

VIOLENCE IN THE MEDIA:
SOME PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

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SOME PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

Violence in the media is such a big and complicated subject that a brief but meaningful approach is extremely difficult. However, a few personal recollections may be helpful.

When I was a little boy back in the late 1930's, I frequently would go to the movies on Saturday afternoons to see a western. While there were various stars, Gene Autry and Roy Rogers are the most memorable to me. They always had bad guys to fight against, but the good guys always won. The violence that was involved did not seem bad. It was regrettable but necessary for the decent people to use violence as a last resort to protect any who were being treated unjustly. The violence was acceptable because it was not bloody, because it had some humorous moments, and because it was serving a noble ideal. The lack of bloodshed made the violence seem not all that painful. Also, it was pretty funny when Gabby Hayes or Smiley Burnette would assist the heroes against the villains with some clownish but effective maneuver. Any real American or other decent person simply had to have a sense of pride that justice was upheld. Besides, Gene Autry and Roy Rogers could both sing some pleasant tunes with homespun words. Add that the picture show was just about the only place to have air conditioning, a blessed attraction during burning Texas summers, and it should be easy to understand that a little boy would feel mighty tall as the movie ended and he strode up the aisle and out of the building.

Violence in the comic books had a different atmosphere from what was standard in the cowboy movies of the time. The comic

books were in color and often had detailed, intriguing art work that contrasted with the often plain sets and sagebrush country of the movie cowboys. While Gene Autry and Roy Rogers were also triumphant by the end of the picture, the comic books showed their heroes in special costumes that highlighted extremely well developed, beautifully muscled bodies. What little boy would not want to grow up and have a physique at least somewhat like that of Charles Atlas? Moreover, these comic book heroes used their powers in the service of benevolent justice. The villains were often very unusual, colorful characters in their own right. Batman would battle such people as Penguin and the Joker. There was an aura of unreality because the typical villains did not seem much like real people, not even as much as the bad guys of the somewhat more believable western movies. Also, the comic book villains would miraculously survive desperate circumstances and reappear in later episodes. The violence used against the comic book villains did not seem too bad, because the villains started the trouble and were obviously evil and also because they were not bothered all that much by the efforts to restrain them. They were only temporarily halted and would soon continue their nefarious schemes. It was reassuring even to imagine that forces of good were working against forces of evil. But it was disturbing to think that ordinary citizens and their agencies apparently could not successfully cope with threats to their security. Could the job be done only by such superheroes as Superman and Captain Marvel? Even they were not able to rid the world entirely of those who used violence for evil purposes.

American involvement in World War II in the period 1941-45 was, of course, extensively covered by all the media. Radio reports conveyed a sense of betrayal and outrage when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The Japanese were not clever but were viciously evil to use their bombs and guns against us when their peace emissaries had only recently been in Washington. Whatever we could do to defend ourselves and fight back would be justified. It was scary to look at the maps in each issue of The Weekly Reader for school children and learn that the Germans were driving constantly deeper into Russia. Movietone News showed us the blitzkrieg in action, carried out in large part with the use of the evil-looking Stuka dive bomber. The mellow but authoritative voice of Lowell Thomas helped us to understand that all of this was serious business. The movies showed us the Japanese as viciously sinister menaces and the Germans as almost mechanical, inhuman monsters. The movies also showed us bloody but heroic battles by our Marines, frightening but vigilant missions by our submarines, and both the daring aerobatics of our fighter planes and the reassuring hum of our bombers. The men in the air provided the greatest romance and glamour, even when they were shooting down an enemy plane or bombing a factory. The terrible atrocities of the Japanese and the Germans, from the Bataan Death March to Dachau and Auschwitz, helped to justify our retaliatory violence against them. Besides, to my knowledge, we did not mistreat our prisoners of war. The German prisoners who were taken to Rosenberg, Texas, were kept at our county fair grounds. The worst thing done to them was that they were made to help our

farmers, the kind of work that they might have done anyway if they had not been involved in the war.

The great problem was that actual people, not movie actors or comic book villains but Germans and Japanese and Americans, were being disfigured, dismembered, and blown to pieces. Many fathers, brothers, and sons would never return home. Of those who did, many would continue to suffer the effects of war wounds in hospitals for veterans. As a way of inflicting suffering in order to avoid even greater suffering, the atomic bomb was something of a relief. Newsreel footage of atomic bomb blasts conveyed some idea of the awesome energy that was released. There was a kind of beauty in the explosive force and the mushroom cloud. It was regrettable that some Japanese would be the recipients of this destructive power; but it was good, however ironical, that a terrible weapon had been found that could help bring an end to the other violence of the war. However acceptable the use of the atomic bomb may have been to Americans at the time, later news accounts of the Hiroshima Maidens and their radiation burns brought deep sadness and regret into many hearts. The redemptive aspect of violence became harder to maintain.

As a young boy, I had seriously wondered what the newspapers would have to write about after the war was over. Nothing else seemed as momentous. The newspapers did continue to find newsworthy events, but the emphasis on violence seemed to be considerably less than it had been. I have no strong personal recollections of violence during the late 1940's and the 1950's. The Korean conflict is an obvious exception, but it did not have the impact of WW II.

News reports of the situation in Korea did raise the question of limitation of where military violence could occur. During World War II American planes went deep into enemy territory in order to engage in saturation bombing. During the Korean conflict word came down that American troops were not to go beyond the Yalu River. Violence as a subject became more complicated, more sophisticated, and more suspect. It had seemed clear that violence could be used by the proper people for a good end. That idea did not have to be completely rejected, but the whole issue was not as simple as it had appeared to be. Calculations would have to be made on how the extent of violence might affect the desired achievement of a good end. The calculations would not be easy nor always correct.

The decade of the 1960's brought increasing concern over civil rights and American involvement in Vietnam. As the media covered the events and the issues, additional perspectives on violence began to emerge. Media coverage of World War II gave me the impression of something horrible but yet something strangely vague, mysterious, and distant. It was still possible to think in terms of honor and nobility. Newspaper reports of the "body count" in Vietnam seemed to dehumanize both the dead and the living. Television brought daily accounts and pictures of gory happenings, in full color in many cases, into American homes. Disenchantment and even disgust were probably inevitable. Hollywood was largely silent during the Vietnam conflict. There were virtually no romanticized movies about the difficulty in Southeast Asia, a sharp contrast

to what the entertainment industry had provided during World War II. The war in Vietnam seemed much closer than other wars had seemed to be. It was also less relieved by humor and sustained high purposes. Doubt, frustration, and anguish eroded earlier claims to an idealistic mission. The Green Berets and the Special Forces could not overcome, and may even have contributed to, a dismal image. The feeling of finding some way to get out, even with a loss of honor, grew stronger. The terrible tragedy of those who suffered and died became less ennobling and more embarrassing. Media portrayal of the violence in Vietnam helped significantly to end American involvement.

Efforts in the 1960's to increase civil rights for blacks were thoroughly covered by the media. What was unusual was the non-violent means used to attain this end of a better life for black Americans. Much violence was reported. There were high-pressure water hoses and dogs in Birmingham. There were electric prods and exposure to mosquitoes (much more uncomfortable than might first appear) in Louisiana. Three civil rights workers were killed in Mississippi. Their bodies were placed in an earthen dam. Those who worked for civil rights were not the perpetrators but rather the victims of the violence. Whatever the merits of their case, the adherents of non-violence increasingly gained sympathy for themselves. The users of violence seemed more and more backward and brutish. The high values sometimes associated with violence transferred to a great extent to non-violence. Idealism was on the side of those who refused active physical force.

Growth in crime has been the dominant impression in my mind concerning violence in the media from the 1970's until today. Although a world at war would be far worse than the present crime rate, it is still distressing that illegal activities against both people and property are numerous. Especially dismaying are crimes against the elderly and crimes against women. It is understandable that crimes are often committed against those less able to defend themselves, but acknowledgement of a criminal's perspective does little to lessen sympathy for the victims. In recent years television and the motion picture industry, as well as other media, have dealt openly and apparently realistically with the previously difficult to mention subject of rape. Even the gangster movies of the 1930's did not deal with such a subject as this. Perhaps there is an increase in public frankness today, but perhaps also there is an increase of more than a slight amount in the crimes themselves. There is certainly growing apprehension on the part of many concerning crime.

One issue raised by the media's treatment of crime is whether or not the presentation of objectionable activities can actually stimulate those activities. Even the Saturday morning cartoons on television do not escape blame for increasing the aggressive tendencies of children. The dynamics of human behavior may never be completely understood, but my own view of the complex issue is that allowance should be made for a series of factors. No one factor by itself would be decisive. For example, a presentation of violence may well give ideas of how to carry out violence to someone

already disposed in that direction. Even then, other circumstances, including a suitable opportunity, would have to be appropriate before the violence occurred. Most people, however, whatever aggressive behavior they follow, do not commit a crime after encountering violence in the media. While interest in violence appears to be strong on the part of many, the media may well allow a vicarious Aristotelian catharsis. The non-violent presentation of violence in the media may provide a cleansing of aggressive tendencies and keep the tendencies from being actualized, at least not in extreme form. When thinking about violence occurs in proper circumstances, perhaps the need to act violently is lessened. The way that violence is presented in the media needs much more consideration, but the removal of violence from the media, even if it were possible, is not completely desirable.

A second issue raised by the media's treatment of crime is what to do about crime. The extent of crime is emphasized both by the news and the entertainment functions of the media. It may be that the presentation of crime in basically entertainment programs involves more emotional impact upon the public than the news reports of crime, but the news and entertainment functions of the media reinforce one another on this subject. If people become sufficiently aroused about crime, then more will be done about it than is being done at present. Beyond this obvious thought, there is the question of what kind of thing can be done about crime. Whatever the specifics may be, should crime be dealt with violently or non-violently or perhaps in some combination of the two ways?

Some appalling excesses of violence and the success of non-violence in such areas as civil rights suggest that a non-violent approach should be found. However, it is extremely unlikely that a wholly non-violent approach would be successful in combatting crime.

The very nature of crime itself tends to promote violence, which cannot be controlled without some violence or threatened violence in return. Even if some need for restrictive violence is admitted, there is still the question of the conditions for dealing with it. Although many of us are poorly prepared either to defend ourselves or to help others who are threatened, it would be an unrealistic holdover from earlier cowboy movies and comic books to think that a comparatively small number of superior individuals could fight bad violence with good violence on behalf of all of the rest of us. Vigilante groups may not be the answer, but somehow more people need to be involved in planning for an assumed proper use of violence in combatting crime. Some non-violent approaches could be part of a total plan, as they are to some extent now. In view of the nature of crime, however, answering violence is an indispensable tool.

The problems of violence in the media are not due to the media alone. The media did not invent war or crime. Violence begins within individuals and within society. The acknowledged functions of the media are news and entertainment. A problem within the media is determining the proper relationship of these two functions, especially in regard to the same subject, especially such a complicated subject as violence. The news function of the media

requires an honest reporting of the occurrences within society, including the occurrences of violence. The entertainment function of the media involves some attention to the realities of society, including the realities of violence, and some concern with whatever may provide dramatic conflict. Drama without even the suggestion of violence may be possible but would be unrealistic in terms of the total range of human life. Problems arise with the news treatment of violence and with the entertainment treatment of violence and with the relationship of the two kinds of treatment. The general problems are those of the amount of violence to present and the manner in which the violence is to be presented. Both problems are continuing problems and have no easy answers. Complicating the problems is the advertising aspect of the media. The desire to reach large numbers of people and to make a strong impression on them for advertising purposes leads to a consideration of what will strongly appeal to large numbers of people. For whatever psychological or sociological reasons, many people do have a strong interest in violence. It would not always or even often be an interest in committing violence but at least an interest in knowing something about the violence that does occur and how one might deal with it. Media people may make mistaken, even selfish, judgments about the amount and manner of presentation of violence that they cover. They also have a great opportunity and responsibility to deal creatively and constructively with one of the most challenging issues in society. It would be good if people both within and without the media industry cooperated

in their philosophies, approaches, and actions. The whole matter is considerably more complicated than what might be remembered about cowboy heroes in Western movies years ago. Other recollections and observations from many people are much needed.