

Short Argumentative Essay, Draft 2

Toward Violence Step by Step

There is an emerging understanding that there is no correlation or causation between exposure to violent media and aggressive behavior. Hal Hinson (1995) is one of the advocates of this emerging opinion, and in his article “In Defense of Violence” he claims that movie violence cannot cause anything other than enjoyment and catharsis as long as the morality of the viewer is not corrupted (p. 292). Anderson et al., in their article “The Influence of Media Violence on Youth”, and in “Academic Achievement” on the other hand, claim that entertainment violence leads to aggressive and violent behaviors, particularly in children. They state that even if people who are exposed to media violence do not explicitly act aggressively, the likelihood of such behaviors increase over time. I believe Anderson et al.’s claim that exposure to media violence causes legitimization of violence through desensitization refutes Hinson’s morality arguments because it argues that people get used to violence, unconsciously and unwillingly, regardless of their moral values.

Hinson (1995) acknowledges that eighty two percent of Americans think that there is too much violence in the movies but he claims that the continuous success of R rated movies contradicts this statistic (p. 289). Therefore he argues that although people deplore violence in real life, they like violence in art and that is why violent movies make so much money (p.288-289). Anderson et al.’s (2003) desensitization argument might clarify this contradiction. Their example of the Cline, Croft, & Courier research that found negative correlation between adult viewers’ exposure to violent scenes and sensitivity to them, explains why it doesn’t bother us to watch mass murderers and rapists in action (Anderson et al., 2003, p.96). We believe that the violence we watch is not excessive because we get used to it and become unresponsive to it over time. However we still think that violence that other people or our children watch is dangerous without realizing that it is the same thing.

Hinson believes that violence in art is completely different from violence in real life. He supports his argument with ideas from the Ancient Greeks who believed that violence in real life is destructive whereas violence in art provides an opportunity for catharsis. Catharsis is a healthy channel for us to relieve our aggression. Therefore Hinson argues that violence in art prevents us from being violent by cleansing our anger and aggression through catharsis (p.292). The experiments given in Anderson et al. (2003) suggest that catharsis argument is inherently problematic. For example Bjorkqvist (1985) asserted that children demonstrated higher levels of physical assault right after they watched a violent movie compared to the children who watched a non-violent movie (p.85). Similarly Geen and O'Neal (1969) experiment showed that college men, who watched prizefight movie, behaved more aggressively when they were provoked compared to the ones who watched a track meet movie. The aggression level of the experiment group who watched prizefight gradually decreased after the end of the movie (p.85). Hinson believes that catharsis relieves you from aggression but Anderson et al. (2003) suggest the otherwise and state that the peak of your aggression is right after you watch the violent scenes. Since people cannot be cleansed and filled with aggression at the same time, one of these claims should be wrong. Anderson et al. (2003) support their argument with scientific evidence whereas Hinson support his arguments with intuition and Ancient Greek ideology.

Hinson's (1995) main argument is that movies offer a "dialogue" to the audience (p.292). He claims that the effect of what we watch on our aggression depends on our interpretation and moral values. If violent actions are restricted by our morality, violent movies or TV programs will not cause us to be more violent and aggressive. In other words, violent scenes do not cause violent behaviors if the viewer of such scenes is not prone to be violent (Hinson, 1995, p.292). People who are disposed to violence will act even more violently when they watch violent shows but I believe Hinson fails to notice that media

violence changes people's moral principles and creates more people who are prone to be violent.

Anderson et al. (2003) at this point, argue that movies and TV shows which depict violence as justified, and killing for revenge as honorable, alter the moral values of youth. Watching that violence is acceptable justifies violence in young minds which create the root of the problem. Hinson says that reasonable people who have moral boundaries will not seek solution in violence but he misses the point that exposure to media violence legitimizes aggression and brutality in youth who are supposed to become the sensible adults of the next generation. He believes that the first step to interpret an aggressive behavior is using our moral judgment, yet Anderson et al's (2003) claims indicate that a prior step exists, and it is the creation of the morality. If the morality is corrupted when it was being developed, then the next step automatically fails.

Anderson et al. (2003) report the Malamuth and Check (1981) study; in which increased acceptance of violence toward women was found among college men who previously watched violent sex scenes (p.86). Another example given by Anderson et al. (2003) is the Berkowitz (1975) study, in which boys in two cottages were assigned to see violent movies regularly, and boys in the other two cottages were shown nonviolent films. Afterwards it was seen that boys who were exposed to the violent films engaged in significantly more physical aggression (p.85).

Hinson (1995) deduce from the overwhelming success of violent movies on box office that people are not bothered by violence or sick of it; on the contrary, they want it more (p.289). This argument actually goes parallel with Malamuth and Check studies. The audience wants violent scenes because they are becoming less aroused by them. If the violence in art is the arousal they are looking for, medium violence will not be enough for them anymore since 'the aggression threshold' of the people increases in the process of desensitization. Since the

audience wants more violence movie industry will make more violent movies. However, then the audience will get used to the higher level of violence since he or she is more exposed to it. This vicious cycle force people to legitimize violence in media which leads them to accept it and want it even more.

Furthermore, accustomedness to violence and subsequent desensitization cause people to legitimize violence in real life. They not only become unresponsive to the scenes on TV once seem obnoxious to them but also believe that violence is normal and acceptable as shown in Malamuth and Check's (1981) study(as cited in Anderson et al., 2003, p.84). In contrast to Hinson's argument that violence in art and violence in reality is completely different Anderson et al.'s (2003) claim that desensitization leads to legitimization of violence and hostile acts and ideas.

Along with the adult viewers, children are also exposed to TV violence, and violent shows and cartoons are even dreadfully harmful for them. Anderson et al.'s (2001) research on the preschoolers, to see the effects of violent programs, showed that children who viewed violence in preschool continued to watch violent programs in adolescence, and the cumulative effects of violence viewing cause them to be more aggressive in later life (p.124). Hinson seems to acknowledge the possible negative effects of violent TV shows on children, but he argues that it is parents' responsibility to keep their children away from such shows. Anderson et al. (2001) similarly argue that parents should monitor what their kids are watching but they also note that cartoons and action-adventure programs have significantly higher rates of violence than other types of programs (p.125). Even Hinson admits the violence in Dufy Duck and Bugs Bunny. If the cartoons especially made for kids are also violent, how can the parents decide which shows their children should watch?

This condition gets even worse for children because of desensitization. People growing up with violent cartoons, TV shows and movies legitimize it and their threshold

increases. Therefore each generation regards more and more violence as acceptable and as a result, each new generation grows up with more violence exposure. The kids who see and laugh at Elmer Fudd shooting Duffy Duck in the head will most probably allow their kids to watch the similar and even worse content. Then we will see cartoons as Itchy and Scratchy show which is created by The Simpsons producers and it contains meaningless and excessive violence. Itchy cuts Scratchy in many pieces, explode bombs in him, run over him by bulldozer and even cut his head off and then run over the beheaded body and the head. If the violence on cartoons continues, it seems that we will teach our kids how to kick and punch before we teach them how to tie their own shoes.

Both Hinson and Anderson et al. have really good points on violence in media. However Hinson's dialogue argument is disproven by Anderson et al.'s desensitization, legitimization and justification arguments. Violence content on media causes our behaviors to be more aggressive because it changes our idea of violence. We may watch violent movies and TV shows may not act as aggressively but continual exposure puts us in risk.

Media violence more or less affects our morality, behaviors and attitudes. As Anderson et al. (2003) put it, exposure to violent content is not "necessary and sufficient" to become extremely aggressive but it enhances the risk (p.83). They argue that just as smoking increase the risk of getting cancer; exposure to violent media increase the risk of being more violent (p.83). A person who smokes two packs of cigarette may not ever get cancer and a person who watches violent TV shows may not get more aggressive but one should ask "Is it worth the risk?"

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Thoughts on the Media Violence Debate

Hal Hinson, the author of the article “In Defense of Movie Violence” reports Michael Medved’s statistical findings: Sixty-eight percent of a scientifically selected sample of people believes that violence in movies have a “considerable” or “very great effect” in causing real life violence (p.289). Blaming movie or any other media violence for causing real life violence may seem like a bold statement, and many critics argue that there’s not a direct link between the two. Hinson takes this one step further and argues that movie violence may not be that bad after all. However, a great deal of scientific evidence shows that media violence increases real life aggression. Review of such studies by Huesmann and Taylor (2006), and Bushman and Anderson (2001) show concern for public health whereas Hinson’s arguments for the alternative view seems ignorant of such concerns and are refutable with the scientific evidence and convincing arguments that these authors provide.

To begin with, we must identify what constitutes the problem. The debate regarding the effects of media violence, especially in television and movies, arises due to the increasing use of graphic violence in different media. Hinson (1995) argues that this is due to demand. He claims that if it was not the demand from the audience, this many action movies depicting violence would not be produced (p. 289). Blockbusters, typically action movies, are usually the kind of movies that are being criticized for being too violent. Hence, Hinson (1995) suggests that there is a contradiction between how people think and act (p.289). In other words, it is the same people who criticize movies for being violent and continue to pay money to see them. It is reasonable to assume that demand from the audience is an important factor for the production of such movies, yet Hinson fails to realize another important factor.

Greater number of production for violent movies arises not primarily because people desire to see violent images as Hinson (1995) thinks, but due to the following: Action movies sell better than other, say, comedy movies since they involve less verbal, and more visual stimuli. Moreover, comedy movies require more wit and common understanding of humor that typically forms within one's own cultural environment. Hence, executives tend to produce more motion pictures in which visual stimuli are dominant over verbal stimuli, because they believe they would have better chances of distribution and less risks of failure in the global market. This tendency becomes evident when one considers the amount of energy executives put to produce better visual stimuli, such as advancements of 3D or IMAX technologies that aim to provide better visual experience.

On the other hand, whether it is action movies or horror movies, the violent content is disturbing for many people. However, Hinson (1995) asserts that people know when they see violent images in movies that it is fiction. Even if thousands of people get killed in the movie and the audience is terrified by this, as soon as the movie ends, they return to real life in which "the number of dead in the world has increased by a total of none" (p.291). The phenomena that he is relying on to make this argument is called "suspension of disbelief". Suspension of disbelief is defined as the phenomenon in which in appreciation of a work of fiction, the audience is to believe a premise that he would not believe in the real world. For any medium, anyone would agree that suspension in disbelief is essential for art. Yet, it should not be so easy to assume that just because people are aware of what they are being exposed to are pieces of a make believe reality, they can be immune to the threats the violent imagery poses to their psychological states.

Parallel to this, in their article "Media violence and the American public. Scientific facts versus media misinformation" Bushman and Anderson (2001) has brought up an interesting point by quoting the former Federal Communications Commission Chairman Reed

Hundt: "If a sitcom can sell soap, salsa and cereal, then who could argue that TV violence cannot affect to some degree some viewers, particularly impressionable children?" (p.479). If business of advertising, the goal of which is to influence people's decision to buy products or services, provides the main source of revenues which media industry is relying on, then it is reasonable to assume that media can influence people in many other ways including their aggression as well. In other words, if advertisements that run for only thirty seconds on television can change people's minds and make them buy products or subscribe for services that they might not even need, how can we be so sure that depictions of violence have insignificant effects on people's behavior?

Findings of some studies including "Television Violence and Violent Behavior" by Hartnagel et al.(1975) point to insignificant and indirect links between media violence and real life aggression. Hinson would agree with such findings. On the other hand, Michael Medved's assert that a TV ad is considered to be a great success even if it only influences 1% of the audience (as cited in Bushman and Anderson, 2001, p. 482). Hence, in a world where 1% is considered significant, it should not be so easy to claim that link between media violence and real life aggression is insignificant. It is certainly true that anyone who is exposed to media violence does not become a violent criminal. Yet, even if 1% of the population becomes more aggressive due to media violence, as Bushman and Anderson (2001) assert, cumulative effects over time might become significant (p.482). These cumulative effects constitute a threat to the public health and well-being. Thus, insignificant correlations established by some studies should not be accepted as sufficient to conclude the debate.

There have been alternative suggestions as to how violent media can actually be beneficial for people. Hinson (1995) proposes that exposing one's self to violent media might actually be a way to release for aggression that would otherwise be manifested in real life

situations (p.290). This phenomenon is referred to as the catharsis hypothesis. Although catharsis may still be valued and used as a therapeutic technique by some specialists, it is a component of the Freudian psychodynamic theory that has been widely criticized for not having scientific grounds. In fact, many researchers claim that catharsis hypothesis proves wrong (Bushman, 2002). Ancient Greeks might see violence in art as “providing a safety channel for the natural aggressive forces within us” as Hinson (1995) says, but is that really so? (p.292). Bushman (2002) describes catharsis and venting anger as “using gasoline to put out a fire— [which] only feeds the flame” (p.729).

As a matter of fact, venting anger may not after all be as beneficial as Hinson would argue when one considers the case of a group of fans in a soccer game as an example. Soccer fans, especially males, justify their use of bad language and overall aggressiveness during a game as being a form of catharsis. Many spectators who occasionally attend to the games claim doing so because they feel the need of a place to get their aggression out. However, if the team loses or even wins but the fans are not happy with the referee, their aggression that is supposedly relieved still carries on the after game has far ended. They may cause damage to the stadium by pulling the seats out of their place, break the windows of cars in the streets or yell at their families uttering “Don’t push me, I’m already angry.” The case of fans or any other similar example that we can easily pull out of our daily lives should make one question the effectiveness of catharsis.

In fact, the argument “watching movies is a form of catharsis” is precarious from the beginning. Catharsis by definition means that one purges their aggression. In other words, the person should “cool down” following it. However, when someone’s watching a movie and a violent scene comes up, his heartbeat and breathing is likely to increase. These are not signs of displaced aggression or frustration on a safer outlet, but are signals which show that a stress response is being induced. This means that the person is getting aroused as he watches the

violent scenes, and that the violent imagery is a stressor itself. Later on, he may seek an outlet for his aggression. This might well be a punching the wall type of behavior imitating a movie character as a result of which the person would end up hurting himself, or yelling at family members or even giving them scolding looks which might cause trouble to their social relationships. Again, it is not to say that televised violence creates criminals all by itself, but as Huesmann and Taylor (2006) assert “the influence of the violent mass media is best viewed as one of the many potential factors that influence the risk for violence.” Moreover, they agree with Bushman and Anderson (2001) that if these influences accumulate over time and affect large portions of the populations, statistically small effects might result in larger consequences (Huesmann and Taylor, 2006, p.394).

Despite the research that points to either no link or very weak correlations between media violence and real life aggression, Huesman and Taylor (2006) provide a body of evidence that combines laboratory experiments, correlational studies, cross sectional surveys and longitudinal studies. These multiple research approaches enable scientists to define causal relationships that are supported by correlations regarding effects of media violence as well as providing opportunity to contemplate on short and long term effects of such exposure over one’s lifespan.

It is evident that there are moderating factors to the relationship between media and real life violence such as the nature of media content and the social influences on the person (Huesmann and Taylor, 2006, p.409). Hinson (1995) would agree with this as he asserts that it is our own decision to see what movies or shows to watch or parents’ job to choose the appropriate content in children’s case. Moreover, he adds that movies offer a dialogue and even if one deliberately exposes himself to violent content, it’s still up to that person’s moral decision to accept or reject it (p.292). However, does this decision making process work as smoothly as Hinson hopes? What role do media have in shaping our judgments?

The documentary *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* makes a good case showing how Hollywood acts as a tool to reinforce the public's acceptance of Washington's policies on world politics. This noteworthy example is parallel to what Joseph Turow (2011) professor of communications calls "commodification of audiences" which refers to the case in which "everything in life, both private and public is being shaped by the values of business and commercialism." In terms of media, this means that media executives perspectives of the world shapes the way that of the viewers (p.477). In such a world, how can we make sure that our morality, which Hinson believes could protect us from the dangers of media violence, can remain media-proof?

Yes, the debate is not over and we do not have a clear answer yet to question "Does media violence cause real life aggression?" But, perhaps accepting the claim that the media violence has a role in increasing real life aggression is after all helpful, even necessary to avoid any possible threats to the public health. At the same time, education policies should emphasize media literacy principles and tools as well so that we can bring up generations that are aware of the significant effects of media on their lives and know how to deal with such influences.

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