VIOLENCE IN TELEVISION DRAMA: TRENDS AND SYMBOLIC FUNCTIONS

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This is the summary of the report of a three-year study of the portrayal of violence in television drama, begun under contract to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence[1] and completed under contract to the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior.[2] It is a progress report in a continuing program of research on television and other media content trends and symbolic functions.

This study was based on the analysis of all dramatic programs (plays, feature films, cartoons) telecast by the three major U.S. networks during prime time and Saturday mornings for one full week in October of 1967, 1968, and 1969.[3] The units of analysis were the play, leading characters in each play, and violent incidents (scenes of violence between the same parties) in each play.

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[1] The report to the Commission was published in Violence and the Media: a staff Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence by Robert K. Baker and Sandra J. Ball. Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1969.

[2] The full three-year report is in G. A. Comstock and E. A. Rubinstein (eds.), Television and Social Behavior. Vol. 1. Content and Control. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1972.

[3] A sampling experiment showed no significant differences in major program characteristics between the shows of the one-week sample and a random sample drawn from a full year's programs.

Violence was defined as "the overt expression of force against others or self, or the compelling of action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed." The focus was throughout on the indisputable determinations of commonly observable facts and acts. Trained coders analyzed through repeated viewings from videotape a total of 281 plays (182 program hours), 1355 violent episodes, and 762 leading characters. Each program was viewed by at least four analysts. Their agreement, measured by tests of coder reliability, assured that only clear-cut and unambiguous observations or broadly shared meanings were used in the results.

The study, then, dealt with the raw "facts of life" in the composite world of television drama. What is that world like? Who populates it and who does what to whom in it? What role does violence play -- whom does it help, whom does it hurt? It was assumed that viewer response or interpretation must start from some knowledge of these terms.

The findings do not necessarily resemble what any person or group elects to view or how they interpret what they view. Aggregate findings such as these represent fictional raw materials of time space, action, and characterization to which heterogeneous communities are exposed over time. They reveal the elementary collective premises from which any range of conclusions stems, and the common messages implicit in them. They describe the social symbolic functions inherent in the system of messages network television drama as a whole released into the mainstream of national consciousness.

This summary deals with three major developments resulting from the research. First, it traces the frequency and distribution of violence as measured by indicators developed to reflect several facets of dramatic action. Secondly, it highlights the qualititative aspects of the portrayals inherent in the changing symbolic complexion of the dramatic representations. Third, it provides support for a theory of symbolic functions, which is that violence in television drama is a demonstration of social power, and that changes in frequency -- with structure remaining constant -- do not necessarily alter such functions. These findings lead to the principal conclusions that the message of violence may be most telling in its projections of differential risks for different people, and the consequent cultivation of an invidious calculus of fears and prejudices.

Cartoon violence up; killings down

The general prevalence of violence in television drama has not changed markedly since 1967, but its nature, distribution, and symbolic complexion have. Some violence was found in eight out of every ten network plays telecast in prime time and Saturday morning. The consistent rate of violent episodes had remained about five per program and eight per hour.

The nature of violence changed in that fatalities declined, and the proportion of violent characters, especially killers, dropped sharply. The proportion of those involved in any violence (either as violents or as victims) fell from 73 to 64 percent, and the group involved in killing shrank from 19 to 5 percent of all leading characters. Something like greater

efficiency and smoother performance of violent acts seemed to be at work: a smaller proportion of characters staged as many violent scenes as before but of a much less lethal sort.

The distribution of violence changed in several ways. The network lineup showed CBS consistently the lowest but by a decreasing margin; ABC and NBC alternated for first place. More importantly, regular adult television drama became less violent, while cartoons became more violent.

The trend toward shorter plays sandwiched between frequent commercials on fast-moving cartoon shows thus further increased the saturation of this most violent type of program. With the rising tide of violence produced for children, and its ebbing on regular TV plays, the average children's hour doubled its lead from three to six times the violence rate of the average adult drama hour.

Some changes in symbolic complexion

Sheer frequencies may reflect something about the pattern of corporate policy controls, but they reveal nothing about the symbolic complexion and social message of the dramatic representations. Changes in frequency do not necessarily affect the message unless they also alter the symbolic functions of violence in the context of the plays.

It is an open question whether violence in a comic context is more or less effective in conveying its social lessons. At any rate, in cartoons, where the frequency of violence increased, the proportion of violent episodes taking place in a comic context also rose from 41 to 48 percent. Conversely,

where violence became less frequent, it also became less funny; comic contexts in non-cartoon plays dropped from 22 to 14 percent of all violent episodes.

Comic or not, most violence seemed painless and hygenic, suitable to relaxed enjoyment of satisfying moral lessons. About the only unmistakably debilitating consequence was death, and that nearly dropped out of sight. In three years, the weekly prime-time and Saturday morning casualty rate fell from 437 to 134. The "body count" of dead dropped from 182 to 46 a week. With the overall violence rate remaining constant, these figures point to the sanitization of TV violence. Visible agony and gore did not seem to be indispensable parts of the message of symbolic violence.

The fictional world and its social functions

In the world of fiction, facts do not get in the way of reality. The reality of mass-produced entertainment is that of institutional purpose, value, and function. "Facts" follow purpose in a context contrived for "just entertainment," which is to say no interference with conventional moral and social significance.

Time, space, demography, ethnography, and fate in the world of television drama provide the context for the social functions of symbolic violence. Just as violence was often comic and did not have painful or shocking consequences, so it tended to avoid familiar settings in favor of fantasy locales, removed from possibly conflicting, disturbing, or perhaps dangerously provocative reality clues. Time and place of violent action, compared to all others, were increasingly remote, contrived, exotic. The past and

future, unlike the present, were nearly always violent. Far-away and unidentified lands were the most likely and big American cities the least likely to be the scenes of violence. Urban violence was safely confined to crime and detective formats.

Violence also played a role in first populating and then dominating the fictional world. It touched more than two-thirds of all characters, but it did not affect them equally. The dramatic calculus of the risks of life implicit in who does what to whom and with what effects assigned different chances to men and women, young and old, single and married, rich and poor, native white and "other."

The differences begin with casting. Any society seems freest to those who run it; in the world of popular drama, they are the ones who can be cast in the greatest variety of roles. A "character part" means a role constrained by characteristics that the ideal hero or heroine presumably does not have. The ruling types of the symbolic world are its most dramatically free, versatile, and usable citizens, and, unlike in the real world, its majority.

About two-thirds of all leading characters were male, American, middle class, unmarried, and in the prime of life. Less than their share of representation went to those lower in the global hierarchy. Other minorities were those more entangled in familiar social contexts, and otherwise hindered by specific human identities and dependencies.

Violents and victims; fear is the message

Aloof males in a loose social network can specialize in violence without

too many complications. Seven out of ten males were involved in some violence. Nearly nine out of ten violents were male.

Unlike in real life, television violence rarely engaged those who knew each other well. Most of it was directed against strangers. Most of it stemmed not from despair, hate, rage, panic, or other emotion, nor from overt ideology, but from a rather businesslike pursuit of personal gain, power, or duty.

The fictional world was so populated that one-third of all characters who had an identifiable occupation could be considered professionals in violence: the forces of official and private authority, and the army of criminals, outlaws, spies, and other enemies arrayed against them. In a world of largely specialized relationships, violence seems to be just another speciality, a skill, a craft, a means to an end.

The end is usually the maintenance or restoration of some order, forever menaced by contentious powers. Their violations provoke the mayhem; the hero delivers the final blow. Thus there are always more victims than violents (and, as we shall see, some groups are more likely targets than others). Fear of victimization rather than the efficacy of aggression is perhaps the overriding message of the risks of life in prime time.

The reciprocal show of force signals the reality and magnitude of the contest. Unilateral violence was rare: only eight percent of all characters (16 percent of violents) committed violence but escaped being its target.

Unilateral victimization was more frequent. More than twice as many characters succumbed to the dramatic need for hapless victims as did violence with impunity. Significantly, many of these violent victims were women.

Differential risks: women and other "minorities"

Woman's "speciality" -- love and marriage -- tends to limit her parts to more familiar and intimate relationships. Unlike the men, women had an even chance of avoiding violence altogether. But once they brushed up against it, women took a greater and increasing chance of becoming its victim.

There were five male victims for every four male violents. Women's risks climbed to nearly eight female victims for every four female violents. Only 17 percent of male victims but nearly half of female victims suffered violence they did not initiate and did not or could not avenge. The ratio of male killers to males killed (2.1) was more favorable than the ratio of female killers to females killed (1.5).

Efforts to reduce violence appeared to concentrate on characterizations least consistent with the pattern and perhaps most "disturbing" from the point of view of conventional "story values"; violent women. But neither the proportion nor the number of women victims was reduced. Even more striking were the facts of unilateral violence. With men's chances remaining steady, the number of violent women who got away unharmed was cut in half, while female victims of unreciprocated violence increased by 60 percent. What happened over time was that selective reductions in the frequency of violent characterizations and casualties only sharpened the pattern of symbolic inequity.

Marriage, like love, is a theme that varies directly with the proportion of women in the fictional population, and inversely with the incidence of violence. However, marital status has a differential effect on the sexes' affinity for violence.

Marriage appears to shrink men and make them unfit for free-wheeling, powerful, he-man parts. Married men were half as likely to be violent as single men. Women, by comparison, appear to gain power through marriage; they lose none of their capacity for violence. Finally, only married women were able to reciprocate violence fully; both single girls and all men were more likely to fall victims of than to commit violence.

The trend over time, as we have seen, has been to limit violent characterizations, especially women, without necessarily reducing female victimization. This trend was most pronounced among middle-aged women, tending to pacify wives and mothers and to reduce, if not to eliminate, this menace to male power on television.

Lower class, non-American, and nonwhite characters shared the fate of women in being especially victimization prone. However, overwhelmingly male, they seemed more violent than their white American middle class counterparts. The consequence was that minority characters paid a higher price than the majority for engaging in violence. This was especially true for fatalities. Dominant majority-type Americans were more than twice as likely as the "others" to commit lethal violence, live, and reach a happy ending. In the symbolic shorthand of television drama, the freer and stronger kill in a good cause to begin with.

Violence as the ritual of power

The social message of violence stems from its symbolic functions as a test of power and arbiter of fate in the world of television drama. These functions are rooted in the structure of society, although they do not just "reflect reality." Rather, they project the fears, biases, privileges, and

desires of men of power upon a global canvas. Violence as a demonstration of power delineates a social structure, depicts relative status differences, defines patterns of domination and submission, cultivates certain values and norms with regard to influence, freedom, and justice, and contains other elements of myth in the historic sense of moral ritual.

The social ideology implicit in any mythology need not be specific to time, place, and familiar events. The freedom of documentary irrelevance permits authentic relevance specific to social power to find its most effective fictional environments. The symbolic functions of the ritual of power may be best performed in a stylized fashion and in relatively remote, unfamiliar, and exotic or comic contexts, least disturbed by potentially jarring juxtaposition with everyday experience or by shockingly explicit consequences.

High financial stakes, cheap production methods, and low critical thresholds combine to make children's programming the prime training grounds for acculturation into the ways of power. But violence entered most programs and permeated the world of television drama; next to commercials, it was its most predictable feature. Something of a male speciality, violence strikes the majority of leading characters, but not at random. The calculus of risks shifts with age, sex, marital status, class, race, nationality, and even time and place, favoring dominant types in the here and now. One's chances depend on one's place in the scheme of things. There are those who kill out of necessity in a noble cause, those who must pay dearly for violence, and those who seem fated to be its most likely victims. To learn these chances and these fears is to accept the hierarchy of powers and calculus of risks that make then tenable.

Selective reductions of certain features of violent representations tend to trim mostly the potentially disturbing, conflicting or non-essential elements of the pattern. Such changes only shift the burden of violence and victimization and further tip the scales of power in the direction already inherent in the representations. The net effect does not blur or loosen but it sharpens and tightens the symbolic hold of social power.

The cult of violence on American television is, then, a ritual of power not easily altered. As in any culture (with greater or lesser intensity), it serves the structure of power from which it stems. Its myths and their enactment help socialize people to grow up knowing how to avoid, as well as to use, violence. Its images and messages perform symbolic tasks of social control. To the extent that the ritual is effective, it saves having to resort to real violence to enforce its norms, while at the same time it attempts to show why it is still so frequently necessary to do so.