

## THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE AND SEX IN CULTURE :

### Evidence which no-one wants to know.

#### David Holbrook

Mr. Chataway is reported as saying that 'there is not a shred of evidence that the showing of violence on television is responsible for violence in the young.' In the publication of the National Book League, **Books**, Mrs. Boyars of Calder and Boyars declares that violence in culture is now an absurd scapegoat of those in 'the Establishment' who want to place limits on our understanding of ourselves. The 'progressive' dogma is that 'there is no evidence of harm from the depiction of sex, on the screen' - and this is now being extended to violence. 'Society' causes violence - and 'Society' is not (apparently) to include commercial culture.

There is, in fact, evidence that sex and violence on the screen do have some effect on behaviour in some circumstances, and that these effects could be socially harmful. A number of American investigation committees, for instance, have had doubts about screen violence on TV. One warned that while normal children might be immune, *emotionally disturbed children were affected, in a most damaging way - and these were a minority with whom we have to live.*

However, no-one apparently wants to look at this evidence coolly in England - and I have found, trying to place articles on the matter, that there is a 'permissive' dogma, which must not be disturbed. Its basis is a belief that it is better to 'release' 'instincts' - because men have suffered too long from the 'inhibition' of their sexual drives, not least the impulse to look at sex. Now, this concern for 'freedom' is being extended to aggression.

I have tried to challenge the 'release' kind of thinking in my books, especially in **Human Hope and the Death Instinct**. Moreover, I have tried to use more recent studies to question the toleration of sadism and 'explicit sex' in our culture. I believe that in psychoanalytical theory there is plenty of sound argument, that the origins of our curiosity, such as pornography exploits, are in the primitive and sadistic phantasies of early infancy. Moreover, I believe there are dangers in this, which are those of

prompting people to 'act out' their unconscious primitive phantasies. Today we have films which combine intense physical violence with sexual sadism (rape, sodomy, and other perversions) often brilliantly enhanced as phantasy by powerful techniques. Children are slipping into such films. Adults are enjoying them, laughing at violence - and taking away an endorsement of a ruthless male aggressiveness as the only possible solution to the problem of life. Woman meanwhile, is subjected to humiliation and cruelty, symbolically, with the implication that we should reject sensitivity. In the symbolism of her victimisation, there is something like the collective infection Jung feared, in attacks on the 'anima' which take a group form as in 'Hell's Angels' rapes - or **The Clockwork Orange**.

Harry Guntrip, the psychotherapist, in his book **Personality Structure and Human Interaction (1961)** tried to explode the 'instinct' theory on which certain views of permissiveness are based - and asked, *'is the relaxation of morality to apply to the 'instinct' of aggression as well as sex?'* When Guntrip asked this, he was being ironic. It is the mark of the rapid changes that have taken place over the last ten years, that we are so much less shocked by such a suggestion. 'Naked Ape' theories, based on 'realism' about our 'animal nature', have tended to persuade us to accept that aggression and sex must be 'released', for us to be truly 'free'. As Guntrip says, the results of relaxed morality in sex have been catastrophic. They include the *'acting out of neurosis in sexually indiscriminate behaviour and, in spite of contraception, an ever-increasing supply of unwanted children who are denied their rightful parental background and are likely to have to endure in themselves the neuroses their parents are supposed to have escaped by means of sexual freedom.'* Even easier abortion has not stemmed the tide of 'unwanted' children, while now the psychic difficulties of the child are added to, by bold and ugly - even pornographic - forms of 'sex education'.

In an article on *Aggression after Observing Violence*, **Journal of Personality** (Vol 35, p.666), Russell Geen and Leonard Berkowitz of the University of Wisconsin say that *'An increasing body of experimental research has demonstrated that the observation of violence can increase the likelihood of subsequent aggression.* In their experimental work aggression was linked with frustration - failure to complete a task being likely to be a 'blow to the ego' and a 'deflation of self-esteem'. This would seem to link this experimental work with Guntrip's theory that aggression arises not from 'instinct' but from 'ego-weakness'. 108 men were used for the experiments. One third were given an insoluble puzzle; one third were insulted by a confederate, and one third were neither frustrated nor insulted. They then witnessed either a violent prize-fight film or an exciting but non-violent racing film. In half the conditions the confederate (who insulted the subjects) was given a name which associated him with the beaten boxer in the fight film, while in the other half he had a name not connected with either film. Subjects were then given an opportunity to aggress against the confederate in what was described as a learning task.

Among the subjects who saw the boxing film, insult led to more aggressive

behaviour than did neutral treatment or task frustration, regardless of whether the target was associated with the film or not. When the target's name connected him with the boxing film, task-frustrated subjects were more aggressive towards him than were the non-aroused controls.

Another article by Berkowitz appeared in the *Scientific American*, February 1964, *The Effects of Observing Violence*. He says that 'associations between the screen and the real world are important' - a sentence which, in itself, is denied by nearly every film critic today. People, he says, seem to be emotionally affected by a screen play to the extent that they associate the events of the drama with their own life experience. Probably adults are less strongly influenced than children because they are aware that the film is make-believe and so can dissociate it from their own lives. But it still seems clear from his experiments that an aggressive film can induce aggressive actions by *anyone in the audience*. The implications of this, where films today are glamourising violence and sadism, as in *A Clockwork Orange*, *Straw Dogs*, *Last Tango in Paris*, are serious, yet nearly always blandly denied in every film review and even in letters to local councils from the Film Censor himself. (To Leeds Corporation, 1973, Mr. Murphy wrote *'we thought it would be antisocial not to allow this film (Clockwork Orange) to be shown.'*

The effects may be short-lived, says Berkowitz. The emotional reaction produced by film violence probably dies away rather rapidly as the viewer enters new situations and encounters new stimuli. Subjected to different influences, he becomes less and less ready to attack people. But, says Berkowitz, television and motion pictures may also have some persistent effects. If young children see repeatedly that screen heroes gain their ends through aggressive actions, they may conclude that aggression is desirable behaviour.

Berkowitz is not impressed by the 'catharsis' argument, so strongly put forward today proponents of yet more permissiveness like Mr. John Calder. *'Effective catharsis'* he says, *'occurs only when an angered person perceives that his frustrator has been aggressively injured.'* That is, there is only catharsis when you feel the satisfactions of seeing the effects of hate.

From this I argue that filmed violence is potentially dangerous. Motion picture aggression has increased the chance that an angry person, and possibly other people as well, will attack someone else. This would seem to explain why, as a recent book by Milton Shulman has indicated, there seems to be a correlation between increases in violence in societies and the length of time they have had television.

From my point of view, there is now the additional dimension of watching sexual acts, including perverted and sadistic acts. If we are to believe Robert Stoller (See *Pornography and Perversion* in *The Case against Pornography*) in this, 'there is always a victim' and elements of sadism and masochistic identification. The colour sex film implies to the audience that it is socially permissible to strip others naked and watch

them in private acts, voyeuristically. Moreover, as such films appear in stronger and stronger packages the sexual acts become more ruthless, cruel and perverted, (as in **Last Tango** where the woman is humiliated by sodomy after a series of untender sexual acts.) The effects of being encouraged to watch this kind of violence may obviously add a dynamic of primitive sexual aggressiveness to the effects noted by Berkowitz.

Certainly, films of sexual activity have an immediate effect on the members of an audience, from masturbation on the spot to disturbed and aggressive feelings afterwards.

Another article, in the **Journal of Sex Research**. Vol.6, 1970, p.268 by Gunter Schmidt and Volkmar Sigusch, of Hamburg University, discusses the effects of showing an experimental group of students some sexually exciting films of masturbation and coitus. The subjects then reported on their sexual behaviour during the next twenty-four hours, in relation to the previous twenty-four hours. The reports on the subjective responses are interesting. On a semantic differential (that is, a chart of responses to certain words which can be measured on a 'before-after' basis), the men showed themselves as significantly more 'bored, aggressive, gregarious, repelled, excited, shocked, irritated', repelled' - and in their account there were more words like 'innerly agitated, jumpy, disgusted, irritated, angered and dizzy'. Women were more shocked, irritated and disgusted than men. But what is interesting is that both charts definitely show an increase in aggression. Both men and women reported an increase in 'inner uneasiness' and reduction of the ability to concentrate. *The women showed a significant increase of inner uneasiness, aggressiveness, and autonomic complaints as well as a decrease of concentration ability. More women also had a restless sleep the night after the experiment, as compared to the night before.*

During the showings there was a definite increase in the number of orgasms. 41 of the men, and 22% of the women reported that they had more orgasms on the day after the experiments than on the previous day. But these were solipsistic activities. The experiments had less effect on interpersonal sexual activity. The increase was almost entirely in masturbation, and 68% of the men and 43% of the women reported that they thought about the films and slides during masturbation. Very few had imitated the film in interpersonal sexual acts. The increased activation, the experimenters say, was 'slight' and so does not in their case confirm that pornography is likely to cause a 'reduction in effective controlling mechanisms' or 'disinhibition'. But, of course, words like 'love', 'tenderness' or even 'passion' do not appear in such a sexological experiment.

Despite this disclaimer, we may, I believe, make certain deductions. Pornography contributes little or nothing to sexual acts between men and women, and the so-called 'sex education' film is likely to do little for people's sexual enrichment. On the other hand, the feelings aroused are 'disturbed' and negative ones - associated with aggression. This is what one

might expect, from psychoanalytical theories, and from my own point of view, which is that pornography arouses primitive sadistic phantasies. The films also prompted much masturbation, and from the psychotherapeutic point of view, masturbation is a 'manic activity' associated with fears of annihilation, and sex, and anxiety about it. It is therefore of great interest to me that both men and women reported being 'cheered up' as well as upset. The subjective reports certainly do seem to indicate that the response of the subjects was a self-encapsulated response - that is, the effect of pornography is to disturb individuals and stir up their inner world, rather than enrich them, and lead them towards real sexual fulfilment with others. As Claire and William Russell say in their book **Human Behaviour** '*the simplest possible way to cramp another person's sexual enjoyment is to arouse their masturbation phantasies*'. As David Boadella, an expert on Wilhelm Reich, argues, the arousal of masturbation phantasies of a 'supplied' technological kind leads in the opposite direction from the development of 'deep feelings for another person.' He reports on a patient who was beginning in his masturbation phantasies to dream creatively of a kind of woman he would like to relate to. But then he saw the rape scene in the film **Straw Dogs** - and this became more real to him than any real woman could do. He became locked, as it were, in a solipsistic engagement with an electronically supplied phantasy that usurped his more creative phantasies. Viktor Frankl indicates that masturbation, while it is harmless, is also accompanied by a 'hang-over', which arises from the frustration of the natural sexual impulse to enjoy the 'significant other'. Such frustration, combined with the arousal of aggressive impulses, (as in films showing rape) might well lead to aggression, and so we should surely not be complacent about a culture which promotes masturbation, and other depersonalised non-relational acts, which are associated with aggressive feelings. Could this not add to the brutalisations our society (and its wars) inflicts on us anyway?

Finally, a piece of research at Rutgers University seemed to show that exposure to pornography was responsible for deviant behaviour among a group of young men studied in American gaols. I discuss this project in **Sex and Dehumanisation** (p. 176). This was evidence sent in to the Presidential Commission on Pornography.

These pieces of research work indicate at least that it would be foolish to say that 'there is no evidence that aggression on the screen has any effect' or that 'pornography has no effect'. It seems quite definitely shown by these experiments that screen violence has an effect on the viewer, which could lead him to imitate it, in certain circumstances, when the film violence seems to relate to his own life. Sexually stimulating material on the film causes people to masturbate, and to have negative and aggressive feelings which are depersonalised and not directed towards partners. It tends to usurp the creative sexual dream, and deepens isolation. There would also seem to be some evidence that early exposure to pornography causes sexual deviance. Perhaps the debate could continue from there - with these objective facts before us - in the proper sphere of ethical concern, as to whether we are prepared to risk increased violence, and

increased sexual depersonalisation in our society, in the name of the 'release' of 'instincts' - when there are also those who express grave doubts about whether in fact such 'release' brings the benefits it is supposed to bring? What, for instance, is the effect of watching sadistic sexual acts in a film like **The Nightcomers** which shows (to add spice to the voyeurism) children watching the sexual scenes - and imitating them? Is it not to gloat on corruption by corruption? When the 'release of instinct' justification, and the 'catharsis' vindication have been discussed by various thinkers - on what do we base our continued decline into cultural perversion?

*Postscript:* I have just read the first copy to arrive in England of the **Report to the Surgeon-General of the United States on Television and Growing up: The Impact of Televised Violence, January 1972**. The studies examined in the report '*indicate - a modest relationship between the viewing of violence on television and aggressive tendencies*'. The report, which is made by behavioural scientists, does not make causal relationships clear, and asks for more research. But it does find that 'violence viewing' *leads to aggression* 'to a limited degree and among a limited number of young people. It suggests that both the viewing and the aggression 'are the products of an as yet unidentified third variable'. Here perhaps the clue is to be found in the psycho-analytical connections suggested in my article. But as another such report in the USA has said, even if, as this one concludes, a small proportion of people are made aggressive by viewing violence - we have to live with them. And, in a society in which violence is increasing so much that normal life is threatened, even a 'modest' connection ought to cause some serious thinking of an urgent kind, about the commercial need to exploit more and more violence, to hold an audience. **The Report to the Surgeon General** examined the 'catharsis' theory - and was not impressed.

To these studies we may add a great deal from other sources than empirical psychology, to question the desirability of allowing an unrestrained indulgence in sick and sadistic phantasies - as from psychoanalysis, existentialism and art criticism. But certainly the argument that these things have 'no effect' is quite untenable.

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