonder where it is all going. Are there no limits? Does anything go? What if my kid sees it? They wonder and they want to have a debate.

No matter how silly that debate can sometimes get south of the border, they are at least having it there. Why not here?