

## Speech, Humanitas Prize Luncheon, Sheraton Universal Hotel, Universal City, CA

*I'd first like to thank the Humanitas Institute for honoring me with this offer to speak, and second, I'd like to offer an apology to all of the nominees in the audience for prolonging their agony.*

*We have recently been involved as individual artists and as an industry in an ongoing legislative force, an absurd bit of public theater and political opportunism known first as the V-chip that has now devolved into an industry 'compromise' that threatens to devalue the first amendment and to provide arbitrary classifications for our art that will inevitably lead to limitations on our creativity.*

*Am I exaggerating? Consider that when the MPAA introduced the film rating system in 1968, one of the first films to receive the X rating was Midnight Cowboy. It had been in production when the ratings system was approved and would not have been made two years later. Why? Because with convenient labels, boycotts were threatened, newspapers fearing advertiser pullouts refused to run ads for X rated movies and within months the major studios stopped making them. Why spend money on films that no matter how artistically worthy, no one would even know were playing? If the screenplay for this film had been ready six months later, it would never have been made, and we would have been deprived of the Academy Award winning best picture of 1969. A movie about two lost and desperate souls who make the first real connection of their lives and discover love, something they each had grown to believe did not exist.*

*When the V-chip was first discussed, I along with many others in this room I'm sure, felt sympathy for parents and their concerns. We live in a world where most couples need two incomes to support their families, where our children are bombarded with imagery, too much of it violent and dehumanizing.*

*And while Bruce Springsteen may believe there are five hundred channels and nothing's on, parents fear there are five hundred channels and a vast pool of programming they wish wasn't on. But as much as we would hope there is a simple solution like the V-chip, there is no Balm in Gilead, no magic answer.*

*Does anyone really think their computer literate seven year old hacker isn't going to figure out how to defeat the chip? Or simply go over to a friend's house with less discerning parents or parents who care but can't figure out how to program the damn thing? And with seven ratings and the four additional content labels now proposed we'll have hundreds of possible permutations to enter into the TV to block programming. Faced with this daunting and confusing system, I believe most parents will simply opt to lock everything out above a certain simple rating threshold, probably PG-7 and refuse all programming with any of the offending content labels; V, S, L D.*

*In trying to introduce a uniform system that applies to all content, you must generalize but this generalization is by definition a form of censorship. For example, China Beach which I was fortunate enough to work on and was often honored here, was routinely ranked as the most violent program on television by numerous monitoring groups. Why? Because it showed the aftermath of violence, not the gratuitous violence most of us are concerned about, but the bloody bodies of young men and women and*

children who were the victims of war. Could you have a China Beach on television today and not affix the V for violence label to it? I doubt it.

And having labeled it with a V, wouldn't that keep many of the impressionable young people enamored of guns and warfare from seeing the very consequences of violence that they need to see? I doubt that many ten year olds thinking of playing with Daddy's gun will want to do so after watching an ER episode that shows a ten year old dying from a sucking chest wound incurred in exactly the same way.

And what of a Friends episode that can't be watched by a thirteen year old because of the D label for adult dialogue? And what is this adult dialogue? Two characters refusing to have sex because neither has a condom. Isn't this thirteen year old exactly who should be watching this episode? With convenient generalized labels that purport to inform parents as to content, is there any doubt that TV advertisers will shy away from programs with a Scarlet V, S, D and L? Why should we believe the results in TV content labeling will be any less damaging to creative freedom than the newspaper advertising censorship that followed the Movie ratings system implementation in the late '60s?

But why am I railing about this subject in this forum? An awards luncheon to honor writing that depicts human values? Because I have an ugly secret, a disturbing confession to make. I don't want to be responsible. The issue has certainly been politicized with everyone from the President to Vice-President, Senators and Congressmen jumping on cynically to express their deep, deep concern for America's children while still refusing to summon the political will necessary to insure that all of America's children receive basic health care. But how did we get here in the first place?

I believe it's our fault. We didn't listen. We didn't hear parents begging for our help, we didn't pay attention to their desperation, their sense of powerlessness, of being overwhelmed by what we're pumping into their homes and by extension into their children's minds. And I for one didn't want to admit that it was my responsibility to do something about it.

I chose a career in entertainment precisely because I thought it was a place I could be irresponsible. I wasn't getting into banking or the law, or teaching or medicine. I was looking for something to do where I could tell stories, stay up late, eat breakfast at noon, go to the movies on Thursday afternoon and hang out with a whole bunch of other people who didn't feel like being responsible either.

When I got my first job in television, I came into the office after the first episode I'd written had aired — the night before. Everybody looked suicidal. I asked, what was wrong: "We got killed last night, they're probably going to cancel us. We only did a 10.4 with an eighteen share (this was admittedly a few years ago)". What does that mean, I asked? "Only about 17 million people saw the show".

Now, I had been working in the theater and we'd had plenty of nights where nine people showed up and we felt pretty damn lucky. 17 million? I remember thinking I should have spent more time on that crappy expositional scene I stuck into the third act. I can't remember what I was doing instead, maybe taking a long lunch.

The Kaiser Foundation recently funded a national survey focused on ER. Their purpose was to determine how many viewers retained information they heard on the program. Kaiser chose a subject we had our characters discuss for 60 seconds and then called viewers in the days following the episode to find out how many had any recollection of this brief scene and the health information it imparted. It was not an important storyline, nobody died, in fact there was nothing particularly memorable about it. And yet, 67% of those polled remembered not only the subject, but the point of view we had expressed.

*Extrapolated nationally, twenty-seven million people watched, understood and accepted a viewpoint we put forward in 60 seconds. No wonder parents are worried.*

*William Faulkner said "The old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truth lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed, Love and honor and pity and pride, and compassion and sacrifice. The writer's duty is to write about these things. To lift man by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past, to tell stories of the human heart in conflict with itself."*

*Do I want content legislation, no. I don't want anyone to tell me what I can or can't write. I want parents to be more responsible for their children and their children's viewing habits. I don't want any responsibility for our collective moral and emotional lives as a community. But whether I like it or not, it is our responsibility. We do make a difference, we change people, their opinions. We inform our audience, not just nationally, but worldwide, we influence them with our own prejudices, hatreds, fears, fantasies. And we also inform them with our good, our humanity, with our characters leading their lives, struggling as our own viewers struggle, searching for meaning and connection and love. They listen to us, they believe us, they accept what we say as truth.*

*It is easier to write violence without aftermath, to show sexuality without consequence, to depict narcissism and personal fulfillment without showing its costs to others. These fantasies are fun, they're easier than what we actually have to confront in our own lives. Than having to understand the reasons behind brutality and inhumanity, to love those we want to hate, to see our own culpability in the world around us. Trying to follow Faulkners' dictum is hard, it takes time, it means failure and it means confronting our own limitations as writers and artists and overcoming them through setting higher standards for ourselves, for our material, for the truths we tell to our audience and that they then regularly accept as reality.*

*Some form of labeling is going to exist. It will be a reality. It may well draw court challenges on first amendment issues. But whatever the outcome we need to look at this as a wake-up call. A wake-up call to writers and artists. We do have responsibility for what we write and film, for what we send into our viewers' homes and it can and should have violence, sexuality, adult dialogue and language.*

*We are right in our contention that these things are all elements of our society, of our day to day lives, and as writers and artists it is our duty to show them. But we have ceded this moral high ground by lazily refusing to show the consequences of these actions, by appealing to our collective fantasies of action without consequence. Guns are fired yes, but not without blood, tragedy, ruined lives. People do have casual sex but not without loss of self-esteem, AIDS, and pregnancy. We must regain this high ground, it is our right. But we are going to have to earn it through our own responsible actions as artists. Through establishing higher standards for ourselves and for our work.*

*I'd like to close with a story I heard from a wonderful man named George Regas. There was a wise old hermit who lived at the edge of the forest, who seemed able to answer every question correctly. The boys of the village liked to try to outwit him but they never could. Finally, one boy hit upon a solution. "I will capture a small bird and hold it tightly in my hands, I will ask the old hermit is the bird alive or is it dead? If the old man answers the bird is dead, I will release it and it will fly away free. But if the old man answers, it's alive, I'll crush it in my hands and drop it at the old man's feet."*

*So the boys captured a small bird and headed for the old hermit's shack. When the old man answered the door, the boy stepped forward with the bird and asked, "Old man is this bird alive or is it dead?"*

*The old man stared at the boy for a very, very long time. And then finally said, "As you will, my son. As you will."*

*We have that same choice every day. As writers, directors, actors, producers and executives. We are responsible, It is as we will.*