The Attractions of Violent Entertainment

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This article summarizes a project supported by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation on the attractions of violent entertainment. We consider why violence is such a prominent feature of entertainment. The audiences for violent entertainment are examined, as is the nature of the violence that attracts them. The role of sensation-seeking, context, the justice motive, and social control in the entertainment experience are considered. Violent entertainment is placed in historical and social contexts, demonstrating that its appeal varies with the times.

In 1990 the International Herald Tribune reprinted the following in its column, "One Hundred Years Ago":

1890: Criminal Reading
LONDON—The Telegraph mentions the arrest of a youthful burglar, who confessed that he was led into crime by reading the "Life of a Detective." The Telegraph thinks that such a book ought to have warned the boy of the dangers of a life of crime. "As a matter of fact the book seems rather to have stimulated than weakened the criminal propensities of the precocious student. Detective literature may be as injurious to the morals of the young as stories eulogizing the achievements of robbers, highwaymen and pirates." It is curious that detective stories are among the favorite books of youthful criminals. [13–14 Oct.]

Whether detective or any other form of violent entertainment stimulates "criminal tendencies" has been widely discussed and studied. With predictable regularity, legislators consider the potentially harmful effects that violent images in mass media may have on our society and our youth, from hearings about


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violence in Hollywood films and the Kefauver investigations of juvenile delinquency in 1954–1955, which implicated comic books, to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1968–1969) and the Surgeon General's inquiries into the effects of television violence. But The Telegraph alluded to another issue, one that until recently had been ignored: the attractiveness of violent entertainment to a youthful audience. Whereas many lament the possible consequences of media violence, few have asked why an audience for violent entertainment exists in the first place. After all, no one is forced to watch Jean-Claude van Damme or a Quentin Tarantino film, go to a boxing match, play Mortal Kombat on their Nintendo platforms, or read Stephen King or Sherlock Holmes. Stallone, Schwarzenegger, and Mike Tyson are among the most highly paid and recognizable figures in the world.

In Japan, both men and women read “Manga,” extraordinarily gruesome comic books that feature extreme violence. In The Great Railway Bazaar, Paul Theroux picks up a fat comic book left by a girl seated next to him on a train in Japan. “The comic strips showed decapitations, cannibalism, people bristling with arrows like Saint Sebastian . . . . The girl returned to her seat and, so help me God, serenely returned to the distressing comic.” Does this graphic violence appeal to Japanese readers for the same reasons that Arnold Schwarzenegger films appeal to Westerners?

The attractions of violence are best explained by analyzing its portrayal, its audience, and the context in which it is consumed.

HOW ATTRACTION IS IT?

The attractions of violent entertainment are many and varied. It offers something for nearly everyone. The audiences for images of violence, death, and dying do not share a single motive; some viewers seek excitement, others companionship or social acceptance through shared experience, and still others wish to see justice enacted. Immersion in a fantasy world is conducive to the transcendental experience of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

To keep this in perspective, bear in mind that although violent entertainment is among the most frequent topics of study and controversy concerning the media, it is not the most popular genre. Although there seems always to have been an audience for violent enactments and portrayals, comedy is more popular, in part because it appeals equally to men and women, young and old.

Many people seem attracted to, or at least not wholly repelled by, violent imagery, but there may be a small audience that actually demands violent images in its entertainment. For some boys and men, the violence is the thing. But for
the majority of consumers of violent imagery, the violence is a means to ends, a device valued more for what it does than for what it is.

THE AUDIENCES FOR VIOLENT IMAGERY

It is difficult to think of a group of people that is not in some way an audience for violent imagery. People consume violent images, talk about violence, read about it, and write scientific articles about it. Boys and men are the most avid consumers, the target market. Every study of the subject finds that males far more than females are drawn to violent entertainment. This is true not only in the United States and Europe, but everywhere it has been studied, for example, in India, Japan, and the Philippines. It is boys and young men who play with toy guns, fill soccer stadia every Saturday, watch *Faces of Death*, and embrace *Beavis and Butthead*.

Violent entertainment appeals primarily to males, and it appeals to them mostly in groups. People rarely attend horror films or boxing matches alone, and boys do not often play war games by themselves. These are social occasions, particularly suitable for "male bonding" and communicating a masculine identity to your mates. Boys may play violent video games alone in their rooms, but they are almost certain to talk about them with their friends. The documentary film *Faces of Death*, for example, was regarded by adolescent boys as a rite of passage, where the acceptable reaction was to consider the gore "cool" rather than "goss.*

Which young men? Those with an above-average level of aggression and a moderately high need for excitement. Not every boy and man finds images of violence enjoyable, and not every female finds them repugnant. Why don’t females find this material as appealing as men do? Is it because men have different needs than women for excitement, for example, or because women have alternative means of satisfying the same needs, such as expressing emotion more openly? Individuals differ in their need for excitement and tolerance for stimulation. Those with a moderately high need for sensation find portrayals of violence more enjoyable than those with a lesser need. Individuals extremely high in sensation seeking, however, tend to find passive activities, like watching films and television, insufficiently stimulating; they prefer active dangers like sky diving and bungee jumping.

Adolescent boys like violent entertainment more than any other group does, although this does not mean that they like only violent entertainment or that they are the only audience for it. Relative to other children, highly aggressive boys find war toys more appealing than other toys and prefer violent sports, films,
video games, and television programs. Even preschool children's favorite fairy tales are related to their degree of aggression (Collins-Standley, Gan, Yu, & Zillmann, 1995).

The most popular spectator sports are similar to rock concerts and other public spectacles, in that they provide a physiological "kick" for the observer and also serve as social occasions for the expression of intense emotion. For men, aggressive sports like football and boxing provide opportunities to shout and yell. Perhaps males can overcome the social pressures on them not to be emotionally expressive with other males only in a hyper-masculine context like aggressive sports, rough-and-tumble play, and violent entertainment. Making airplane, automobile, and shooting sounds is one of the appeals of aggressive games, especially for boys.

WHY WE WATCH

People can choose the degree of emotional content and frenzy with which they are most comfortable, just as they do when selecting music to listen to. There is the heavy metal in-your-face violence of *Natural Born Killers*, documentary footage of suicides, accidents, and public executions in *Faces of Death*, the commedia dell'arte stylized violence of a Schwarzenegger or Stallone movie or of a martial arts video game, slapstick comic violence, and the more cerebral *Pulp Fiction*. There is the bookish violence of horror and detective stories, true crime reports of Ann Rule, and for those who want to do away with the emotional content altogether, there is the academic study of violence.

In discussions of violent entertainment there is much speculation about morbid curiosity and our baser instincts. But the interest in violent entertainment may have less to do with our "violent nature" and more to do with old-fashioned virtues of morality and justice. In examining armchair analyses, Cantor (1998), McCauley (1998), and Zillmann (1998) could find no support for several popular (and a few truly bizarre) explanations. They have laid to rest many of the speculations regarding violent entertainment. For example, they could find no evidence to support the position that people experience a catharsis of deep-seated fears, such as fear of the dark, or fear of aging, death, AIDS, technology, or the unknown. Likewise, there is little evidence to support the claim that viewers identify with the aggressor. Violent entertainment does not purge us of aggression or the propensity for violence, nor does it provide relief from unpleasant emotions.

"We are told ... that the atomic bomb created a new climate of fear, and that because people now are more death-conscious than ever before, they seek
exposure to displays of violence and death to work out their fears," wrote Zillmann (1998, pp. 185–186). This makes no more sense, he says, than "the claim that a fear of overpopulation is behind our interest in seeing as much slaughter of humanity as we can muster" (p. 186). Violent material does not "provide relief from ill emotions and motivations" (p. 186). The best evidence is that the audience is disturbed and disgusted by scenes of violence but continues to watch it anyway. The benefits, in other words, outweigh the costs.

The potential of a book, film, or video game to engross one in an imaginary world is one of the most attractive features of entertainment media. For a short time, one can become totally immersed in an activity. The willing suspension of disbelief, the leap into imaginary worlds, whether through literature, film, television, play, or sport, appeals on many levels. This potential inheres in all entertainment, of course, but it helps explain the tolerance for, if not the attraction of, violent imagery.

**SOCIAL IDENTITY**

I once spent an evening with a group of teenage girls and boys watching horror films that they themselves had selected. How would these middle-class American youngsters react to the dismemberments and exploding bodies? These young people seemingly found it difficult to watch the bloody excesses, though boys and girls expressed their distress in different ways. When the music-enhanced story suggested impending bloodshed, the girls would look away from the screen and talk animatedly among themselves about unrelated topics—school, friends, parties. The boys apparently did not feel free to look away; while still gazing determinedly at the screen, they distanced themselves emotionally from the action by commenting upon the special effects, how they were done, whether the gore looked convincingly real. For a moment they saw the film through the dispassionate eyes of a film critic. When the music gave the "all clear" signal, they resumed their engagement with the story.

"Distancing" oneself from the mayhem makes it tolerable. These adolescent boys and girls were able to fine-tune their degree of involvement. I spoke with one young woman who watches horrific films. She makes them palatable by squeezing her leg until it hurts, distracting herself while looking at the screen. She, too, wants to demonstrate that she can take it. Zillmann (1998) described the process well: "Boys must prove to their peers, and ultimately to themselves, that they are unperturbed, calm and collected in the face of terror; and girls must similarly demonstrate their sensitivity by being appropriately disturbed, dismayed, and disgusted" (p. 197).
In the 1960s people defined themselves in part by their reactions to \textit{Bonnie and Clyde} (Hoberman, 1998). The violence of the film became a subject of conversation and social maneuvering, the purposes served by our public responses to all forms of entertainment.

Cantor wrote that "violent television series might be characterized as anxiety-reducing, justice-restoring genres that attract anxious, more empathic children, who side emotionally with the 'good guy' over the 'bad guy' and use the programs to control their anxieties" (1998, pp. 113–114). However, violence for violence's sake should be considered separately. "Children who are attracted by something described only as 'very violent' are more likely to be children with a good deal of exposure to violence in their own lives" and who enjoy the violence "irrespective of moral considerations or outcomes to protagonists" (p. 114). But the basis for their attraction remains unclear: Is it because, in contrast to what they witness on the screen, their own lives seem less wretched? Perhaps aggressive youngsters have a greater need for excitement, which underlies both their antisocial behavior and their entertainment preferences. It may be a test of their manliness, or a way to make or maintain friends.

**SENSATION-SEEKING AND EXCITEMENT**

Perhaps our attraction to violent imagery is an outcome of what sociologist Elias (1982) called the "civilizing process," a way to fill the void left by diminished opportunities to experience the real thing. As death and dying were displaced from the family parlor to the funeral parlor, when the venue for capital executions was changed from public squares to behind prison walls, at just this time did public interest in images of death and dying increase, according to photo historian Goldberg (1998).

Regardless of whether we crave excitement because society is increasingly "civilized" and "unexciting," it is certainly true that some individuals crave excitement more than others. An undeniable characteristic of violent imagery is its emotional wallop. It gives most people a jolt. Not everyone finds this kind of stimulation pleasant, but some do. Psychologist Zuckerman's (1979) concept of sensation-seeking helps to explain individual differences in attraction to violence.

For the rebellious young, the mere fact that the topic is taboo is reason enough for engagement. Their curiosity about the forbidden is satisfied, and they learn to manage anxiety and defeat fear by distorting and exaggerating reality. At the same time, they bond with others, story tellers, and peers by sharing intense emotional experiences.
In the wonderfully titled *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Clover (1992) observed that extravagantly participatory audiences (shouting, throwing things) were the norm in all manner of performances (operatic, dramatic, symphonic) until toward the end of the 19th century, when they were silenced and "sacralized."

Audiences express uproarious disgust ("Gross!") as often as they express fear, and it is clear that the makers of slasher films pursue the combination. More particularly: spectators tend to be silent during the stalking scenes (although they sometimes call out warnings to the stalked person), scream out at the first slash, and make loud noises of revulsion at the sight of the bloody stump. The rapid alternation between registers—between something like "real" horror on one hand and a camp, self-parodying horror on the other—is by now one of the most conspicuous characteristics of the tradition. (p. 41)

Comic relief provided by the audience or the medium is one of the several clues that the violence on both sides of the joke is unreal. Negative emotions can be mixed with positive ones. In one study, the degree of enjoyment of the film *Steel Magnolias* was directly related to the degree of sadness experienced during the film (de Wied, Zillmann, & Ordman, 1994). People may be attracted to violent entertainment, but they do not necessarily enjoy the gory details.

**WHEN VIOLENCE IS NOT ATTRACTIVE**

The premise that portrayals of violence are inherently appealing is untenable. Depending upon personal dispositions and social conditions, these portrayals are capable of evoking grief, disgust, or elation at extreme levels. From studies using bloody films that viewers found decidedly unappealing, violent portrayals can be disturbing, disgusting, and depressing, but these effects are insufficient to deter some viewers (McCauley, 1998).

Why don't negative feelings, such as fear and sadness, make for an unpleasant viewing experience? Feelings of control mediate this process. With the joystick or remote control in their hands, the audience or players can control not only what appears on the screen but indirectly what effects it will have on them. A remote control is ultimately a device for self control, for producing satisfying emotional and physiological states in the user. In a study at the University of Utrecht, students who viewed a violent videotape while merely holding a remote control experienced less distress than those who viewed the same tape without a remote control. Presumably, the feeling of control made the gruesome scenes less unpleasant.

Some see predictability as the most appealing feature of violent entertainment, from cowboy movies to horror films. We know that the bad guys
will “buy it” in the end, or in the sequel. But this does not account for our interest in blood sports, where the outcome is not known in advance (Guttmann, 1998). Perhaps the unpredictability of events like a boxing match is attenuated by the knowledge that there will come another fight, another game. Maybe it isn’t over when it’s over. Although the outcome of a specific game or match is unpredictable, a subsequent one may provide a sense of closure.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Both the context of violent images themselves and the circumstances in which they are experienced play a crucial role in their appeal. People go to horror films in order to experience in safety emotions that are usually associated with danger. In order to experience anything like pleasure from exposure to violent or threatening images, the audience must feel relatively safe and secure in their surroundings. Furthermore, there must be cues that the violent images are produced for purposes of entertainment and consumption. McCauley (1998) conducted research on the sort of bloody imagery that university students find unappealing and disgusting. He asked university students to view three video tapes until they found them intolerable. One was of a steer in a slaughterhouse, another of a monkey killed and served fresh to connoisseurs in China, and the third, surgery on a young girl, whose face had to be sliced open and the skin pulled away from the skull. Few watched these videos to the end. Bloody images lose their appeal when there are few cues to their unreality. If the violent imagery does not itself reveal its unreality, the physical environment may do so. We are aware of holding a book, of sitting in a movie theater or a sports stadium, of manipulating a joystick or remote control.

Without background music, awareness of the camera, exaggerated special effects, or film editing, images of violence are unattractive to both males and females, according to McCauley’s (1998) experiments. In a Scandinavian study, preschool children typically showed facial expressions of joy while watching cartoon violence, but showed negative emotions while watching realistic physical violence (Lagerspetz, Wahlroos, & Wendelin, 1978).

Not only the viewing situation, but the larger social world as well influences the attractiveness of violence. Interest in violent imagery changes with the times. War and war films are not independent of one another, nor are crime and crime entertainment. Real violence activates aggressive associations, images, and emotions. These, in turn, may heighten the preference for further exposure to violent entertainment. If children first hear aggressive stories, they are more likely to choose aggressive toys for play (Jukes & Goldstein, 1993). The same relationship is evident in preferences for violent film entertainment, war toys and
video games, and enjoyment of blood sports (Keefer, Goldstein, & Kasiarz, 1983). One study reported an increase in attendance at violent films by University of Wisconsin students following the murder of a female student on campus (Boyanowsky, Newton, & Walster, 1974). During the Persian Gulf War, sales of replica missiles skyrocketed (Goldstein, 1994). Heightened public support for military expenditures is related to increased sales of war toys and in the prevalence of war movies (Regan, 1994).

THE JUSTICE MOTIVE

The popularity of violent entertainment in times of war may reassure the audience that good will prevail over evil. Displays of violence result in distress, which is reduced when the bad guys get their comeuppance. According to Zillmann (1998), negative attitudes about the victims contribute greatly to the enjoyment of humiliation, disparagement, defeat, and destruction . . . . Observing the audience of any contemporary action film, especially the apparent euphoria of young men upon seeing the bad guys being riddled with bullets and collapsing in deadly convulsions, should convince the doubtful that Western audiences fully exercise their moral right of rejoicing in response to exhibitions of righteous violence . . . . There can be little doubt, then, that righteous violence, however brutal but justified by the ends, will prompt gloriously intense euphoric reactions the more it is preceded by patently unjust and similarly brutal violence. (pp. 205–208)

Viewers come to have strong feelings and fears regarding protagonists and antagonists and decide in moral terms what fate they deserve. “Implicitly justified hatred and the associated call for punitive action allows us to uninhibitedly enjoy the punitive action when it materializes. Negative affective dispositions, then, set us free to thoroughly enjoy punitive violence. As we have morally condemned a villain for raping and maiming, for instance, we are free to hate such a person, can joyously anticipate his execution, and openly applaud it when we finally witness it” (Zillmann, 1998, p. 202). Thus the typical storyline of enjoyable entertainment involves the establishment of animosity toward wrongdoers, which makes later violence against them seem justified and hence enjoyable.

ALMOST REAL

Does realism enhance or diminish the acceptance or appeal of violent images? People prefer realistic violence in sports, news reports, and magazine photos. Violence in sports is appealing not because of any “blood lust” among spectators
but as a sign that the participants are willing to take risks for their sport, an indication of their passionate commitment (Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989). In other realms, such as film, children's television, and play, it appears that violent imagery must carry cues to its unreality or it loses appeal.

Based on his studies of disgusting films, McCauley (1998) offered two possibilities:

1. Emotions elicited by drama are weaker than everyday emotions. So the arousal accompanying fear, disgust, and pity can be experienced as pleasurable. Within a dramatic or protective frame, violent imagery becomes exciting rather than anxiety provoking.

2. The emotions experienced in drama are qualitatively different from their real-life counterparts. "Indeed, this theory would assert that we err in calling dramatic emotions by the same names as everyday emotions; the dramatic emotions are a parallel but different reality," wrote McCauley (p. 160). Perhaps when the violence is almost real, so too are the emotions it elicits. Both sides of the equation (the violent images and the emotions that result) are recognizably different from the genuine articles. Hence, the distress is not too intense to spoil our enjoyment.

**VIOLENT IMAGES AS SOCIAL CONTROL**

Gerbner and his colleagues (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) at the University of Pennsylvania reported that heavy viewers of violence in the media come to see the world as a frightening and dangerous place. As a result, they lend support to the forces of law and order. In Gerbner's cultivation theory, media violence is a means of social control. Similarly, Tatar (1998) considered children's stories as a form of moral instruction, produced by adults to frighten children into obedience. Do these scary tales with morals produce obedience? Yes, she says, if it is clear what must be done to reduce the jeopardy. Children who disobey their parents, lie, or steal in these tales meet horrific ends. The message is that obedience, truthfulness, and honesty will enable children to avoid these horrible consequences.

Violent entertainment did not suddenly arrive on the scene, and it is not likely to depart it any time soon. People become acclimated to the arousal generated by violent images, but they have a continuing need for excitement. Does this mean that we shall have to accept ever-increasing violence and terror for entertainment purposes? "It would appear to be so," answered Zillmann (1998, p. 211).

Can the future course of violent entertainment be predicted? The violence in some media has been toned down over time, as occurred with fairy tales, whereas
in others, like Hollywood films, it has increased. What is technologically feasible will almost inevitably be tried. Are the exploding bodies of Hollywood only a test of the limits of new technology? If so, we can expect increasingly realistic shoot-em-ups as virtual reality and other new technologies evolve.

It is up to the image makers to put violence in perspective, to emphasize, as they do, the unacceptability of random, arbitrary, anarchistic, and plain sadistic violence, and to portray violence that ultimately serves justice and the good of humanity. The public can and does influence the limits of acceptable displays of violence. There is opposition to “ultimate fighting,” and even the future of boxing is in doubt because of growing public discontent with its crippling injuries. Eventually it might suffer the fate of smoking. Granted that the portrayal of violent action is inevitable, nevertheless, the limits we place on it, the manner in which we consume it, and the ways we respond to it help to define a culture.

REFERENCES


