

This is Entertainment?

There comes a moment when most tolerant young adults become narrow-minded fuddy-duddies. This is the phenomenon that Churchill referred to when he is purported to have said: "A man who isn't a Liberal by age 20 has no heart. A man who isn't a Conservative by age 40 has no brains."

For many Americans, the force that drives them to start sounding like their parents is that they themselves have become parents. Suddenly, they don't see it as liberating or cool to get drunk or stoned at 15; they see it as a menace to their own children, who are fast approaching that age. For me, one of the driving forces has been the steadily increasing brutality and graphic gore in movies. I would hope that any gun owner understands why this is *not* a good thing, but just in case you don't, let me explain.

There is a well-understood phenomenon in both psychology and medicine; if you slowly increase a person's exposure to many toxic substances, over time, the mind or the body develops an increasing tolerance for it. Serious addicts can tolerate much higher doses of alcohol or opiates than people without prior experience. Arsenic is another example; in classical times, it was common for those worried about being poisoned with arsenic to take slowly increasing doses to protect themselves. (Nero's mother, who had used arsenic to advance her son to the throne, and knew her son well, is reported to have taken slowly increasing doses of arsenic in case her son decided he no longer needed her direction.)

The same seems to be true psychologically for individuals and I would argue, for whole societies. Do you remember the first time that you saw something really, really graphic, a scene of violence that was so much more detailed and unpleasant than anything

that you had ever seen before? For me, it was when I was about 14, and I went to see one movie, and stuck around for the double feature, *Soldier Blue*.

Soldier Blue was a heavily fictionalized account of the Sand Creek Canyon Massacre during the Civil War, which depicted the mutilation of Indians by the Colorado Territorial Militia. I was utterly horrified by what the film showed—cavalrymen riding through the village, hacking the heads, arms, and legs off women and children, raping the women, then, while they were still conscious, cutting off their breasts as trophies. (Unfortunately, while the movie has significant fiction to it, the savage crimes committed by the Territorial Militia that day are gruesome, ugly, uncontested fact.) I was on the edge of vomiting for the last ten minutes of the film.

In 1970, *Soldier Blue* was an extreme, unpleasant film, at a time when most legitimate movie makers were testing the limits of what was allowed with pornographic movies. The films that they made were no more explicit than what most Americans can watch on cable TV today. In an era where the popular slogan was, “Make love not war,” Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969) was considered unpleasantly detailed in its violence, with the sound of cracking bones and slow motion spurting blood. Yet, *The Wild Bunch* was downright restrained compared to *Soldier Blue*, and both of them pale in comparison to what is being made today.

In this case, I went from having seen almost no really gruesome violence to a really graphic depiction of savagery. But what happens if you get exposed to just slightly more gruesome violence each year, and this exposure to violence is happening almost weekly? Each step up is just a baby step, and you get used to the change over time. Your tolerance for gruesome violence increases with each baby step, and soon, the bone-cracking, blood-

spurting shock of *The Wild Bunch* doesn't get your adrenalin pumping anymore—so if the director *really* wants to get the audience to react, he needs to shock you just a little bit more.

In the last few years, the special effects magicians of Hollywood have been working hard at coming up with better and more “realistic” effects. (“Realistic” of course, means that it has to *look* realistic to an audience that often knows nothing about guns, violence, or real human suffering.) The movie *Casino* some years ago was something of a special effects milestone in its depiction of a human head being slowly crushed in a vise, with the eyes slowly bulging out from the pressure.

Let's not worry about the long-term effects on a generation that has watched these movies as adults; we can hope that something like a moral code has already solidified in adults. Think about the long-term effects on a generation that has grown up where these horrifying images of graphic human suffering and degradation have been as normal as watching cowboy movies was to previous generations. Does anyone *seriously* want to argue that this steady diet of dehumanizing trash doesn't play some part in creating a generation of kids who are quite prepared to plan and carry out horrendous acts of mass murder?

The new movie *Hannibal* demonstrates the continuing triumph of special effects, cinematography, and Hollywood greed, over decency. As Roger Ebert pointed out in his February 9, 2001 review, “we must give it credit for the courage of its depravity; if it proves nothing else, it proves that if a man cutting off his face and feeding it to his dogs doesn't get the NC-17 rating for violence, nothing ever will.” The film is graphic in a profoundly unnecessary way, and one that has more to do with the desire to increase the

heartbeat of the audience, than with the real world. It takes no effort to read Ebert's horror when he describes how *Hannibal* includes a scene in which a "man whose skull is popped open so that nonessential parts of his brain can be sliced off and sauteed for his dinner."

Make no mistake about it: horror that would have been unimaginable to a generation raised twenty years ago is now entertainment. This profoundly degrading material, masquerading as "a fable of good and evil" is becoming a fundamental part of the psyche of a younger generation of Americans. To most teenagers in the county in which I live, watching films like *Hannibal* is a sign of how cool you are—that you are all grown up and can handle anything. Do you want to live in a society raising kids who are so calloused that they can regard films like this as entertainment?

There is a culture war going on in America. On one side is Hollywood, producing the film equivalent of the Games in ancient Rome, where the masses enjoyed watching children dressed in sheepskins ripped apart by starving dogs. The continual pursuit of more degrading special effects and more dehumanizing movies shows the utter lack of self-control of an industry dominated by greedy and out of control people. Not surprisingly, people who lack the self-control to say, "Wait a minute! Why are we making such a degrading and repulsive movie?" assume that gun owners lack the self-control to make appropriate use of a gun.

Unfortunately, many of the virtues that were common in America just a few years ago, such as self-control, and concern for others, are disappearing rapidly. They are not "natural," as the gross entertainments of classical times and the twentieth century's genocides demonstrate. This rapidly declining standard for entertainment is coarsening the public morality.

I do not know what the solution is, but I do know that every dollar we put into the movie theater ticket booth or the video rental store for these films that turn human suffering into mere entertainment is a dollar closer to a society that will be too savage to be trusted with guns, and too dangerous to be disarmed. Before you buy that ticket, or rent that movie, see what movie reviewers have had to say about it, and ask yourself, “Is this the sort of movie that desensitizes people to brutality and violence?” If the answer is yes, perhaps it’s time to ask yourself why you renting it.

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