

Towards a Cultural Framework of Audience Response and Television Violence

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**Abstract:** In his paper "Towards a Cultural Framework of Audience Response and Television Violence" Lajos Császai argues that media violence is not a reification of social violence; rather, a popular ritual allowing contemporary societies to sublimate, to substitute, and to discuss aggression in the public sphere. Császai reviews the central questions of contemporary debates about television violence including Stuart Hall's thought on this topic and introduces the ideas of Elias, Geertz, Turner, Bettelheim, Benjamin, Girard, and others in order to locate the representation of violence in an interdisciplinary context. Using the genre of the horror film as an example, Császai suggests alternate ways the representation of violence could be interpreted. Császai's objective is to reconnect the vital but neglected theoretical insights of social and cultural thinkers to existing debates about the meanings of media representations of violence.

**Lajos CSÁSZI**

### **Towards a Cultural Framework of Audience Response and Television Violence**

Television violence has preoccupied public opinion for at least the past thirty or forty years. In fact, it has been perceived as a social problem ever since the spread of television. As media scholars have pointed out, moral anxiety surrounding television has parallels with similar concerns that greeted the appearance of earlier forms of commercial mass culture. The popular novel in the mid nineteenth century was negatively compared to elite literature; the silent film in the early twentieth century was harshly judged in comparison with the theater; and television was considered pernicious in comparison with the recently domesticated film (see, e.g., Starker). Even this short list of media-related anxieties indicates that "TV violence" is not a new social phenomenon, but, rather, the contemporary form of a long-standing struggle with the role of the media in modern societies. It is from the 1950s that debates about TV violence began to proliferate in the daily press as well as in parliamentary commentaries. This general moral anxiety triggered responses from different branches in both the humanities and the social sciences such as media studies, film and television studies, criminology, and applied social psychology. As a consequence, television violence was transformed into a social issue and gained the legitimacy of academic discourse. The implicit promise of this discourse was that the conflict-ridden social phenomenon was actually a technical problem for which rational explanations and effective solutions were available. TV violence became part of a scholarly as well as public discourse paradigm attracting vast sums of money and an army of researchers (see Williams) and the flood of books and journal articles that began in the 1960s continues ever since (according to one estimate, at the beginning of the 1980s, there existed 2,500 English-language publications on the topic, a number that has probably multiplied many times since (see Sparks).

The extent and unceasing liveliness of this research proves that contemporaries continue to see an unparalleled danger in the violence that appears on the television screen. In the early stages of research, the central question that preoccupied scholars had to do, not so much with the problem of the social existence or meaning of the images appearing on the television screen, as with their direct impact on viewers. There was a widespread belief that TV violence represented a transgression of social norms and had the effect of inducing fear and of provoking imitation. According to this "hypodermic needle model," or "effect model," the sight of violence had an impact similar to a single shot of narcotics, supposedly causing people to lose their normal sensitivities and increase aggression and crime. Later, this concept was refined in the so-called cultivation school's emulation theory, which held that it was not the direct impact of one television program, but their gradual cumulative effect over time, which led to the growth of fear, aggression, imitation and finally criminal activity (on this, see, e.g., Gerbner and Gross). Instead of direct connection, as cultivation theory suggested, other studies showed a very complex relationship between fear, aggression, and reality. One of their most important findings was that those who encountered violence on a daily basis in their own environment were more likely to be afraid than those who saw violence only on TV (see Sparks). In other words, it was found impossible to evaluate the world of television without taking into account the social world beyond television. Both TV watching and personal experience played a role in the development of fear, but in different ways. Paradoxically, those who experienced more violence in their environment also watched more TV on the average, in order to find reassurance for their anxieties (see Sparks). In contradiction to earlier assumptions, TV violence had a calming effect on these viewers. It also emerged, however, that the direct connection between TV and audience behavior, which was advocated by the cultivationist school, also had validity, but primarily among those who watched the TV screen at least four or more hours per day. Among these, the cause of fear was motivated not by social experience but by unlimited TV viewing (see Sparks).

The problems with these findings about the connection of social experience and TV watching in the explanation of the origin of violence induced fear is that they were never integrated into a coherent

theory. Empirical data about the effect of watching TV violence remained contradictory despite the size and volume of research on the subject. Instead of firm evidence, there was a long history of affirmations and denials of effects, which followed on each other's footsteps and contested each other's assertions (on this, see, e.g., Lowey and DeFleur; Rowland). Stuart Cunningham was right when he claimed: "If over 10,000 studies carried out over decades can produce such little 'effect,' media effects measured in this way must be below or beyond the threshold of such measurement" (98). Instead of searching for further "partial proofs" within the cultivation paradigm of TV violence industry, he suggested that research should focus more on the understanding of social meaning of violent representations.

To illustrate the theoretical and methodological problems that cultivation theory did not take into account, it is instructive to take a look at its definition of violence in different genres. Its "violence profiles" focused only on the effects of direct, physical violence, such as murder, bodily injury or pain. But this is a obviously a very narrow and one-sided definition of violence, which assumes that violence is a definable event, rather than a relationship between means and ends in an emotionally defined force field, where emotions, values and symbols fully influence the action (see Sparks). The fallacy of this kind of simplification, so characteristic of cultivation theory, can be illustrated through the reception of the horror movie Peter Jackson's *Braindead*. In the film, the hero destroyed hundreds of zombies in his home by a lawnmower. According to the cultivation theory approach, this should be coded as "hundreds of murder," which presumably caused unbearable horror in the audience. But, the critic who sat among the viewers saw just the opposite reaction. The audience started to cheer and laugh when the hero, fed up with the zombies' destructive activity, ignited the lawnmower to destroy them, with this exclamation: "The party is over" (Schubart 219; I return in the end of this paper whether the laugh was the result of a "cultivated insensitivity toward violence," as cultivation theorist may argue, or something else).

Because of its simplifications, it is not surprising that during the last decades the model of cultivation theory has come under sharp criticism. As opposed to the cultivation theory's "effect research," culture-oriented "reception theory" or "audience studies" did not consider as self-evident the meaning of any media representation. Most importantly, they did not evaluate TV violence as automatically negative (see Hall). Rather, they set out to understand how the active audience made sense of television programs and movie films (see Fiske and Hartley). Instead of the reactions of isolated individuals, they concentrated on discursive communities and preferred qualitative methods as opposed to quantitative methods. They studied the process of how representations created intersubjective meaning and their historical, social, and cultural contexts. According to their findings, media representations were perceived as violent and repulsive by some people; but others in the same time, place, and under the same circumstances seemed to enjoy them. In short, they did not see the meaning of media programs as either fixed or as homogeneous (on research suggesting alternate views, see, e.g., Chabot Davis; Tan; see also the project <<http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/aggr/Projects/Emo/description.html>>). The postulates of cultivation theory about the negative moral relationship between children and TV violence found empirical refutation from a number of sources such Robert Hodge and David Tripp Trip, David Buckingham, and others. Martin Barker analyzed the everyday pleasure and interest that people took in comic's books and violent movies and contrasted his findings with that destructive ideological presupposition that cultivation theory attributed to them (see Barker). David Gauntlett wrote in 1998 a manifesto with this provocative title: "Ten Things Wrong with the Effect Model" and he gave video facilities to children and asked them to make their own films. In the end, he found a high level of media literacy among children at all ages that contradicted to the victimization thesis of "cultivation" theory. The effect of media did not mean primarily imitation of socially deviant behavior; but rather interaction between the media and the audience (see also Livingstone). According to this view, violence induced not only anxiety, but also desire. Moreover, it promoted the transmission of different ideas and information and produces moral lessons and artistic experience as well (see McLeod, Kosicki, and

Pan). I share the assumptions of audience studies work referred to and agree with their conclusions that the meaning of TV violence is a social and cultural construction. However, interestingly enough the said findings did not penetrate scholarship in general, nor were they able to change public opinion in its evaluation of media violence (see Cunningham; Rowland). The public has remained not only negative about TV violence, but has shown a moral panic in connection with it (see Barker and Petley). In addition, even those media and audience studies scholars who otherwise prefer cultural approaches have accepted the negative judgment of the cultivationist school about media violence. In a word, while some work in audience research opened up a new field in the explanation of the personal experience of the representations of violence, work following cultivation theory remained hegemonic about TV violence, its perceived effects and emotional response(s) to it. This theoretical split in scholarship reflects the everyday schizophrenic reaction I found in many focus group discussions about violent movies among high school teachers and students: participants feared them, enjoyed them, or were personally neutral about them for different reasons. They, however, were hesitant to talk about their experience because of the stigmatizing moral tone of the public discourse of violence, which transformed personal feelings into ideology.

What is the connection between these two kinds of discourses, the personal and the ideological? Why can the ideological explanation dominate public discourses? Stuart Hall's answer to this question is simple: moral panic. In his retrospective survey of the literature on TV violence in his 1978 paper "Violence and the Media," Hall did not discover any evidence of "moral dissolution" owing to TV violence. The only tangible result of TV violence he found in the course of his extensive research was the increase of fear among viewers of violence. He emphasized, however, that there were many different interpretations for the cause and nature of this fear and, therefore, urged caution in the use of the concept of TV violence. This need for caution was, he argued, applicable to the very assessment of audience fear as a negative phenomenon. It can be seen as normal psychological self-defense, whose goal was to keep at a distance the object of fear. If, therefore, TV violence caused fear, then, it could be argued that exactly the desired reaction is achieved (for example, according Hall, there is no TV violence, because there are many different kind of TV violence's). A similar conclusion can be reached from a sociological perspective, in so far as the acceptance of the normative system of society is enforced and its transgression punished. In this sense, the meaning of TV violence is the imaginary transgression of the moral boundaries and learning the management of anxiety as a result of the transgression.

Because of the lack of direct connection between real life violence and TV violence, Hall redirected the question of unexplained anxiety that surrounds the transgressive violent acts and called it "moral panic" (223) and he argued that the real question was not how much violence was caused by the media, but, rather, why we were anxious, shocked, and morally indignant when faced with violence. Why did we think that the media was the chief cause of violence? He argued that moral panic was a result of a loss of general confidence in the orderliness of society and thus we should explore not the fear itself but the question of who considered TV violence responsible for this and why? According to this view, TV violence was fundamentally not the problem of the viewer, nor was it a social problem that should preoccupy public opinion and scholars. On the contrary, it was an ideological problem about the crisis of modern society, created by politicians, social investigators, and other public figures, that was then projected on to the viewers. Moral panic, argued Hall, made it difficult to see TV violence as a complex metaphor about society, which was an integral part of a larger discourse about social order and anomie. Instead, it presented the phenomenon as truth and reified it when it identified it with different empirically-defined social and moral agents and causes. Moral panic first abstracted and then transposed the discourse about violence into a moralizing context. It was a part of the dramatization of social problems and as such affirmed values and conjured up dangers. According to Hall, moral panic uses this secondary moralizing narrative to reinterpret the primary narrative of TV violence; that is, with the interpretation of the secondary narrative, it added its own conservative myth to the original

story of violence presented on television. Hall considered the public debate about TV violence as a moral panic because he saw it as the conservative ideological exaggeration of fear from real life crime in England in the 1970s. His description of the mechanism of moral panic as a displacement of social anxiety is convincing. But he left without answer the other half of the question having to do with the personal experience of anxiety about TV violence. My argument is that we need to redirect our attention from moral panic to personal anxiety; from the moral exaggeration of fear to the "normal" production of fear by violent representations. Why are people so afraid of pictures of violence even if there is no direct connection between them and reality? What kinds of dangers do these representations conjure up and why? And finally, is it possible to construct a theory about the representation of violence that satisfies Hall's legitimate demand to resist in the media the reification of anxieties caused by modern life?

Cunningham recognized the importance of answering these questions and the challenge they posed for media policy and he suggested that "cultural studies should excuse itself from the intellectualist disdain for what often is regarded as ill-informed public anxiety leading to simplistic scapegoating of the producers, broadcasters, and regulators of media messages. The *Tribunal's* report notes that there is evidence to suggest that viewers have considerable difficulty in expressing their concerns about complex issues such as the relations between symbolic and societal violence, and are therefore more likely to complain in terms couched within the *available* discourse of censorship, discrete program complaints, and expressions of taste and morality" (Cunningham 110, emphasis in the original). As a solution he suggested separating social violence from fictional ones in television. Representations of real violence, according to his view, should be censored by the community, in order to prevent moral panic. At the same time, representations of fictional violence should be allowed freely as part of private life. I agree with Cunningham that cultural studies should help to offer "alternative conceptualizations of violence in accessible terms" (Cunningham 110) but I have doubts about the possibility of separating "real" violence from "fictional" ones on the screen. The main reason for this difficulty lies in the fact that during the 1990s the boundaries of the real and imaginary in television became blurred. No one can decide any longer whether a docudrama, a tabloid, or a talk show is real or staged. The problem is that in television both the "real" and the "fictional" are representational. In these circumstances, one can only separate "real fantasies" from "fictive fantasies" in narratives (on this, see, e.g. Dundes). But, even in cases where violence is "real," such as in news broadcasting -- and even if we disregard their edited and constructed structure -- their absolute objectivity remains questionable. We should not forget that showing shocking pictures is very often an intentional, preplanned intervention to generate attention and assistance for those who need them. For example, the humanitarian organization, Physicians without Borders, has an agreement with directors of leading TV organizations to transmit all their violent pictures to produce to shock on the viewers (see Boltanski). Cunningham is right to argue that we need community education about TV violence. My point, however, is that this education should be based not on public policy and the control of media, but on cultural policy and the understanding of media. In other words, rather than using existing interpretive frames to classify violence as "real" (community controllable) and "imaginary" (non-community controllable), we should elaborate on new cultural frames to explain media violence. This new approach should challenge the dominance of the ideological reading of violence, which is pervasively negative and can easily be triggered to result in moral panic. It needs to focus on the personal experience of watching violent movies and to generalize these individual cultural practices into a broader theory.

In the following, I introduce the outlines of a theoretical model that does not see in the representation of violence a direct, realistic imprint of modern life, as the notion of community-based "real violence" or as the notion of ideology-based moral panic does. Instead, I understand media violence as a symbolic reaction to real-life violence, a ritual performance that is not a reification of real life violence, but, on the contrary, its dramatization. According to this view, the ultimate function of violent representations is not to reflect violence but to sublimate, magnify, transform, and redress it. It is, thus,

meaningless to separate real news from fictive movie films, since they are both different kinds of ritual performances. Writing about Balinese cockfight and stressing that every culture has its own unique cult of violence, Clifford Geertz has argued that "art forms of violence" played a very important role in society (443). It was a displacement of human emotions which allowed members of society to project their own fears and hopes, anxieties, and excitements onto fighting animals. Through violence as metaphor, people were able to speak about experiences and emotions that were inherent in everyday life, but usually repressed in society. Enactments of violence thus provided for participants a kind of "sentimental education" about the meaning of "death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, chance" (Geertz 443). Despite the bloody physical scene, Geertz emphasized the cultural aspect of the cockfight: "Like any art form -- for that, finally is what we are dealing with -- the cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived" (Geertz 443). Geertz offers here a ritual model of communication where violence is a form of communication with the hidden, the unknown, the Other. This Other, however, is nothing else than the masked version of society's own violence. According to this view, representations or symbolic enactments of violence serve to protect the entire community from its own violence (see also Girard). Perhaps the prime example of such violent rituals can be found in animal sacrifices and fights, but historically they came to be more and more transposed into the realm of fantasy and expressed as representations. Human violence, in other words, can be replaced not only by animal substitution, but aesthetical sublimation as well. Of course, this does not mean that actual violence is eliminated from society and replaced by institutionalized or representational forms. Psychologists such as Freud, Jung, Bettelheim, and others have stressed that, although aggressive behavior is heavily controlled in modern societies, aggressive passions, primitive fantasies, and fears remain active from childhood till death. This is the very reason why representations of violence play such an important role in our modern societies. They allow people to keep in touch with these anxieties and at the same time they protect them from them. Identifying sacrifice as the essence of violence rituals, René Girard has pointed out: "The surrogate victim, as founder of the rite, appears as the ideal education of humanity, in the etymological sense of *e-ducatio*, a leading out. The rite leads men away from the sacred gradually; it permits them to escape their own violence, removes them from violence, and bestows on them all the institutions and beliefs that define their humanity" (Girard 366).

Curiously, these positive examples of anthropological and psychological insights have been excluded from the evaluation of modern representations of violence on television. TV violence has been coded without exception as a "polluted" social and cultural expression. In order to offer a different explanation I turn to Norbert Elias's and Eric Dunning's theory of civilization and violence and argue that it is possible to give a positive interpretation of violent images in modern societies as well. Elias's and Dunning's theoretical framework shows that the process of civilization did roll back societal violence. At the same time, however, the same process opened up a compensatory space for representations of violence as an indispensable frame to work out of these repressed taboos. According to Elias and Dunning, society's control and repression of violence -- what is more its feeling of distaste and revulsion toward the phenomenon -- can be regarded as one of the most important results of the civilizing process. Looking at the history of sport, he has demonstrated that in classical antiquity far more violence was permitted in wrestling and boxing -- for instance, the breaking of bones and strangling -- than would be imaginable today. As a result of civilization, violence became a new kind of taboo, writes Elias, enforced by the creation and maintenance of historically changing rules that regulated the socially acceptable form and degree of violence. Summarizing their argument, Elias and Dunning write: "Whether it happens in our society or in societies at different developmental levels, the legal transgression is automatically judged by this standard. Insofar as we make them our own, these norms provide us with protection and reinforce in many different ways our resistance to transgressing the

laws. One can observe manifestations of this resistance in the high degree of sensitivity toward violent actions; in the passionate revulsion to representations of violence that are too realistically rendered or that exceeds the allowable levels; or finally, the guilt and bad conscience that we feel about our own transgressions" (Elias and Dunning 44).

On the basis of the above argumentation one could, therefore, interpret the representations of violence on television as a sign of the appropriate working of the civilizing process. Elias and Dunning, however, see the situation as more complicated than this; they remind us that the level of moral acceptability in the practice and representation of violence differed not only between different historical periods, but even within the same period: "A good example of this," they write, it "is the beauty of Greek art and the relative brutality of Greek competitive sports" (Elias and Dunning 49). In other words, while ancient aesthetic representation emphasized harmony, ancient sport valorized brutality. Elias and Dunning explain this peculiar phenomenon saying that a society can use sharply diverging criteria for the practice and representation of the same activity by the so-called concept of heteronomous value judgment and they refer ironically to those who imagined that value judgment of the same phenomenon could be considered identical or homogeneous without regard for the social spaces where they appeared. It must follow from all this that our revulsion against violence can only be explained as a manifestation of the civilizing process if our criteria for judging violence and the representations of violence were identical or at any rate compatible with each other. The question is whether this is, indeed, the case? If we think of the increasingly restrictive forms within which social acceptability of violence is constrained -- for instance the injunctions against beatings in schools or the legal understanding of marital rape -- we are, then, forced to conclude that, generally speaking, violence is more controlled, more individualized, and more sensitively sanctioned in modern societies than in past centuries. The relocation of the control of social violence from external authorities to the individual's own conscience coincided historically with the institutionalization of representations of violence in media (see Armstrong and Tennenhouse). I can only add, along with Elias and Dunning, that unfortunately the restriction of violence is less applicable to the relations between states than to the norms regulating social interactions of individuals within states.

During the nineteenth century as part of the civilization process, all kinds of animal fights were banned with the notable exception of the bullfight in Spain and parts of Latin America. But at the same time, new and more abstract kinds of violence became popular in the form of media representations of violence. If we now cast our glance at contemporary depictions of violence, be it on television, film, or any other media, we can see the unambiguous increase of violent actions and scenes in virtually every area of life. Of course, the modern period also manifests a discrepancy in the criteria of evaluating violence and the representation of violence, but this discrepancy is just the reverse the Greek example I discussed above. Today, the restrictions apply primarily to the everyday practice of violence, whereas in the depiction of violence the permissiveness of society is for some reason much more lenient than in earlier periods. In contrast to highly limited and strictly regulated violence in society, its mediated and visualized representations not only mirror, but also enlarge, exaggerate, and often reverse the place and function of violence in our lives. So how can we explain this paradoxical cultural practice in modern societies? Jean Cazeneuve considers media -- but especially television -- a modern magic apparatus that was able to represent and make alive all of those prohibitions and anxieties which are an organic part of the human condition but during the civilization became repressed as invisible taboos. He sees television as a new public space for symbolic inversion of taboos: "So the interest shown by the mass media in such news item as accidents, catastrophes, crimes and in anything that was taboo, is one facet of the entrance of humanity into history and of its acceptance of innovation ... The inversion of taboo is a means, for Promethean societies, of accepting the anxieties of the human condition by transforming the awesome into spectacle" (218). Can we call the inversion of taboos in the media a ritual? Is the concept of ritual still usable in case of modern media events like TV violence? Victor Turner's answer to this question is definitively "yes." Turner sees a significant



change in the structure of traditional rituals in modern societies. According to this, the "liminal" stages of archaic rituals -- very often considered the most important part of rituals because symbolic conversions take place during this stage -- were transformed in modern societies to "liminoid" stages, which is the common name for cultural performances in sport events, festivals, or media. While the traditional "liminal" periods were objective, social and prescribed, Turner emphasizes that modern "liminoid" periods were personal, psychological, and independent from the fixed structure of traditional rituals. Owing to this change, modern ritual performances like watching TV violence made it possible for people to pass through the ritual stages and to participate in them, without physical presence.

I arrive here to a crucial point about the representations of violence: why is the representation of violence especially suited for playing a civilizing role? Why is fear and excitement so important in this process? The answer is that both the anxiety and the joy come from the same thing: from the turning upside down of the social order. Violence is the most important example of inversion rituals because it makes possible participation in a liminoid, subversive performance, which temporarily helps to liberate people from the protecting / repressing rules of everyday life (see Cazeneuve; Tudor). The representation of violence "licenses" people to transgress the hidden rules, conventions, and taboos of modern life, including violent action. The importance of this "permission" is that it allows people to act out of aggressive fantasies, to transgress social sanctions, so without punishment or guilt. Making these taboos visible through transgression in the movies and TV shows allows people to participate in violence-related rituals. On the other hand, however important the theory of the civilizing process and the inversion rituals are, they do not explain alone all the problems of representations of violence. It is important to recognize that the general resentment, and occasionally moral panic, against media violence is not against the representation of violence itself, but its inappropriate forms. In the Bible, in the works of celebrated cultural classics, or in daily news there are plenty of violence but these are somehow considered appropriate and acceptable. In other words, the real culprit is not violence, but the popular representation of violence, which lacks external legitimation (see Fowles). Violence in the Bible is justified by sacred values, in elite culture by aesthetic rules, in the news by the need for information. In popular culture, by contrast, violence is seen as "shocking," "sensationalist," "fear mongering," "obscene," or simply "rude" presentation. The source of moral anxiety connected with popular representations of violence is that they are not subject to aesthetic, moral, or normative control in this context. This is proven by the changing historical rules of representation, even in the realm of high art. The harmony of the classical aesthetic canon was already questioned in high culture in the eighteenth century and was replaced by a new aesthetic based on the grotesque, the ugly, the trivial, and the sensational (see Boltanski). The history of modern literature and art shows that after this aesthetic turn products of elite culture were always attacked from traditional moral perspectives. They were blamed for showing the "dirt of society." However, it is important to recognize that this struggle took place within elite culture and avant-garde culture -- whatever the judgment of official culture -- and that it was vindicated by artistic legitimation.

The fate of popular representations of violence, however, was a different story, because such representations were not protected by neither the moral nor the aesthetic values of the dominant culture. From the nineteenth century on, thanks to technical developments and the general accessibility to media, representations of the grotesque, of horror, of fear, of aggression, became widespread, whereas earlier they had been isolated to avant-garde culture or in disrespectful popular culture (see Singer). With the help of new mass media, popular narratives spread a new sensibility that transmitted the physical, moral, and emotional shock of modern life. Vision and visuality played an important role in this process because it helped to disclose the "secrets" and the ordinary or ugly details of real life. This was just the opposite of the classical aesthetic canon which preferred harmonious composition and idealization and directed the gaze of the spectator from reality to the spiritual. In contrast, modern sensibility and popular sensationalism created the intensive experience and appropriation of the moment (see Charney). This transformation of the gaze was shocking, but it was accompanied by pleas-

ure and awakened curiosity for experiencing modern life. As a result, we can conceptualize the consumer of popular violence as someone who covers his/her eyes in defense against the aggressive spectacle, but who at the same time peeps through his/her fingers to enjoy the spectacle. He/she does not want to take responsibility for the violent spectacle, but, because of his/her curiosity is unable to resist the lure of stimulation. The situation of the audience is basically ambivalent: they see and do not see, know and do not know, participate and do not participate in what is presented in the medium. The popular sensations of the media institutionalized the need of modern audiences for renewed stimulation. At the same time, paradoxically, they also served as an entertaining compensation, as a time out, against the shock of modern life. According to Walter Benjamin, there is some parallelism between the effects of shocking stories and the traumatic shock on the battlefield. Referring to Sigmund Freud's analysis of traumatic shock -- which threatened those who were not prepared for it -- Benjamin wrote that "The more readily consciousness registers those shocks, the less likely are they to have a traumatic effect" (Benjamin 161). We can add that violent stories can create traumatic anxiety too by conjuring up unknown, unexpected, and repressed transgressions of taboos. The result is very similar to traumatic shock. Those people who deny the presence of violence in society have a stronger anxiety than those who can accept it in the form of popular sensations in the media.

Television did not invent violence. Violent representations in the media are only the modern-day replacements of formerly orally-transmitted ghost stories and scary tales told to amuse, frighten, titillate, and educate their audience. Writing about present-day crime-related stories in New York City, Eleanor Wachs calls them "urban legends" and observes that they play the same role as traditional scary tales and exist parallel with violent stories in the media: "one of the aims of the narrator of a crime-victim story is to shock the audience ... [the] story highlights the unpredictable consequences of urban living for the everyday citizen. What is so frightening is the precariousness of someone's life in such a common setting. Yet, that is exactly the point. The ordinary setting and the extraordinary event that takes place within the story frame not only lend believability to the story but also insure its shock value" (6). Crime-related legends, like TV violence, can be seen as ritually performed "cautionary tales," which are part of the socialization process that always end with resolution. Telling stories can play a therapeutic role for crime victims: "The victim," writes Wachs, "often goes through several stages in overcoming a crime victimization ... denial, anger, acceptance, and resolution" (Wachs 73). Bruno Bettelheim was equally passionate about the understanding of the importance that violent stories play in our social and personal life: "By asserting that there is, or ought to be, no place for violence in our emotional make-up we evade the issue of how to educate for the control of our violent tendencies. In this way we try to force each individual to suppress his violent tendencies, since we have not taught him how to control or neutralize them, nor have we provided outlets by proxy for them in society" (Bettelheim, *Surviving* 189-90). He criticized those, who, in the name of some kind of an enlightened point of view, wanted to remove violent scenes and figures from fairy tales. Stories confront us with outside and inside difficulties on the level of imagination and teach us to manage them, to live with them: "When a child who has a rich fantasy life -- something which fairy tales stimulate -- is exposed to aggressive fantasy material as it occurs in fairy stories (in the experiment a film with aggressive content), he responds to this experience with a marked decrease in aggressive behavior. When not stimulated to engage in aggressive fantasies, no reduction in aggressive behavior could be observed" (Bettelheim, *The Uses* 122-23). Representations of violence occupy an ever-increasing space during the process of civilization and can be seen as displacement or sublimation of aggression. The media makes possible the whole range of coping techniques from violent acting out or practicing self-control to learning about sacrifice as the ultimate solution to stop violence. In other words, violent movies and popular stories help to make visible hidden emotions, and force people, not only to learn about them, but also to deal with them in a socially appropriate way.

To this point, I considered TV violence as a homogeneous category, although in reality it is a heterogeneous phenomenon that includes all kinds of genres ranging from the news, documentaries,

docudramas to fiction movies. The latter can be further divided into the genres of the crime story, the western, horror, sci-fi, war, and action movies. In spite of these genre categories, however, it is possible to discuss them collectively since they are connected not only through the same themes, but also by the same visual and semantic codes as well; thematic and formal similarities are the result of the fact that different genres are part of the same symbolic chain of rituals that interpret social violence through cultural performances. In order to specify what I have been discussing theoretically up till now, I turn now to one of the most offensive genres of media violence, the horror movie. When I first began to study TV violence, I used crime stories to show how TV violence can be interpreted as purification rituals. But I was criticized by some of my colleagues who contended that "crime stories are too easy" to use as ritual performances and they argued that intellectually sophisticated crime stories based on the logical solution of a puzzle are different from irrational horror stories, which, in turn, work only on our own fear and feeling of annihilation. Compared to crime stories, it is common to regard horror as a historically later and aesthetically lower and emotionally degenerated form of popular representation of violence. Even those who are receptive toward different forms of popular culture freeze at the thought of horror movies and see them as a "disgusting" genre. In the words of one indignant film critic, "the gratification of the contemporary Horror film is based upon tension, fear, anxiety, sadism and masochism -- a disposition that is overall both tasteless and morbid. The pleasure of the text is, in fact, getting the shit scared out of you -- and loving it; an exchange mediated by adrenaline" (Brophy qtd. in Tudor 444). Horror is, however, a more complicated genre than appears from such descriptions. As we know, the Gothic novel, the ancestor of horror, appeared historically earlier than crime stories: Frankenstein preceded Sherlock Holmes and the Gothic novel was an early reaction to the pan-rationalism of the Enlightenment as it thematized the unknown, the mysterious, the uncanny, and conjuring up those problems that had been left out of a progressive and rational vision of modernity. The irrational, unexplainable, and uncanny aspects of life were to find a permanent place in modern popular culture, first in the Gothic novels of the late eighteenth century and later in cartoons, popular novels, and penny dreadfuls, and in the twentieth century in comics and films (on this, see, e.g., Hayward). Although the ratio of horror movies is much lower, both in the movies and in television than the ratio of crime stories, horror nevertheless plays an important role in defining the representation of violence. As opposed to other genres, their formulaic specialty is that they present the absurdity of the subjective perception and evaluation of reality in a particularly aggressive way. Because they also influence other genres, they blur the difference between different violent genres. According to Rikke Schubart, movies that are far from horror, films such as Garry Marshall's *Pretty Woman* use many of the visual elements of the horror genre. Or, to give another example, often-mentioned in film criticism, the repeated spectacle of the splattering brain of President Kennedy in Oliver Stone's *JFK* does not differ significantly from the spectacle of postmodern horror movies (Schubart 234).

According to the consensus in the periodization of horror movies, there began a new period in the genre in the early 1980s that still prevails today. Films such as *The Evil Dead* (Raimi), *Re-Animator* (Gordon), and *Braindead* (Jackson) are good examples of this era, sometimes called "postmodern" or "psychotic" horror (Schubart 232). These films are often named "splatter" or "slasher" movies because of their aggressive scenarios and their literally "full-blooded" scenes. The sign of death, for example, is not just a drop of blood at the edge of the lips of the dying person. Instead, it is depicted through the crackling noise of the knife penetrating the body and blood jetting from the arteries like water from a garden hose. According to the rules of the genre, the death of a person is unthinkable until his liver, kidney, or brain blows up and land on the floor or on the wall of the room. To increase fear, the audience is shown the victim, not through the eyes of the killer, as was the case in the famous bathroom scene of *Psycho*, but through the eyes of the victim himself/herself by means of a handheld camera. This new kind of representation does not result in unbearable terror, however, but in a kind of playfulness and irony that unites laughter to horror and presents desire in the form of parody, rather than

threatening repressed dreams. This "psychotic" horror does not generate the kind of anxiety that the former horror movies had, which made it difficult to differentiate reality from the fantasy, people from beasts. The symbolic "return of the repressed" has disappeared as well. Although there are beasts and violence in these films as well, the audience has a different reaction to them, laughter replacing fear as their dominant attitude. The sight of the living dead is terrible, but if he has his head under his arm, as is the case in the *Re-Animator*, it is comic. The pleasure of these movies comes not from suspense but from the abundance of bad taste (read in some cases camp, irony, and/or bad film making) and disgusting things being depicted in them. Using the technique of two tension-rising horror-clichés causes fear, but using hundreds of these clichés produces laughing, because they cancel out the effect of each other.

"Teenager horror movies" are a subgenre of the postmodern horror film, beginning with *Halloween* (Carpenter) and followed by *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven). Like folktales, these movies have their own easily recognizable formulaic structure. The teenagers are left alone by their parents/society, they unexpectedly face a manic killer/society and only the most dedicated and skilled survive the horrible encounter. It is significant that the audience of these movies is predominantly 14-18 year old boys. According to many interpreters, these horror films play an important role in masculine gender socialization of this age group, helping them learn adult male roles. In one of the more recent ones of this subgenre, *Mimic* (Del Toro), the professor in the film, summarizes this message for adolescents with these words: "Life is -- by its essence -- dirty, brutal and short" (I might add: is it not comical and/or camp to hear the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes as the message of a teenager horror movie?). Violence in these horror movies functions as an initiation ritual for adolescent boys who are leaving the safety of the family and provides them with the knowledge of a brutal and unknown world outside of their family. The ritual function of these movies is unambiguous; they help to end childhood and encourage the adolescents to fight for their integration into adult society, including the socially accepted management of their sexual desires (see Zillmann and Waewer). Not surprisingly, there is a no narrow, mainly young audience, that is fully aware of the new formal rules of the "psychotic" horror genre.

And this is the point to refer to the question I raise at the beginning of the paper: why do violent movies provoke a different reaction from viewers, that is, laughter instead of horror? The answer, I would like to suggest, does not lie in the so-called "moral desensitization" of viewers. In other words, it is not a sick accommodation to, or as uncritical acceptance of, real life violence that explains viewers' reactions. Rather, it is a result of familiarization with the rules and formulas of the horror genre: "Where a first-time audience or an old horror fan would be terrified, scared or at least disturbed, today's young audience cheers and screams with laughter" (Schubart 219). This audience does not feel any fear watching these movies; on the contrary, they insist on their particular formulas, because through them they can learn to control their feelings and to celebrate their adult male status. The result is exactly the same as Bettelheim's depiction of the effects of fairy tales: "The original displeasure of anxiety then turns into the great pleasure of anxiety successfully faced and mastered" (Schubart 122). Of course, the uncontrollable fear never disappears completely and the uncanny and the mysterious always find previously untouched taboos and new forms to elicit the feeling of terror and annihilation. However, this is not the same question as the shock of mainstream society when confronted by "psychotic" horror movies because of this split between a literal as opposed to metaphorical reading of violent representations it is always easy for the moral entrepreneurs to generate moral panic among the population and to mobilize people against "TV violence."

"Not blood. Red," said Jean-Luc Godard, when he was accused of using too much blood in his films (Godard qtd. in Russel 175). Godard referred to the fact that movie scriptwriters and directors used violence for special purposes. Audience and reception studies should help to clarify this purpose in order to locate the representation of violence and the emotions it triggers within a broader frame including discourse about power, values, morals, and security. Through the unfolding of representations of

social problems and human conflicts, media give us answers about the nature and role of power, the construction of values, and the feelings that accompany these processes in our life. In other words, performed violence is the symbolic construction and ritual condensation of discourses about social and cultural matters. It is important to understand that not real persons, but abstract ideas and moral principles, collide with each other in these performances (see Fiske and Hartley). This is the explanation of the often misinterpreted fact that violence is more frequent and more exaggerated on the screen than in real life and that the nature of imaginary violence is different from its social counterpart. This explains the fact that the frequency or quantity of TV violence is not related directly to the increase of the violence in society. The amount of the representation of violence is not a direct expression of the amount of real life violence and, in turn, the amount of the representation of violence does not influence directly the amount of violence in social life. If it shows anything directly, it is perhaps the sensibility of society toward violence and not the occurrence of violence.

My purpose in this article has not been to resolve the tangled problems of TV violence. Rather, it has been to challenge the widespread hostility that surrounds the subject and to present it as a promising subject for scholars of (popular) culture. As opposed to cultivation theory and conservative cultural criticism, I postulate that TV violence does not "teach" aggressive behavior and does not promote violence any more than other forms of storytelling. The imaginary, but shocking, challenge that TV violence poses to our reality is not accidental or some kind of mistake but the essence of an inverted ritual that gives complementary meaning and symbolic order to this dangerous aggression. As a consequence, popular representations of violence should not be seen as signs of some kind of contagious illness that society should be cured of. On the contrary, violent stories are essential complementary readings, very often liberating counter-readings of our life experience whose understanding is indispensable for the mental health of society (see Fiske). From a cultural perspective, possible reactions to violence can be formulated in the following way: social denial or cultural appropriation? In other words, should media studies take part in the defensive rituals of moral panics or in the support of the inversive rituals of popular media representations?

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