



TV AND RADIO

Morality Building with the FBI

THE ABC Television series, *The FBI*, is telecast early Sunday evenings, at a favorite family viewing time. With my two teen-age daughters, I recently watched one episode, "The Tormentors," which was presented both during the regular season and as a summer repeat. You might see this episode sometime, in this country or abroad, and if you are with foreign friends, you might point to it as an example of "true instructional and entertainment values" mentioned on page five of the National Association of Broadcasters Television Code (Tenth Edition, August 1965). The relevant paragraph in the code encourages the presentation of "adult themes . . . not for the purposes of sensationalism, to shock or exploit the audience or to appeal to prurient interests or morbid curiosity."

The plot of "The Tormentors" concerns a rich, young boy who is kidnapped and held for ransom by two men and a young woman. His father endangers the son's life by vacillating in his cooperation with the federal law enforcement agency, but eventually the FBI rescues the boy and restores him to his wealthy father.

The boy is abducted while with a chauffeur in a limousine. The chauffeur tries to escape. One of the male kidnapers cold-bloodedly shoots the chauffeur in the back—in the immediate presence of the boy, the camera registering in

closeup the lad's horror and shock at the brutal murder. Later, in the kidnapers' hide-out, the murderer (who by now is clearly seen as a paranoid) strikes the boy in the face and knocks him to the ground. The other kidnapper protests, and for his scruples, is also killed—again in the presence of the boy, the camera in closeup once more capturing the boy's shock and apprehension.

The woman seems to derive sadistic pleasure from the violence. In the boy's presence, she urges her companion to kill him, and when he hesitates she says: "What's the matter? You chicken?" The killer warns the girl friend that he will make her pull the trigger if she doesn't shut up. He gives her his gun to hold on the boy while he goes out "to dig two graves." These scenes and others like them constitute the violent heart of the story. Structured around it is the lesson learned by the boy's wealthy father—trust the FBI and cooperate with them: You have a better chance of getting your son back alive.

My daughters, members of the television generation, have developed, alas, some immunity to all sorts of television murders, beatings, assaults, and mayhem. But kidnapping is still a theme fraught with deep resonances of terror for children and parents. It strikes at the most fundamental emotions of fear and tenderness.

The morning after "The Tormentors"

I called the NAB, ABC Television, and the FBI. I thought that the television code precluded "reference to kidnapping of children." From the NAB I learned that the code had been amended so as not to prevent or impede the broadcast of "adult themes," provided "exceptional care" was exercised ". . . in order to avoid terrorizing [children]." The NAB also said that it hadn't monitored the program because *The FBI* series "didn't pose any problems under code standards." It would check now. ABC also promised to check. The man at the FBI was puzzled by the call. The program in no way glorified crime, he said. When I explained that it was the kidnapping theme and the way it was handled that disturbed me, he said the agency had no comment and referred me to the producer, Quinn Martin in Hollywood.

THIS man produced that memorable adventure in television violence, *The Untouchables*. Students of this nadir of television's moral values are referred to Senate Hearings on Juvenile Delinquency (Part 10, 87th Congress, pages 2348-2365). From Quinn Martin's office memos on that series, here are but two quotes:

I wish we could come up with a different device than running the man down with a car, as we have done this now in three different shows. I like the idea of sadism, but I hope we can come up with another approach for it.

This scene is the roughest I have ever seen and I don't know if we can get away with it, but let's leave it in. I have a feeling you may have to kill the girls off camera.

Under the casuistry of the code ("the standards," said the NAB, "contain a lot of prohibitions but they're not to be taken literally; they're to be viewed in context"), you can never beat the self-regulators. The violence in "The Tormentors," they would argue, is not for its own sake but for plot and character development. Viewed in context the work is done "in good faith," "presents genuine artistic or literary material, valid moral and social issues," etc. Anyway, the self-regulators would conclude, no one has yet proved that violence on television harms children: we're keeping up with the research and when . . . etc.

All this is standard procedure for the industry. But it was disturbing to have "The Tormentors" come to us with the approval of a federal agency. At the end of the program, there was this acknowledgment: "The producers extend their appreciation to J. Edgar Hoover and his associates for their cooperation in the production of this series."

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.



"Why, yes, Captain Flash, I did write that I loved you madly, but I was only nine at the time."