

BEFORE THE BROADCASTING STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Decision No: 1998-112

Dated the 24th day of September 1998

IN THE MATTER of the Broadcasting Act 1989

AND

IN THE MATTER of a complaint by

P R PARRY
of Auckland

Broadcaster
TELEVISION NEW ZEALAND
LIMITED

S R Maling Chairperson
L M Loates
R McLeod
J Withers

DECISION

Summary

A woman brandishing a knife pursued another woman, and threatened her, in an episode of *Remington Steele* broadcast on 23 June 1998 beginning at 1.35pm.

Mr Parry complained to Television New Zealand Ltd, the broadcaster, that knives should never be brandished about in this manner on television. He suggested that a scene such as this was implicated in copycat crimes, and that it simply exploited gratuitous violence to boost ratings.

TVNZ pointed out that the episode was made in the 1980s and was not typical of the modern trend in drama. Nevertheless it maintained, the incident, seen in perspective, did not contravene the standards. It was not gratuitous, it argued, nor was the incident accompanied by an atmosphere of menace. Under those circumstances, it declined to uphold the complaint.

Dissatisfied with TVNZ's response, Mr Parry referred the complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Authority under s.8(1)(a) of the Broadcasting Act 1989.

For the reasons given below, the Authority declines to uphold the complaint.



Decision

The members of the Authority have viewed the item complained about and have read the correspondence (summarised in the Appendix). On this occasion, the Authority determines the complaint without a formal hearing.

A scene near the end of an episode of *Remington Steele* broadcast on TV One on 23 June, beginning at 1.35pm, showed a woman being pursued by another woman who was brandishing a large knife.

Mr Parry complained to TVNZ that such a scene should never be broadcast on television. He expressed his serious concern that this was the type of material which would excite the unstable in the community and lend itself to copycat crime. He also complained that it merely exploited gratuitous violence. Mr Parry argued that since TVNZ was still publicly owned, it had a duty to set an example in its choice of programming. Quoting from his own experience working with unemployed people in various work schemes, Mr Parry contended that TVNZ's attitude was anti-social because it ran counter to the efforts of such schemes.

TVNZ advised that it had considered the complaint in the context of standard V1 of the Television Code of Broadcasting Practice, which reads:

V1 Broadcasters have a responsibility to ensure that any violence shown is justifiable, ie is essential in the context of the programme.

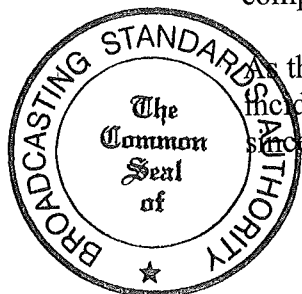
It agreed that it was necessary to treat with care any scene in which a weapon was used in a threatening manner, especially if the use of the weapon was gratuitous or accompanied by an atmosphere of menace. However, it stressed, contextual matters were also important.

In this case, it noted, the series had been made in the early 1980s and the episode complained about had first been screened in New Zealand on 12 June 1985. TVNZ argued that the series was devoid of menace, and was somewhat formulaic in its predictability – the dapper Remington Steele could be guaranteed to catch the villain at the very last minute, and everyone would live happily ever after.

To Mr Parry's argument that the scene was gratuitous, TVNZ responded that far from being gratuitous, it was the denouement of the story. It pointed to the visual link of the knife with the character who had been identified as the villain, and suggested that gave a message that knives and threats were things that bad people were involved with.

TVNZ assured Mr Parry that it regularly excised from films scenes in which knives or guns and other weapons were used gratuitously or in an atmosphere of menace. Neither was the case on this occasion, it argued. It therefore declined to uphold the complaint.


As the standard requires, the Authority first considers the context in which the incident occurred. The Authority understands TVNZ's point that the series had dated since it was first aired in the 1980s. It finds the story line somewhat lightweight and



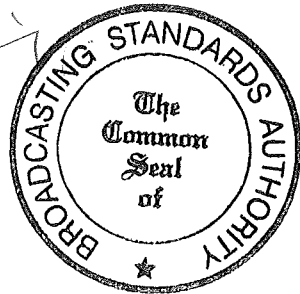
almost formulaic in its resolution of the mystery, and concludes that it was never intended to be seen as a serious drama. While the Authority finds the knife wielding incident somewhat clumsy, it does not consider that it incorporated the elements which would cause standard V1 to be contravened. It understands Mr Parry's point that screen violence has a serious impact on people who are already predisposed to violence as a means of resolving conflict. It is aware of the extensive body of research which puts that view. However, it does not find this somewhat exaggerated and farcical scene was sufficiently violent to attract the standard. It therefore declines to uphold the complaint.

For the reasons set forth above, the Authority declines to uphold the complaint.

Signed for and on behalf of the Authority


Sam Maling
Chairperson

24 September 1998



Appendix

Mr Parry's Complaint to Television New Zealand Ltd – 26 June 1998

Mr P R Parry of Auckland complained to Television New Zealand Ltd that a broadcast of *Remington Steele* on 23 June beginning at 1.35pm contained inappropriate material. He referred to a sequence in which a woman pursued another woman while brandishing a large knife.

Mr Parry asserted that such scenes should never be shown on television. The reasons, he said, were obvious. The first was that it excited the unstable in the community and led to copycat crime. The second reason, Mr Parry continued, was that it was neither entertainment nor educational, and simply exploited gratuitous violence for no other reason than to boost ratings. He suggested that as TVNZ was publicly owned, it had a duty to set an example, and added that if TVNZ saw what he did in his work with the unemployed in places such as Otago it would realise that its attitude was anti social and ran counterproductive to the efforts of workers like himself.

He concluded:

I cannot help but think that the three murderers on the run could have learned some of their attitudes from today's TV and films.

TVNZ's Response to the Formal Complaint – 31 July 1998

Having initially dealt with the complaint informally, TVNZ provided a formal response at the Authority's request.

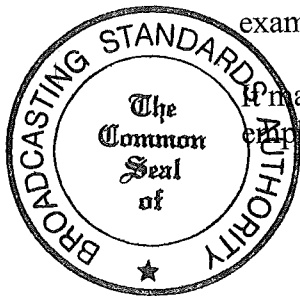
It described the episode as a "whodunit" in which Steele and his companion Laura investigated attempts on the life of a popular singer. It noted that the scene to which Mr Parry objected was towards the end of the programme, when one woman character threatened another with a knife. They were seen arguing and then scuffling.

TVNZ advised that it had considered the complaint in the context of standard V1 of the Television Code of Broadcasting Practice. It wrote:

TVNZ agrees that it should treat with the utmost care any scene in which a weapon of any type is used in a threatening manner – especially if the use of the weapon is gratuitous or is accompanied by an atmosphere of menace. We do however stress that contextual matters must also be considered, and decisions accompanied by common sense.

In this case, TVNZ noted, the series was made during the 1980s, and the episode was first screened in New Zealand on 12 June 1985. It suggested it hardly qualified as an example of a modern trend in television drama.

It maintained that the series was devoid of the menace referred to above. It also emphasised that viewers knew that the character of Remington Steele would always



come to the rescue at the last minute, and everyone would live happily ever after. It added:

It is that sort of programme, and the certainty about the outcome – while not diminishing the excitement of the chase – gives viewers a security they might not find in a drama series quite so predictable.

To Mr Parry's suggestion that the scene was gratuitous, TVNZ argued that far from being gratuitous, it was in fact the denouement of the story. It added:

Common sense suggests to us that you do not destroy the denouement of a story of the *Remington Steele* variety just because the big moment involves the use of a knife.

TVNZ gave its assurance that it regularly excised scenes from films in which knives and guns and other weapons were used gratuitously or in an atmosphere of menace. It argued that neither was the case on this occasion.

TVNZ advised that it declined to uphold the complaint.

Mr Parry's Referral to the Broadcasting Standards Authority – 7 August 1998

Dissatisfied with TVNZ's response, Mr Parry referred the complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Authority under s.8(1)(a) of the Broadcasting Act 1989.

He said he still found the scene unacceptable. His reason was that a mild mannered student of his had been viciously attacked at the Otara Shopping Centre with a knife. The only motive he could think of was racial but, he said, the youth was lucky he did not lose his arm. Later on, he recalled, another youth was killed with a knife at the same place in a confrontation involving Samoan and Tongan gangs.

He asked the Authority to impose a ban on broadcasting such violence. He suggested it would be nice if New Zealand could set an example to the world.

TVNZ's Response to the Authority – 17 August 1998

TVNZ responded that while it was sorry to learn of the injury suffered by Mr Parry's former pupil, it noted his belief that the motive for the attack was probably racial. It suggested that there were many social influences affecting behaviour, and that the Authority would be aware that the literature regarding the role of television was far from conclusive.

TVNZ said it did not believe that a scene from a programme such as *Remington Steele* could seriously be held responsible for the incident he described. It added:

Television is an easy target. Criticism of it perhaps absolves the social conscience of the need to find and overcome the real causes of violence in our



Mr Parry's Final Comment – 21 August 1998

Mr Parry advised that he still stood by his reaction about showing knives on television in a threatening manner. He suggested that there was nothing more fearsome than to be confronted by individuals wielding knives, and noted that that was the experience of a friend who had been held up by four youths and had his wallet taken.

Referring to the incident in which his former pupil had his arm gashed, Mr Parry maintained that race did not come into the matter, and was not an excuse for carrying knives. He wrote:

I am not attempting to lay at the door of the television industry all the ills and violence in society, but since they have such a hold on people, they should respond by not adding fuel to the flames and set an example. One has only to see the response when a character in Coronation Street gets failed and thousands of viewers in several countries write demanding the release of the actress concerned.

All he asked, he said, was for civic responsibility. He suggested the police, the teaching profession, social workers and the judiciary already had enough on their plates without others working against them.

