Films' Real Victims
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OPINION

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Brutal and gory films are rapidly desensitizing our children to violence

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The "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" was a box-office hit the weekend the movie was released in the United States in October, 2003. On the subsequent Monday morning, I listened to a discussion on the "Live in America " radio show, prompted by this super hit, about the impact of violent movies on the minds of viewers. As much as I love a good murder mystery, I am firm about not watching gory, violent thrillers such as The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. I go to movies sometimes to shut out the world--something I cannot do when there are blood and bullet holes and mutilated body parts on screen. I already visualize these grotesque things when I talk to women who live in fear of getting shot or stabbed and lying in a pool of blood as part of my work counseling women and children from abused and battered homes.

The radio show analyzed the gruesome nature of the movie and our rising tolerance for violence as evidenced by the millions this film had grossed, on the heels of another successful, incredibly violent thriller, Kill Bill. The same Monday evening, life projected its own horror scene for three young children in Texas. A Houston man shot his wife. As she fell to the ground, he stood over her body and shot her several more times before turning the gun on himself--all this outside their home and in front of their children. "My daddy's killing my mama!"--one of the youngsters is reported to have screamed.

Reportedly, the couple was estranged after a turbulent seven-year relationship, and the husband had made a previous death threat by shoving a gun to his wife's head.

Only their children know the brutalities they have witnessed in their own home. Sadly, the years of brewing violence culminated in the bloody scene of their father murdering their mother--perhaps not so unlike scenes from today's most popular movies.

Violence is a profitable theme for the American movie industry. Unlike drama or comedy, its simplistic content attracts a wider range of audience and, as a result, exports cheaply to other countries. There cannot be any dearth of ideas either, as the storylines are often based on actual incidents of violence. Interestingly, these movies conveniently choose not to deal with real-life consequences of violence--physical injury, financial toll, emotional trauma and grief and loss. Similarly, the peripheral victims--such as the three children--who must endure the atrocity, damage and loss are usually not part of the storylines either.

The goal of violent thrillers is to keep the audience at the edge of their seats through fast-paced action scenes. Action is what moves the plot, not the storyline. Therefore, those who get killed disappear quickly from the movie screen and, as a result, from the viewers' minds. How the loss of a life might affect someone or how one's life might change due to a severe physical injury cannot figure into the plot.

It was apparent from listening to the radio call-in show that The Texas Chainsaw Massacre fit the bill of a notoriously gruesome thriller. It was based on an actual killer, although the killer did not use a chainsaw to kill--just a shotgun. Imagination, special effects and prosthetics helped to further dramatize a true story already laden with violence.

Some callers, claiming to be regular folks who hate violence, discussed the adrenaline rush such movies provide. They described the movie's ability to lift us to an alternate state of reality where it is OK to witness killing and the sawing of body parts with the awareness that such things are wrong. It seems the gory scenes we'd abhor in real life are meant to increase our thrill, to transport us to a new realm and, ultimately, to make the movie a conduit to enrich corporate coffers.

Studies on violence indicate that watching violence at home can condition a young mind to use violence as a solution to life's problems. But equally disturbing is the fact that even children from nonviolent homes can turn towards using violence if

they are exposed to repeated, unpunished and realistic violence on the screen. Increased exposure to violence leads to increased tolerance of it, by decreasing their emotional response. Over a period of time, children can be conditioned, subtly yet powerfully, to view violence as a normal and even pleasurable aspect of life.

The movie violence may have looked fictional earlier in the century when real-life crime reports were low, but not anymore. Today, the murder rate in the United States--2.5 people murdered every hour--is the highest in any industrialized nation. Based on studies conducted in the 90s, professional organizations, including the American Medical Association and the National Institute of Mental Health, unanimously concluded that media violence contributes to societal violence.

Still, there are very few restrictions placed on the movie industry. Hollywood continues to market their violent movies to teens. In spite of the rating system, children of all ages receive little protection from videos, videogames, 24-hour movie channels and news programs devoted to crimes projecting generously onto their living room sets. As a result, children imbibe flashes of real as well as realistic-looking crime scenes which often blur the boundaries between art and life.

I am certain most of us feel horrified about the murder scene the three Houston children watched in front of their home that Monday evening in October. Surely, we recognize that what they saw was real; no special effects; no fake body parts. Unlike scenes in movies, this single horror scene is destined to haunt them for a long time to come. Yet, the same scene transformed into a violent thriller and projected onto a big screen years later is justified as "entertainment."

As we rush to the box office and pay to experience "fiction," we seldom think of the innocent victims of the brutal events that "fiction " is based upon. My wish is that, while watching a thriller like The Texas Chainsaw Massacre inside a darkened movie theater, we do not let go of the reality that looms larger than life on the wide screen in front of us--those who died in vain and those left behind, forever marred by the violent act of killing.

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