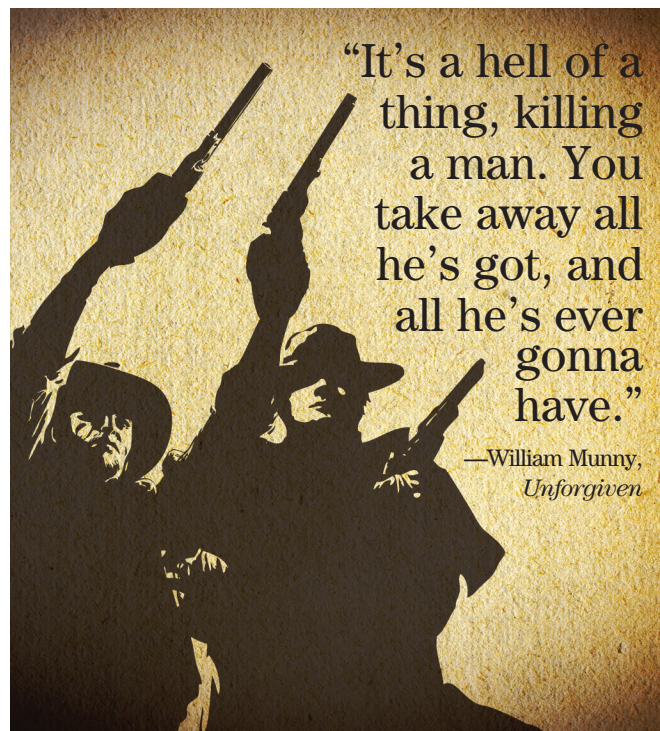


A History of Violence

Tragic mass shootings always spark the debate of media violence—but is it fair?

Words by Leo Graziani



America seems quite comfortable ignoring the violence that pervades its media until something violent happens in reality. Invariably, the pundits show up looking for something to blame, with movies, music and video games being the common scapegoats. But that's not to say that violent media doesn't play a role.

In 1982, a study by the National Institute of Mental Health concluded that children who watched violent television may become less empathetic, more fearful and more aggressive. Similar results were found in a 2003 study from the University of Michigan. And a Virginia Tech study published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* in 1999 found that violent films can make certain people less civil, i.e., more prone to using harsh words or insults.

Why Do We Like Violent Films?

Human history is a history of violence; it's practically wired into our DNA. Countless wars, medieval torture, gladiatorial combat—we were killing each other just fine before moving pictures were invented.

Modern cinematic violence can trace its roots back to *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967, or even *Psycho* in 1960. Since then, we've seen all manner of violent films emerge, from *Reservoir Dogs* to *Bullet to the Head* (a title that doesn't leave much to the imagination). However, violence is also prevalent in other facets of our lives: classic literature, sports, nature

shows, reality shows, the evening news, religion, slapstick comedy and cartoons.

Why are we so drawn to onscreen violence? One possible answer is that it's wish fulfillment, or a hero fantasy. We sympathize with antiheroes, like gunslingers in the Wild West, *Dirty Harry*, *The Bride in Kill Bill* and *Batman*. This would also explain why violent video games are popular, because they immerse you in the hero fantasy—you actually get to play it out, without harming anyone.

With all these outlets for aggression, the studies would have you believe that everyone is a hair-trigger away from going on a killing rampage. But I've seen tons of violent movies, played violent video games and listened to a lot of angry music, and I would never dream of killing someone in real life. I can't be the only one.

Desensitization

Also wired into our DNA is the ability to find violence abhorrent. While it's been argued that violent media chips away at this inherent disgust, I think it's more about being desensitized to *further depictions of violence on screen* than anything else. If the violence is real, I'm mortified. I can't look at videos containing real deaths or horrible wounds—I can't even watch horror movies. *Faces of Death* was disturbing. The point is, the vast majority of us can make the distinction between fantasy and reality.

A shooting spree is about the innate derangement of the individual firing the

gun, not the movies. The movies are just decoration. When someone commits a mass murder, it's almost always because they were already mentally unbalanced. Blame the criminal for the crime, not the media. Some say that violent movies shouldn't be made at all, or that we should limit access to them, particularly for young people. Sounds like the big C-word to me: censorship. And once you start, where does it end? Freedom of expression is a vital component of a functioning democracy.

A Solution?

According to the study from the University of Michigan, one solution is simply for parents to watch TV with their children and talk to them about it, as it appears to reduce the effects—it pulls the child out of the televised fantasy. Even more importantly, teach them to think critically about the things they watch, listen to or play. I realize life is busy for everyone and it's perhaps unrealistic to screen everything, but if you don't want your kids participating in violent media, don't let them.

When it comes to film violence... sorry folks, I like it. I see violence in film as simply entertainment, nothing more. To me, the real issue boils down to either a question of censorship or a question of parenting.

Or perhaps my cavalier attitude towards it all is simply the result of decades of media violence.