TV Isn’t Violent Enough
MIKE OPPENHEIM

BROKE READING: Think about some of the violent movies or TV shows you have seen recently. Were you genuinely frightened by their depictions of violence? Did the pictures of the destruction of the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001, frighten you in a different way?

Caught in an ambush, there’s no way our hero (Matt Dillon, Eliot Ness, Kojak, Hoss Cartwright . . . ) can survive. Yet, visibly weakening, he blazes away, and we suspect he’ll pull through. Sure enough, he’s around for the final clinch wearing the traditional badge of the honorable but harmless wound: a sling.

As a teenager with a budding interest in medicine, I knew this was nonsense and loved to annoy my friends with the facts.

“Aw, the poor guy! He’s crippled for life!”

“What do you mean? He’s just shot in the shoulder. . . . That’s the worst place! Vital structures everywhere. There’s the blood supply for the arm: axillary artery and vein. One nick and you can bleed to death on the spot.”

“So he was lucky.”

“OK. If it missed the vessels it hit the brachial plexus: the nerves. Paralyzes his arm for life. He’s gotta turn in his badge and apply for disability.”

“So he’s really lucky.”

“OK. Missed the artery. Missed the vein. Missed the nerves. Just went through the shoulder joint. But joint cartilage doesn’t heal so well. A little crease in the bone leaves him with traumatic arthritis. He’s in pain the rest of his life—stuffing himself with codeine, spending his money on acupuncture and chiropractors, losing all his friends because he complains all the time. . . . Don’t ever get shot in the shoulder. It’s the end. . . .”

Today, as a physician, I still sneer at TV violence, though not because of any moral objection. I enjoy a well-done scene of gore and slaughter as well as the next viewer, but “well-done” is something I rarely see on a typical evening in spite of the plethora of shootings, stabbings, muggings, and brawls. Who can believe the stuff they show? Anyone who remembers high-school biology knows the human body can’t possibly respond to violent trauma as it’s usually portrayed.

On a recent episode, Matt Houston is at a fancy resort, on the trail of a vicious killer who specializes in knifing beautiful women in their hotel rooms in broad daylight. The only actual murder sequence was in the best of taste: all the action off screen, the flash of a knife, moans on the soundtrack.

In two scenes, Matt arrives only minutes too late. The hotel is alerted, but the killer’s identity remains a mystery. Absurd! It’s impossible to kill someone instantly with a knife thrust—or even render him unconscious. Several minutes of strenuous work are required to cut enough blood vessels so the victim bleeds to death. Tony Perkins in Psycho gave an accurate, though abbreviated, demonstration. Furthermore, anyone who has watched an inexperienced farmhand slaughter a pig knows that the resulting mess must be seen to be believed.

If consulted by Matt Houston, I’d have suggested a clue: “Keep your eyes peeled for someone panting with exhaustion and covered with blood. That might be your man.”

Many Americans were puzzled at the films of the assassination attempt on President Reagan. Shot in the chest, he did not behave as TV had taught us to expect (“clutch chest, stagger backward, collapse”). Only after he complained of a vague chest pain and was taken to the hospital did he discover his wound. Many viewers assumed Mr. Reagan is some sort of superman. In fact, there was nothing extraordinary about his behavior. A pistol is certainly a deadly weapon, but not predictably so. Unlike a knife wound, one bullet can kill instantly—provided it strikes a small area at the base of the brain. Otherwise, it’s no different: a matter of ripping and tearing enough tissue to cause death by bleeding. Professional gangland killers understand the problem. They prefer a shotgun at close range.

The trail of quiet corpses left by TV’s good guys, bad guys, and assorted ill-tempered gun owners is ridiculously unreal. Firearms reliably produce pain, bleeding, and permanent, crippling injury (witness Mr. Reagan’s press secretary, James Brady: shot directly in the brain but very much alive). For a quick, clean death, they are no match for Luke Skywalker’s lightsaber.

No less unreal is what happens when T. J. Hooker, Magnum, or a son brother meets a bad guy in manly combat. Pow! Our hero’s fist flashes into the villain’s head. Villain reels backward, tipping over chairs and lamps, finally falling to the floor, unconscious. Handshakes all around. . . . Sheer fantasy! After hitting the villain, our hero would shake one’s hand. He’d be too busy waving his own about wildly, screaming with the pain of a shattered fifth metacarpal (the bone behind the fifth knuckle), an injury so predictable it’s called the “boxer’s fracture.” The human fist is far more delicate than the human skull. In any contest between the two, the fist will lose.

The human skull is tougher than TV writers give it credit. Clunked with a blunt object, such as the traditional pistol butt, most victims would not fall conveniently unconscious for five minutes. For a clean head wound, a sharp object is needed. A knife, unless it hits the brain, is dangerous but not deadly.

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The human skull is tougher than TV writers give it credit. Clunked with a blunt object, such as the traditional pistol butt, most victims would not fall conveniently unconscious for five minutes. For a clean head wound, a sharp object is needed. A knife, unless it hits the brain, is dangerous but not deadly. When this essay was published in the February 11, 1984, issue of TV Guide, Mike Oppenheim was a freelance writer and physician practicing medicine in California.
they'd suffer a nasty scalp laceration, be stunned for a second or two, then be extremely upset. I've sewn up many. A real-life, no-nonsense criminal with a blackjack (a piece of iron weighing several pounds) has a much better success rate. The result is a large number of deaths and permanent damage from brain hemorrhage.

Critics of TV violence claim it teaches children sadism and cruelty. I honestly don't know whether or not TV violence is harmful, but if so the critics have it backward. Children can't learn to enjoy cruelty from the neat, sanitized mayhem on the average series. There isn't any! What they learn is far more malignant: that guns or fists are clean, efficient, exciting ways to deal with a difficult situation. Bang! — you're dead! Bop! — you're unconscious (temporarily)!

"Truth-in-advertising" laws eliminated many absurd commercial claims. I often daydream about what would happen if we had "truth in violence" — if every show had to pass scrutiny by a board of doctors who had no power to censor but could insist that any action scene have at least a vague resemblance to medical reality ("Stop the projector!... You have your hero waylaid by three Mafia thugs who beat him brutally before he struggles free. The next day he shows up with this cute little Band-Aid over his eyebrow. We can't pass that. You'll have to add one eye slit, three missing front teeth, at least twenty stitches over the lips and eyes, and a wired jaw. Got that? Roll 'em... ").

Seriously, real-life violence is dirty, painful, bloody, disgusting. It causes mutilation and misery, and it doesn't solve problems. It makes them worse. If we're genuinely interested in protecting our children, we should stop campaigning to "clean up" TV violence. It's already too septic. Ironically, the problem with TV violence is: It's not violent enough.

A new study says TV desensitizes children by not showing the consequences of violence, so let's turn it off...

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Hollow Claims about Fantasy Violence

RICHARD RHODES

BETORE READING: As you grow older, does violence in the media appeal to you more — or less? Can you account for your reactions?

The moral entrepreneurs are at it again, pounding the entertainment industry for advertising its Grand Guignolosque confections to children. If exposure to this mock violence contributes to the development of violent behavior, then our political leadership is justified in its indignation at what the Federal Trade Commission has reported about the marketing of violent fare to children. Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman have been especially quick to fasten on the FTC report as they make an issue of violent offerings to children.

Grand Guignol, a popular theater founded in Paris in 1897 to present graphic performances of crimes — Eos.

Richard Rhodes is the author of more than two dozen books, including The Making of the Atomic Bomb (1986), which won a Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction, and Why They Kill: Discourses of a Moral Surgeon.
But is there really a link between entertainment and violent behavior?

The American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the National Institutes of Mental Health all say yes. They base their claims on social science research that has been sharply criticized and disputed within the social science profession, especially outside the United States. In fact, no direct, causal link between exposure to mock violence in the media and subsequent violent behavior has ever been demonstrated, and the few claims of modest correlation have been contradicted by other findings, sometimes in the same studies.

History alone should call such a link into question. Private violence has been declining in the West since the media-barren late Middle Ages, when homicide rates are estimated to have been ten times what they are in Western nations today. Historians attribute the decline to improving social controls over violence—police forces and common access to courts of law—and to a shift away from brutal physical punishment in childrearing (a practice that still appears as a common factor in the background of violent criminals today).

The American Medical Association has based its endorsement of the media violence theory in major part on the studies of Brandon Centerwall, a psychiatrist in Seattle. Dr. Centerwall compared the murder rates for whites in three countries from 1945 to 1974 with numbers for television set ownership. Until 1975, television broadcasting was banned in South Africa, and “white homicide rates remained stable” there, Dr. Centerwall found, while corresponding rates in Canada and the United States doubled after television was introduced.

A spectacular finding, but it is meaningless. As Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins of the University of California at Berkeley subsequently pointed out, homicide rates in France, Germany, Italy, and Japan either failed to change with increasing television ownership in the same period or actually declined, and American homicide rates have more recently been sharply declining despite a proliferation of popular media outlets—not only movies and television, but also video games and the Internet.

Other social science that supposedly undergirds the theory, too, is marginal and problematic. Laboratory studies that expose children to selected incidents of televised mock violence and then assess changes in the children’s behavior have sometimes found more “aggressive” behavior after the exposure—usually verbal, occasionally physical.

But sometimes the control group, shown incidents judged not to be violent, behaves more aggressively afterward than the test group; sometimes comedy produces the more aggressive behavior; and sometimes there’s no change. The only obvious conclusion is that sitting and watching television stimulates subsequent physical activity. Any kid could do that.

As to those who claim that entertainment promotes violent behavior by desensitizing people to violence, the British scholar Martin Barker offers this critique: “Their claim is that the materials they judge to be harmful can only influence us by trying to make us be the same as them. So horrible things will make us horrible—not horrified. Terrifying things will make us terrifying—not terrified. To see something aggressive makes us feel aggressive—not aggressed against. This idea is so odd, it is hard to know where to begin in challenging it.”

Even more influential on national policy has been a twenty-two year study by two University of Michigan psychologists, Leonard D. Eron and L. Rowell Huesmann, of boys exposed to so-called violent media. The Telecommunications Act of 1996, which mandated the television V-chip, allowing parents to screen out unwanted programming, invoked these findings, asserting, “Studies have shown that children exposed to violent video programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children not so exposed.”

Well, not exactly. Following 875 children in upstate New York from third grade through high school, the psychologists found a correlation between a preference for violent television at age eight and aggressiveness at age eighteen. The correlation—0.31—would mean television accounted for about 10 percent of the influences that led to this behavior. But the correlation only turned up in one of three measures of aggression: the assessment of students by their peers. It didn’t show up in students’ reports about themselves or in psychological testing. And for girls, there was no correlation at all.

Despite the lack of evidence, politicians can’t resist blaming the media for violence. They can stoke the moral high ground confident that the First Amendment will protect them from having to actually write legislation that would be likely to alienate the entertainment industry, some use the issue as a smokescreen to avoid having to confront gun control.

But violence isn’t learned from mock violence. There is good evidence—causal evidence, not correlational—that it’s learned in personal violent encounters, beginning with the brutalization of children by their parents or their peers.

The money spent on all the social science research I’ve described was yanked from the National Institute of Mental Health budget by reducing support for the construction of community mental health centers. To this day there is no standardized reporting system for emergency-room findings of physical child abuse. Violence is on the decline in America, but if we want to reduce it even further, protecting children from real violence begin.

The End
Violence Never Solved Anything, but It's Entertaining

HOLMAN W. JENKINS JR.

BEFORE READING: In watching a violent TV show or movie, would your pleasure be reduced if the bad guys won? Why?

The stock market is jittery. Poverty stares us in the face. At least we still have violent programming on TV, but some would take even this solace away from us.

A debatable sociological wisdom crept into the law with the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Children who watch violent television are at risk of becoming aggressive and violent themselves. Adults who steep themselves in the local news develop an exaggerated fear of the world, the so-called mean world syndrome.

As one of the many scholars plying this vein has noted approvingly, "policymakers are taking the position that television programmers should provide warnings to make viewers aware of the risks of watching certain shows." Because we are programmed by TV, we need the V-chip to reprogram our programmer.

Certainly television has wrought changes in the world, but before asking how it has reshaped human nature, how has human nature shaped television?

Since it became popular to denounce the "wasteland" in the early 1950s, surprisingly few have asked basic questions about the supply and demand for violent programming. The standard critique assumes supply without demand: The audience is dumbly trapped before the show, which is calculated to lift them to a higher state of "arousal" in order to become more receptive to the messages of advertisers.

Now we have the benefit of an economist looking at all this, James Hamilton of Duke, whose new book is Channeling Violence: The Economics Market for Violent Television Programming.

It turns out that broadcasters are neither as dumb nor as smart as the standard critique paints them. Pollsters constantly reiterate that Americans find TV "too violent," but combing more finely through the data one finds a substantial minority of dissenters, the people who actually watch violent TV. In Nielsen speak, these are males age eighteen to thirty-four, females age eighteen to thirty-four, and then males age thirty-five to forty-nine. There is demand after all, and it comes from young adults of both sexes.

That broadcasters are prepared to oblige them is no mystery. These viewers are advertisers' most valuable and elusive demographic group. Young adults are out building lives and careers. They are just developing the brand attachments that will last a lifetime but are seldom to be found in front of a TV where marketers can reach them.

Advertisers pay richly to reach youthful consumers. Ted Turner, who can often be heard denouncing television violence from a podium, has given us Saturday Night Nitro on TNT—whole evenings of delicious violence aimed at young adult viewers. Even when competing against Monday Night Football, 65 percent of the movies on TNT contained violence. The rest of the year 92 percent contained violence.

Mr. Hamilton says broadcasters don't aim their violence at younger children, and advertisers don't wound broadcasters for young children in the audience. Their viewing is an "externality," like pollution. But someone might have said the same about adult viewers back when the Big Three networks forced everyone to sit through the same programs.

Thanks to technology and the proliferation of channels, audiences have been freed to go their separate ways. Cable, especially premium cable, has become the violence medium, while violence has dropped steeply on the major networks.

The action-adventure genre has all but disappeared, with the sorry exceptions of CBS's Walker, Texas Ranger and ABC's new Vengeance Unlimited. The networks base their survival hopes on compiling the last large audiences in television-land, so they fill up our evenings with news-magazines and sitcoms—shows that attract young people without driving other viewers out of the room.

Why does the younger demographic have a special taste for violent programming? We can at least speculate.

Dolf Zillmann, a psychologist at the University of Alabama, has been one of the few paying attention to the viewer's perspective. Among his several contributions, he has shown that teenagers swarm to horror flicks to the boys can demonstrate their manly unflappability... are rated as more sexually desirable by their peers. Young people, as they set about making room for themselves in the world, are especially full of anxiety about whether good guys or bad guys jump in the end. Nor are they burdened unduly by a sense of propor.

Mr. Zillmann points to a program in which a lawyer cheats an lady out of her savings. The audience's sense of poetic justice is no less fulfilled by "seeing him burn and die in a crash," than versions by
Mr. Hamilton, the economist, supplies buttressing evidence when you consider that the young are less discriminating in matters of taste. Unsurprisingly, the more stars TV Guide awards a film, the less violent the film is likely to be. Violent shows are often bad shows. A lousy producer working with a bunch of mediocre writers and actors is going to resort to cloddish violence to dramatize what would otherwise have to be rendered by more literary means.

Criminologists have long noted that homicide becomes rarer among elite social groups as those groups make greater use of lawyers. TV seems to be evolving in the same direction. Lawyer shows are proliferating on the networks. Boilerplate courtroom drama may be replacing shoot-em-up as the preferred formula for resolving conflict.

Those who worry about television may sincerely dream of society becoming a nicer, less competitive place. Children do sometimes mow down their school chums, acting out a scene they may have seen on cable. But claiming we have to reprogram the media watched by 99.99 percent of us to influence the behavior of 0.01 percent is to be rendered helpless by a much smaller problem.

Only sick minds are interested in plotless violence. A British censor once explained his methods by saying he made certain cuts “because we were worried about a very few people who might be vulnerable to being influenced by playing one particular scene in that video repeatedly in their home.”

These “very few people” surely exist in the audience, but making television the issue only avoids the question of how we could be doing a better job of identifying the homicidally mentally ill before someone gets hurt.

A Desensitized Society Drenched in Sleaze

JEFF JACOBY

BEFORE READING: What’s the difference between the violence depicted in popular movies and described in the lyrics of some rap songs and the violence portrayed in Macbeth or a classic Greek play like Oedipus Rex?

I was seventeen years old when I first saw an X-rated movie. It was Thanksgiving in Washington, D.C. My college dorm had all but emptied out for the holiday weekend. With no classes, no tests, and nobody around, I decided to scratch an itch that had long been tormenting me.

I used to see these movies advertised in the old Washington Post and—like any seventeen-year-old boy whose sex life is mostly theoretical—I burned with curiosity. I wondered what such films might be like, what awful, thrilling secrets they might expose.

And so that weekend I took myself to see one. Full of anticipation, nervous and embarrassed, I walked to the Casino Royale at 14th Street and New York Avenue. At the top of a long flight of stairs, a cashier sat behind a cage. “Five dollars,” he demanded—steep for my budget, especially since a ticket to the movies in the late seventies usually cost $3.50. But I’d come this far and couldn’t turn back. I paid, I entered, I watched.

For about twenty minutes. The movie, I still remember, was called Cry for Cindy, and what I saw on the screen I’d never seen—I’d never even imagined—before. A man and a woman, oral sex, extreme closeups. The sheer gynecological explicitness of it jolted me. Was this the forbidden delight hinted at by those ads? This wasn’t arousing, it was repellent. I was shocked. More than that: I was ashamed.

I literally couldn’t take it. I bolted the theater and tumbled down the steps. My heart was pounding and my face was burning. I felt dirty. Guilty. I was conscience-stricken. All that—over a dirty movie.

Well, I was an innocent at seventeen. I was naive and inexperienced, shy with girls, the product of a parochial-school education and a strict upbringing. Explicit sex—in the movies, music, my social life—was foreign to me. Coming from such an environment, who wouldn’t recoil from Cry for Cindy or feel repelled by what it put up on that screen?

But here’s the rub: Dirty movies don’t have that effect on me anymore. I don’t make a practice of seeking out skin flicks or films with explicit nudity, but in the years since I was seventeen, I’ve certainly seen my share. Today another sex scene is just another sex scene. Not shocking, not appalling, nothing I feel ashamed to look at. With these bodies on the screen? Raunchy lyrics in a song? They may entertain me or they may bore me, but one thing they no longer do is make me blush.

I’ve become jaded. And if a decade and a half of being exposed to this stuff can leave me jaded—with my background, my religious schooling, my disciplined origins—what impact does it have on kids and young adults who have never been sheltered from anything? What impact does it have on a generation growing up amid dysfunctional families, broken-down schools, and a culture of values-free secularism?

If sex- and violence-drenched entertainment can desensitize me, it can desensitize anyone. It can desensitize a whole society. It can drag us to the point where nothing is revolting. Where nothing makes us blush.

And what happens to an unblushing society? Why, everything. Central Park joggers get raped and beaten into comas. Sixth-graders sleep around. Los Angeles rioters burn down their neighborhood and murder dozens of their neighbors. The Menendez boys blow off their parents’ heads. Lorena Bobbitt mutilates her husband in his sleep. “Artists” sell photographs of crucifixes dunked in urine. Prolife fanatics open fire on abortion clinics. Daytime TV fills up with deviants. The U.S. Naval Acad-
And we get used to all of it. We don't blush.

The point isn't that moviegoers walk out of Oliver Stone's latest grotesquerie primed to kill. Or that Gato Boys' sociopathic lyrics (“'Leavin' out her house, grabbed the bitch by her mouth / Drug her back in, slam her down on the couch. / Whipped out my knife, said, 'If you scream I'm cutting,' / Open her legs and . . . .') cause rape. The point is that when blood and mayhem and sleazy sex drench our popular culture, we get accustomed to blood and mayhem and sleazy sex. We grow jaded. Depravity becomes more and more tolerable because less and less scandalizes us.

Of course, the entertainment industry accepts no responsibility for any of this. Time Warner and Hollywood indignantly reject the criticisms heaped on them in recent days. We don't cause society's ills, they say, we only reflect them. "If an artist wants to deal with violence or sexuality or images of darkness and horror," said film director Clive Barker, "those are legitimate subjects for artists."

They are, true. Artists have dealt with violence and sexuality and horror since time immemorial. But debauchery is not art. There is nothing ennobling about a two-hour paean to bloodlust. To suggest that Snoop Dogg's barbaric gang-rape fantasies somehow follow in the tradition of Sophocles' tragic drama, Chaucer's romantic poetry, or Solzhenitsyn's moral testimony is to suggest that there is no difference between meaning and meaninglessness.

For Hollywood and Time Warner, perhaps there no longer is. The question before the house is, what about the rest of us?

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**Gore for Sale**

**EVAN GAHR**

**BEFORE READING:** Did you enjoy violent video games when you were younger? Can you explain why they did or did not appeal to you?

**FRESH CORPSES LITTER THE GROUND. BLOOD IS EVERYWHERE. VICTIMS MOAN AND BEG FOR MERCY.**

"For added realism, as the Web site of the developer (Running with Scissors) proudly states: "Corpses stay where they fall for the duration of the game — no mysterious disappearing bodies." But they do not fall right away. First "watch your victims n around on fire.""

"If you have a perversion with violence, it's no longer necessary to skulk around in arch of underground entertainments. Just visit your neighborhood electronics store. At the Wiz on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the notorious game Grand Theft Auto is smack in the middle of a display rack behind the cashier. The game's story line: As either a "gangsta" or "psycho bitch" you will be "running over innocent pedestrians, shooting cops, and evading the long arm of the law.""

"In another game, Duke Nukem (manufactured by GT Interactive), sex and violence combine. Determined to expel from Los Angeles the aliens who are kidnapping scantily clad women, Duke Nukem trolls the seedy quarters of the city and shoots anyone who gets in his way. He even kicks his victims' decapitated heads through glassposts to celebrate."

"In Doom, one of the most popular among violent video games and a favorite of one of the Littleton murderers, the player wanders through a maze of rooms, corridors, and halls killing everything in sight. Survive and you make it to the next level. For lethal power you can choose among pistol, shot gun, rocket launcher, and chainsaw. The aliens and monsters don't go down easily. Bodily fluid spurts all over the walls; aliens are left to lie in pools of blood, their limbs sometimes dangling in the air."

"The manufacturer of Doom, id Software, advises that you should prepare for the most intense mutant-laden, blood-spattered action ever. You don't just play Doom — you live it." You certainly do."

"A more advanced version of Doom, called Quake, is an "ultra-violent gore fest," as one online reviewer called it. Players wander through a maze and use every weapon imaginable to slay aliens. (The nail gun is a big hit.)"

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