

## THE SYMBOLIC CRUSADE AGAINST MEDIA VIOLENCE IS A CONFESSION OF DESPAIR

Todd Gitlin

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*As you read, note the distinctions Gitlin makes. In paragraph 1, for instance, he says that he is not defending TV violence, and in paragraph 4, he concedes that TV violence is unpleasant. He argues, however, that it is not the cause of killing. Note the reasons Gitlin gives to support his belief.*

Guns don't kill people, picture tubes do. Or at least that seems to be the message behind the clangor of current alarms about television violence. Don't misunderstand: I have denounced movie violence for more than two decades, all the way back to *The Wild Bunch* and *The Godfather*. I consider Hollywood's slashes, splatters, chainsaws, and car crashes a disgrace, a degradation of culture, and a wound to the souls of producers and consumers alike.

But I also think liberals are making a serious mistake by pursuing their vigorous campaign against violence in the media. However morally and aesthetically reprehensible today's screen violence, the crusades of Senator Paul Simon and Attorney General Janet Reno against television violence, as well as Catharine MacKinnon's<sup>o</sup> war against pornography, are cheap shots. There are indeed reasons to attribute violence to the media, but the links are weaker than recent headlines would have one believe. The attempt to demonize the media distracts attention from the real causes of—and the serious remedies for—the epidemic of violence....

That media violence contributes to a climate in which violence is legitimate—and there can be no doubt of this—does not make it an urgent social problem. Violence on the screens, however loathsome, does not make a significant contribution to violence on the streets. Images don't spill blood. *Rage*, equipped with guns, does. Desperation does. Revenge does. As liberals say, the drug trade does; poverty does; unemployment does. It seems likely that

<sup>o</sup>Catharine MacKinnon: A feminist and law professor who argues against pornography not because of its explicit sexual content but because she sees it as causing violence against women.

a given percent increase in decently paying jobs will save thousands of times more lives than the same percent decrease in media bang-bang.

Now I also give conservative arguments about the sources of violence their due. A culture that despises and disrespects authority is disposed to aggression, so people look to violence to resolve conflict. The absence of legitimate parental authority also feeds a culture of aggression. But aggression per se, however unpleasant, is not the decisive murderous element. A child who shoves another child after watching a fist fight on TV is not committing a drive-by shooting. Violence plays on big screens around the world without generating epidemics of carnage. The necessary condition permitting a culture of aggression to flare into a culture of violence is access to lethal weapons....

The symbolic crusade against media violence is a confession of despair. Those who embrace it are saying, in effect, that they either do not know how to, or do not dare, do anything serious about American violence. They are tilting at images. If Janet Reno cites the American Psychological Association report *Violence and Youth*, she also should take note of the following statements within it: "Many social science disciplines, in addition to psychology, have firmly established that poverty and its contextual life circumstances are major determinants of violence.... It is very likely that socio-economic inequality—not race—facilitates higher rates of violence among ethnic minority groups.... There is considerable evidence that the alarming rise in youth homicides is related to the availability of firearms." The phrase "major determinant" does not appear whenever the report turns to the subject of media violence.

The question for reformers, then, is one of proportion and focus. If there were nothing else to do about deadly violence in America, then the passionate crusade against TV violence might be more justifiable, even though First Amendment absolutists<sup>6</sup> would still have strong counter-arguments. But the imagebusting campaign permits politicians to fulminate photogenically without having to take on the National Rifle Association, or for that matter, the drug epidemic, the crisis of the family, or the shortage of serious jobs. To the astonishment of the rest of the known world, we inhabit a political culture in which advocates of gun control must congratulate themselves for imposing restrictions on the purchase of certain semi-automatic weapons, or a five-day waiting period before the purchase of a handgun....

There is no space here to address properly the plague of real-world violence. Let that discussion proceed with proper respect for the gravity of the situation. As for *media* violence, let it be criticized for the right reasons and in the right spirit. To be loathsome, popular culture doesn't have to be murderous. To approve of media violence, we don't need a threat of government action to

<sup>6</sup> Amendment absolutists: Those who give the highest priority to the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment protection of speech rights and freedoms.

rectify morals by fiat. The proper disapproval would have recourse to categories of judgment that make Americans nervous: aesthetic and moral standards and the intersection of the two. The democracy of taste has not been hospitable to judgments of this order. We aren't content to condemn trash on the grounds that it is stupid, wasteful, morally bankrupt; that it coarsens taste; that it shrivels the capacity to feel and know the whole of human experience.

Let a thousand criticisms bloom. Let reformers flood the networks and cable companies and, yes, advertisers, with protests against the gross overabundance of the stupid, the tawdry, and the ugly. Let them demand of local TV stations that the news cameras find something else to photograph besides corpses. . .

Not least, let the reformers not only turn off the set, but criticize the form of life that has led so many to turn, and keep, it on.

## LOVE, MONEY, PRISON, SIN, REVENGE

Andrew Lam

*Andrew Lam, an associate editor at Pacific News Service, came to the United States with his family at the time of the fall of Saigon, when the Vietnam War ended in 1975. He has been a Rockefeller Fellow at UCLA, and his work has appeared in the New York Times and the Nation. In this reading, published in the Los Angeles Times Magazine in March 1994, Lam explores a 1991 shooting incident in Sacramento, California, during which three of four young Vietnamese gunmen (two of them brothers) were killed. He presents the story, in part, to discover what caused the violence. Implicitly, he asks, Why did the journey of these boys end so differently from my own?*

*As you read, note the differences Lam mentions between the wave of Vietnamese immigrants who arrived in 1975 and those who arrived later, referred to as boat people, who underwent terrible hardship to leave Vietnam in small handcrafted boats. Note, too, the ideas named in his title—love, money, prison, sin, revenge. According to Lam, how did the Vietnamese and American cultures, high-tech consumerism, Hong Kong videos, and the legacy of the Vietnam War contribute to the Sacramento shooting?*

On the afternoon of April 4, 1991, 15 years, 11 months and 27 days after the end of the Vietnam War, four Vietnamese youths armed with semiautomatic pistols stormed into a Good Guys electronic store on Stockton Boulevard.