

On Violence in Media: A review essay by Carolyn Marvin
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Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment. By Sissela Bok. Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 1999. 194 pp.
\$22.00 (hard), \$13.00 (soft).

Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment. Edited by Jeffrey Goldstein. New York: Oxford
University Press, 1998. 270 pp. \$55.00 (hard), \$19.95 (soft).

Defining Violence: The Search for Understanding. By David Morrison et al. Luton, UK: University of Luton
Press, 1999. 256 pp, (£12.95)

One landing scenario for John Glenn's Friendship space capsule in 1962 placed him in remote New Guinea. Envisioning how local inhabitants might react to explosive noise followed by the sudden descent of a sky-borne capsule disgorging a man in a silver suit and helmet, Glenn's handlers equipped him with a document in several languages. In English it read: "I am a stranger. I come in peace. Take me to your leader, and there will be a massive reward for you in eternity." The first order of business among strangers is discovering whether they plan to hurt each other.

Violence is central to social existence, one of the root foundations of social order and prestige. Its monopoly defines authority in nation-states. Celebrated moments of group history reference it. It is also clearly a threat to individual and group life. Though we fear the seductions of its representations in image and narrative, we worry more that people might become indifferent to it. We also believe some murderous images and stories are enjoyed in good conscience. We teach the young the glorious history of crusading wars. *Hansel and Gretel*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *The Legend of Sleeping Hollow* are treasured children's stories. Even religious pacifists celebrate violence. The central, endlessly represented event of Christianity is a public execution.

How do scholars look at violence these days? They seem to be thinking about it in newly sophisticated ways. (Representations of violence in research may be indulged with a strong sense of virtue, despite its limited entertainment appeal.) In the old days of media violence research, the task was measuring short-term changes in attitudes and aggressive responses to narrowly specified "stimuli." Such changes were taken to predict how likely male college students or young children were to change their attitudes or behavior following "exposure" to depicted violence. How such transformations translated to nonlaboratory life remained obscure. An additional difficulty was the failure of this research to demonstrate long-term effects, nor was it clear how a tradition that preferred summing individual responses to analyzing interaction among social actors with histories in real contexts could conceptualize such effects.

Efforts were also made to characterize media violence, particularly on television. The quantity of media violence—this meant the amount of violence in TV drama—was held to be important independently of intentions of broadcasters or interpretations of audiences. The bold and untested assumption was that reducing overall doses of media violence would result in something good for individuals and society. Such measurements turned on the possibility of a clear and objective definition of media violence, a definition on which researchers have never entirely agreed. The reason is

instructive: Morality intrudes at every point in framing what counts as a violent act. Putting aside this problem, there is evidence that some kinds of media violence teach aggression in some contexts. Because this line of research has not been able to step from the lab into real life, it remains stymied.

There are new questions out there. They do not ask how to establish dose definitions of media violence, but how cultures represent and circulate notions about violence and what purposes such notions serve. Researchers are examining how violence is manifested in sports, literature, fairy tales, video games, journalism, religion, and other domains. They are noticing how much energy and treasure cultures devote to fabricating variegated messages about violence for many types of audiences, and the enormous range of sites and occasions that frame them. They are assuming that representations of violence are always culturally instructive, without concluding they are necessarily antisocial or dangerous (or healing and benign, either). They are asking how members of groups with different experiences of real-life violence understand its representations and what the history of such representations has been in high and low cultural forms. They are investigating the structure and sequence of violent narratives.

Three new books are especially interesting, *Why We Watch* is a Guggenheim Foundation-sponsored collaboration among scholars of history, literature, film, psychology, anthropology, sports, folklore, religion, and photojournalism attracted to studying the nature and functions of violent entertainment. The range of issues considered is imaginative and useful. Allen Gunman, for example, offers historical and contemporary evidence that sports increases rather than reduces aggressiveness in spectators. Guttman's conclusions contradict claims that sports is a safety valve for violent impulses, at least in the short term, though there is no proof that eliminating sports would reduce overall levels of violence in society over, say, a generation. Indeed, it is conceivable that doing away with sports would increase violence from its present levels.

Different sports have produced different levels of spectator violence. Boxing incites lots of aggressive display and language but comparatively little violent fan behavior. Far less violent soccer games routinely set the stage for brutal fan misbehavior in Great Britain. Some of the bloodiest spectator violence has taken place in the great historical civilizations, notably in Roman gladiatorial contests and Byzantine chariot races. Teaching aggression through sports may be an especially efficient and effective way to instruct the young males who are counted on to do the violent work of society. Perhaps we want them to know things we cannot quite own up to and must deny, even as we move the message clearly and often.

Vicki Goldberg observes that Westerners' first-hand experiences of death and violence have receded dramatically since the late 18th century, as representations of death and violence have increased in sensationalism, intimacy, and detail. The customary context of violent imagery has also shifted from religion to the secular arena of news and entertainment. It seems we must chew on violence. As death at home and in the public square has retreated to remote institutions, and street violence has come to be considered aberrant, we have imaginatively reintroduced both with a vengeance. In this regard, the popular press is our most prolific messenger. (I am reminded of a recent *Nightline* series portraying the effects of a hypothetical bioterrorist attack on an American city. While assuring viewers that the horrifying imagery they saw was fictive, moderator Ted Koppel gravely proclaimed three nights running that experts believe the issue is not whether such events will happen, but when.) Goldberg's conclusions raise significant questions about the social role and function of

violence. Having laid out her grand hypothesis, however, Goldberg is less persuasive in establishing and explaining smaller interval changes in violent imagery in the United States since World War II.

Toy soldiers and weapons are among the oldest toys and offer children the opportunity to rehearse violence in imaginative play. Jeff Goldstein considers how such play may serve rational, desirable, and even moral purposes, especially for boys who learn early that men often die in violent encounters. Does violent play teach strategic competence? Does it assist in shaping a sensibility attuned to justice? Does its very improbability reassure? In another chapter, Dolf Zillman argues that imaginary mastery has psychological value for managing arousal and anxiety. Goldstein contrasts certain forms of aggressive play among school boys, in which clear rules signal that injury is not intended and players may be evicted for breaking them, with schoolgirl gossip that aims to inflict social death on its targets, though it is devoid of physical injury.

Folklorist Maria Tatar argues that adults have always instrumentalized narrative violence to discipline and socialize children in the service of guiding and healing them. This is one of its attractions for adults who produce children's literature, which presents both burlesque violence - irreverent exaggeration that turns right-thinking official order on its head--and retaliatory violence, which teaches notions of physical punishment. In the 19th century, violence in children's stories was graphic and gory in order to make the desired moral impression. Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* (1845), the most enduringly popular German-language children's book, recounts the story of Conrad the Thumbsucker, whose thumbs are disciplinarily lopped off by a tailor wielding huge shears. In an illustration, blood drips from Conrad's mutilated hands. The sadistic style of much early children's literature was used to drive home a range of instructions from the consequences of playing with fire to the importance of eating nourishing food and cultivating other responsible habits. If "violent delights" (from Shakespeare) are markedly less visible than pleasurable ones in contemporary children's literature, the goal of both techniques remains control over the child. For surprise, cathartic pleasure, reversal, tragedy, and surreal comic effect, violent narratives such as the original Grimms's tales may often be superior to narratives that conform to the protective standards lately demanded by adults for literature aimed at children. Not that violence alone appeals to kids. Joanne Cantor cites a survey with 26% of parents reporting that *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* was one of their children's favorite programs, and another in which 33% of parents reported that *Full House*, a situation comedy, was among their favorites. This is, of course, hardly a rousing victory for comedy, and the distinction fails to recognize how much physical force and its verbal representations inhere in comedy.

Concern about the impact of violent representation on adolescent and young adult males is explained by the fact that they are the most dangerous group in any society. In perilous times it also falls to them to carry out society's righteous violence, usefully defined by Zillman as violence whose perpetration serves, however remotely, the common good. As Goldstein notes, though, we are all receivers of violent messages. One of the strengths of this collection is its recognition of the variety of persons to whom violent messages are addressed and the richly layered meanings attached to their production and reception. No one, however, entertains the possibility that society must circulate messages about how to understand and perform as well as control violence, or that these messages must be fashioned in such a way that everyone will sooner or later get whatever point about violence is appropriate for their particular cultural location and responsibility.

Representing the smaller number of authors in this volume who do not focus on macrosocial explanations, Dolf Zillman considers what evolutionary, psychological, and social-psychological explanations can teach us about the drawing power of violent entertainment. (He includes gender influences and effects.) Zillman's search for integrated theory reflects a far broader focus than the child at the end of a picture tube. His chief concern is how anxiety and distress produced by watching violence are transformed into euphoria when that violence is contextualized as righteous. He also punctures a number of speculative notions about why violent entertainment attracts. The most familiar is catharsis. If repeated exposure to violence offers a safety valve for anger and violent impulses, Zillman points out, repeated exposure to love and sympathy must likewise drain us of impulses for affection and charity. Not catharsis, but emotion-flattening habituation is the consequence of repeated exposure to violent excitation.

Though no one offers an explanatory framework for relating patterns of violent representation to cultural variation in the manner, say, of Norbert Elias, who attributed emerging habits of self-control to the transformation of early modern Europe from a feudal warrior society to a society of centralized states, these articles suggest links on which broader understandings of the functions and meanings of violent representations across time and space could be built. If symbolic violence matters, it matters not only in media, but in boot camp, in medical school, in religious preaching. J. Haberman, for example, understands American mass culture as a form of spectacular political theater that communicates as a feedback system to electoral politics, with which it overlaps. In this arena, violence is a symbolic currency in which notions about ourselves and others compete for cultural definition, existence, and acceptance.

Another interesting contribution comes from a group of University of Leeds based scholars and media practitioners. A team led by David E. Morrison assembled 12 adult focus groups of 8 respondents each to view *Pulp Fiction*, made-for-TV drama, documentaries, news footage, cartoons, comedy, and children's programs. Prompted by researchers' probes, groups articulated their own criteria for what counts as violence in media and graded a range of presentations from unobjectionable to objectionable. Excerpted transcripts of their discussions, framed by researchers' explanatory glosses, constitute the substance of *Defining Violence*.

The researchers guessed correctly that notions about screen violence would vary with respondents' gender, age, parental status, and familiarity with real-world violence. They recruited cops, war veterans, "hard" young men living in a milieu of violence, similarly "hard" young women, their counterparts from milieus where violence is an outrageous rarity, and mothers and fathers.

What do folks say about violence, given the opportunity? The greater their familiarity with authentic violence, the more they recognize: the contrived character of depicted violence. (In brief, authentic violence is quickly over, rarely observed with the intimate focus afforded by camera, and its practitioners are usually not technically skilled.) Knowledge of these conventions helps buffer viewers from shock. Those with real-life knowledge of violence are more tolerant of screen violence and less likely to believe it desensitizes viewers. For those without such familiarity, screen violence becomes the definition of what authentic violence looks like.

Morrison and colleagues avoid theoretical conclusions in this small-scale exploratory work. They achieve a conscientious if laborious specification of the categories respondents used to decide what counts as violence and when it is excessive or "ought" not be shown. Respondents calibrate "violence"

with the nature and degree of exhibited force, and, more importantly, to whether moral codes of conduct have been violated. The key finding is that moral judgment controls every step in estimating the presence and acceptability of screen violence.

This results in a few interestingly quirky judgments. Not a single group was willing to rate *Pulp Fiction* as violent in any important sense because of the comic intention built into it. Older women who did not consider a graphic television documentary on domestic abuse unacceptably violent did classify as unacceptably violent bad language in a number of examples. Familiarity with iconically violent films and dramas was routine, even for those with low thresholds for assigning and tolerating screen violence. Knowledge of the mediated culture of violence is a widely shared form of contemporary cultural literacy, whatever one's moral posture.

Respondents were capable of endlessly refining their basic criteria to accommodate new elements, such as whether exhibited violence was distant in time. (Historical war films fared well as acceptable violence.) The more personally threatened viewers felt by any given form of violence, the more they were likely to consider its portrayal objectionable. Describing themselves as not personally threatened by domestic abuse, women with little real-world experience of violence and high fear of crime were undisturbed by graphic images of physical brutality in a documentary on the subject because of its educational value. Because the focus of discussion was on what respondents considered acceptable, whether or not they had differing notions of acceptability for themselves and their children was not systematically addressed.

As children are the target of greatest concern in the media violence debate, it is instructive that no Leeds participants-researchers or respondents-thought to count personal observations of kids fighting or physical discipline of children by parents as real-life contact with violence (though personal observations of other displays of physical force did count). This omission reflects the deeply embedded moral framing of definitions of violence, despite the fact that unjust and harsh force-criteria explicitly linked to the presence of violence-are common among siblings and playmates. We know less about the exercise of physical force by parents, but not because it is uncommon.

Sissela Bok's *Maybem* is a distinguished lay contribution to the debate about regulating media violence. Bok belongs to a long tradition of moralists who fear the social consequences of undisciplined and popular violent images. As a widely published moral philosopher, Bok is also no typical layperson, but she avoids technical vocabulary and methodological hairsplitting. She also presents the challenge of conversations between laymen and specialists because of her apparent lack of familiarity with the documented weaknesses and ambiguities of the research on which she relies. All research has gaps, and an awareness of them is critical to informed discussion. Bok treats research conclusions as more straightforward than they are usually understood to be within the research community. She also adds a conceptualizing layer that is vulnerable to serious challenge.

Throughout, Bok compares exposure to screen violence with alcohol and cigarette consumption. In the United States, both are regulated through access to sales, required product warnings, and, in the case of alcohol, legal definitions of physiological impairment. Bok notes that alcohol and cigarette regulations preceded conclusive evidence of their damaging effects. Thus, she counts reluctance to regulate screen violence as a failure of public nerve. Media violence is not ingested, however. It is interpreted within moral frameworks that, to be sure, differ wildly. The issue is not whether ingestion of alcohol and cigarettes makes us more or less morally responsible, but how such ingestion transforms

reaction time, motor functions, and perceptual acuity, or gives us cancer or emphysema. Sipping alcohol from a silver goblet or sitting on a curb with a bottle in a paper bag is not what makes us drunk. Given body weight and other physiological factors, if we imbibe a certain quantity of alcohol in a certain period, it doesn't matter that we are persons of moral integrity and discrimination, or what the circumstances are. We are just as drunk.

In its represented form, violence is a social relation that addresses questions about who is a fit object of moral respect. What shapes our understanding of it and how we feel about it have no genuine parallel in how alcohol and cigarettes work on motor functions or affect internal organs. (If this is wrong, researchers may need lab shields to block images from their visual field just as X-ray technicians block their bodies from radiation exposure.) The notion of desensitization confuses a physiological response with a moral posture. If repeated exposure to violent stimuli will morally disable us, why would we not expect the same effect from immersion in religious or patriotic symbols or from onscreen presentations of love and respect?

Bok's failure to confront the logic of her argument is signaled by an anecdote that begins her book and then drops from sight. She describes the Gebusi, a small New Guinea rainforest tribe who firmly repudiate expressions of anger and violence in their child-rearing practices and entertainments, which consist of carefully controlled displays of ritual antagonism among tribe members. It turns out the Gebusi have one of the highest homicide rates in the world, about 40 times the U.S. rate. Nearly a third of adult Gebusi deaths result from murder. Those killed are often suspected of sorcery, their killings quickly hushed up. Cigarette and alcohol comparisons notwithstanding, vigilant restrictions on mediated violence (suppressing information about real killings and attentively restraining dramatized violence) have not helped the Gebusi. Bok clearly hopes to fend off First Amendment obstacles to regulation by linking media violence to models of disease and physiological impairment instead of to models of interpretation and imagination. The story of the Gebusi suggests at least the possibility that regulating violent representations may be quite irrelevant for producing a peaceful society. Because Bok never returns to it, the story remains a pointed challenge to her argument.

Violence, the range of arguments and evidence suggests, is not only socially and individually destructive, but operates as a positive means of self-and social creation, of realizing personal and social autonomy. Its moral dimensions and consequences are always complex and ultimately uncertain. This does not mean that there is nothing to choose in the face of such indeterminacy. However, simple formulas about the meaning of violence cannot address the complexity of lived experience in any useful way. The social relations that are organized by violence take different ideas for granted at different times. Earlier ages often saw great moral value in the display of the body's pain. Some quite violent displays appear in the greatest artworks of Western civilization and elsewhere. Understanding how cultures circulate meanings about the exercise of physical force by some human beings on others requires a richer background language and thicker description and appraisals than can be found in the simplifying presumption that such representations are inevitably coarsening, frequently dangerous, and always to be avoided.

I close with a childhood memory of "ingested" screen violence by writer Tobias Wolff. He writes of the 1950s:

Television was very big on the Nazis then. Every week they screened new horrors, always with a somber narrator to remind us that this wasn't make-believe but actual history, that what we

were seeing had really happened and could happen again if we did not maintain ourselves in a state of vigilance. These shows always ended the same way. Overviews of ruined Berlin. Grinning GIs rousting the defeated Aryan soldiery from their hiding places in barn and cave and sewer. Himmler dead in his cell, hollow-eyed Hess in Spandau. The now lathered-up narrator crowing, "Thus was the high-flying Prussian eagle brought to ground!" and "Thus did the littler Fuhrer and his bullyboys turn tail and run, giving up forever their dream of The Thousand Year Reich!"

These glimpses of humiliation and loss lasted only a few minutes. They were tacked on as a pretense that the point of the show was to celebrate the victory of goodness over evil. We saw through this fraud, of course. We saw that the real point was to celebrate snappy uniforms and racy Mercedes staff cars and great marching, thousands of boots shimmying down together while banners streamed overhead while strong voices sang songs that stirred our blood though we couldn't understand a word. The point was to watch Stukas peel off and dive toward burning cities, tanks blowing holes in buildings, men with Lugers and dogs ordering people around. These shows instructed us in the faith we were already beginning to hold: that victims are contemptible, no matter how much people pretend otherwise; that it is more fun to be inside than outside, to be arrogant than to be kind, to be with a crowd than to be alone.

Wolff has grown up to write vivid, gripping, and morally sensitive narratives. His fascination with Nazis, nurtured by mass media, seems to have served him and us well. His experience offers encouragement for the more complicated and challenging approach to cultural representations of violence that new approaches offer.