

On Sex and Violence

There are some experiences that take us to the very 'essence' of our humanity and can also most severely test our faith. I don't think they are 'new'; on the contrary, they are the venerable elements of story-telling as found in ancient myth, and they remain the basic ingredients of the entertainment industry. Let's consider, then, sex and violence.

Hollywood has offered 'sex and violence' as a steady diet, so, however diluted into adolescent fantasy, we may feel saturated more than satiated. But how do we as Christians understand the experience of sex and violence?

I don't know which is 'selling' best now, but let's start with sex.

Making Love in the Desert

"Love is most nearly itself when here and now cease to matter." (T.S. Eliot)

Love, as Eliot advises us, is eternal in origin and our aspirations reflect its transcendent character.

However, when it comes to sex, it is very 'here and now.' As Dorothy might have asked Toto, where are we? (And, more importantly, how did we get here?)

In America today, the initial experience of sex isn't physical but cultural. Before our young bodies begin to make their

demands, we've seen, though probably didn't understand, countless sexual encounters on our ever-present 'screens.' Our very concepts of sex initially come from the appeal of popular culture and especially from the media, an unprecedented power in our mass society.

Mimetic desire, the anthropological term for envious rivalry and imitation, is fundamental to human nature and present in all cultures; it is the way that we humans learn, through imitation, even how to be human. Mimetic desire, the desire for what others have, is at the very heart of mass society, and is virtually unrestrained in a society which promotes commerce through mimesis. Mimetic desire doesn't just grease the wheels of the marketplace, it is the wheel.

For most young Americans, how one initially learns about 'sex' in our market society is the same as how one learns about sports, cars, or cosmetics. What is desirable is what 'sells,' that is, what is done or consumed by an admired social elite, most often celebrities. The immediate model-rival may be initially age-determined peer leaders, particularly among adolescents ('the cool ones'), but they are merely the most astute imitators of mass marketing trends. Ironically, among adolescents this is particularly true of those who are marketed as 'rebels' -- that is, in reality, pseudo-nonconformists.

However, the concepts and practices of sexuality promoted by mass society, including entertainment and advertising, have changed during the last half century. For generations, American culture offered the ideal images of romantic love -- a passionate attachment, physical and emotional, between

the sexes. Romantic love is the historic compromise Christians made with the modern age, conceding to modernity's goal of self-realization. It still exists in remnant aspects of pop culture, such as country music, but 'a romance' is now primarily a form of nostalgia, like 'slow dancing.'

The question of the relationship between sexual love and human nature relates to the mysterious unity of the body and soul, but it is more than a theological matter or a semantic difficulty. The neglect of the irreducible unity of the body with the inner self leads to an often-unconscious repression. While the Victorians suffered from repressed physical desires, late moderns are experiencing their own compulsions and fears provoked by a repression of the spiritual dimension of sexuality.

This repressed condition provides the unacknowledged context for the politicized controversies about all aspects of sexuality. The recent preoccupation with homosexuality, including questions of civil rights, have somewhat replaced the controversy over abortion. However legitimate the legal issues, these political battles have been conveniently evasive of the more fundamental questions regarding the nature and meaning of sexuality itself. For example, the most significant change in American sexual mores in the last half century is the prevalence of divorce and the rise of cohabitation, which, once accepted as norms, largely determine the public attitudes toward the other 'hot button' issues. It is purposeless to argue about 'same-sex' relationships or 'sexual morality' unless there is some shared understanding of what is meaningful and significant

in human sexuality. No such shared understanding, much less moral consensus, now exists.

The changed attitudes about sex seem to have taken place in rather rapid historical terms, yet they were a long time coming. G.K. Chesterton's jeremiads regarding the growing fashion of divorce came before the First World War. Over a half-century ago, long before the aggressive demand for 'sexual liberation,' C.S. Lewis referred to the modern media's "propaganda for lust"! Among our cultural sophisticates, marriage as the "consecration of love" was considered a quaint sentiment even before television.

Evaluating Sexual Liberation

*"At Last, My Lonely Nights are Over!"
(Etta James song, 1961)*

To better understand the current controversies, let's take a look back at the once-revolutionary concept of 'sexual liberation' that changed American life a half century ago.

The American sexual revolution that accelerated in the Fifties was inspired more by technology than new ideas. The 'pill' and other devices were used long before their implications were understood. It was widely assumed that "birth control" technology would not fundamentally change the precepts of sexual morality. However, the 'counter-culture' of the Sixties then promoted more fundamental conceptual changes, though providing attitudes more than coherent thought. There was also a rather strident anti-intellectualism that developed among the New Left in the

late Sixties that privileged spontaneity and even irrationality over reason. All this was enormously convenient for those seeking sex without consequences.

The common goal at the time was consistent with the humanist agenda of the late modern era, which was to not just to 'liberate' but to absolutize personal freedom, an aim ultimately expressed in terms of 'personal choice.' As one feminist leader articulated it: 'It doesn't matter what you choose, as long as you have the right to choose!'

However, it is the secondary goals of the sexual liberation movement that are most revealing and now conveniently forgotten. These secondary goals, which were openly and confidently proclaimed were, first, a reduction in the sexual anxieties that produced neuroses and compulsions. Freer access to sexual fulfillment, it was argued, would unburden many sexually-repressed poor souls and offer relief and satisfaction, if not always ecstasy. Related to this attainment was the confident prediction of the disappearance of pornography. This may now seem an odd and even contradictory objective considering the more libertarian views of today's 'progressives,' but the other objective of sexual liberation at that time is even more curious.

It was assumed that by 'liberating' men and women, and even encouraging early sexual experiences -- consensual but without commitments -- that people would mature and learn from practice, the way one might learn in music or sports. By having sex with a variety of consensual partners, one would learn 'how to do it' and presumably 'get it right.'

Here's the anomaly: This pre-marital "pedagogy" was meant to strengthen the family!

Early political revolutionaries, such as the 19th century anarchists, had advocated the abolition of the family as an outmoded feature of an oppressive social structure, as did some of the French revolutionists. Some such sentiments now seem to be resurfacing. But Americans in the Sixties made no such demands, or at least not publically. A lasting relationship, presumably, one even producing children, was still deemed a worthy goal. But it would need sexual liberation to make it viable.

How might we evaluate, more than fifty years later, the results of the sexual liberation movement? It does not seem to me unfair to use the attainment of their own goals as criteria. Clearly, the secondary goals were not only unachieved, but the movement produced results that moved in the opposite direction. Sexual compulsions are conspicuously still with us, and pornography has exploded into a major global industry. Most important, the American family, however defined, continues to disintegrate. Many of the well-meaning reform movements of modern times, it has been noted, have produced unfortunate 'unintended consequences.' In no area is this more evident than in sexual innovation.

Perhaps we might agree that in contemporary America sex seems to produce more conflict and controversy than it produces children. However, these ongoing American social conflicts don't arise so much from considered morality or social philosophy but from the broad acceptance of norms

promoted primarily by the political elite and the mass media. Our 'new norm' in sexual relationships is best described as 'serial monogamy.' This implies early exploratory sexual involvements and probably more than one long-term relationship, but, ideally, sequential and, hopefully, with some degree of fidelity. But, again, this too must be a matter of 'choice.'

Whatever its variables, the American norm is no longer 'romantic' sex implying a lasting, lifelong relationship. Even popular music reflects this change. What is sought is an intense, however fleeting, experience of mutual gratification, a kind of ersatz transcendence. (This is sought, I suggest, not necessarily achieved.) Indeed, for some, only sex seems to promise this elevated state, and no religious belief or affiliation can compete with it at present. The compulsive obsession with sex isn't just about pleasure -- it is about many things: identity, status, and power -- but, primarily, it fills in for the lack of any passionate alternative.

Engaging questions about the nature of sexuality constitutes one of the major challenges for media artists, and particularly those of faith. This challenge will not be met, however, by proselytizing or catechizing through the media. This may be of value within the church itself, but the only convincing response to the contemporary relativizing if not trivialization of sex will be to lay bare the now-buried spiritual roots of our sexual impulses. I believe this will be best done, if done at all, by the arts rather than through overt moral instruction.

What is lacking in modern life is a sense of the sacred that unites people in whatever they do, including a sacrality that is integral to physical sexual union. This may sound, I realize, like a proposal for the anomaly of a 'Christian X-rated movie,' but then so be it.

Perhaps no other arena of contemporary life has reflected the modern desire for personal autonomy more than sexuality. Yet, as often, the result has been yet another tangle of 'unintended consequences.'

In confronting this 'brave new world', like the Children of Israel, we too have no choice but to venture into the unknown. Let us pray for a faith and strength comparable to theirs . And, given the vastness of the contemporary desert and its intense heat, let us remember Augustine's cautionary words as we go: "Love and then do what you will!"

Love and Death

Before we examine violence, let's take a look at death itself.

There is nothing more important Catholic artists can contribute to this confused world than the recognition of the inseparable unity of life, love, and death, which, theologically, is an affirmation of the unity of body and soul. How we love is how we die, and visa-versa. Truly loving means being fully alive and human, and being human means we will die. To deny and run from death means running from life and incapacitates our ability to love.

The separation of the body from the spirit or soul is a temptation as old as philosophy, or older, but treating the body as private property is a distinctly modern idea. The commodification of sex quickly followed and is now prevalent and not just in pornography. This dualism that ultimately denigrates the body is not the result of conscious thought much less a developed philosophy. It has been engendered by mass culture, particularly in the last half century.

The ultimate result, if not the underlying purpose of 'youth culture' as the term suggests, has been the denial of death. We need to recognize how profoundly this relates to our sexuality and sexual practices. To understand this, we will need to draw on experience more than even good theology. This means re-establishing rites of passage and multi-generational ties. It is only from those who have faced the reality of death that we will learn the 'art of dying' and then its correspondent, 'the art of loving'. So, here again, is another challenge.

Reflections on Violence

Who is watching Travis Bickle?

It might seem callous or even hard-hearted to offer merely an analysis of the many recent mass killings or similar horrors, but I'm not really offering analysis, only an attempt at partial description.

I'm also offering a perspective rooted in a lifetime of experience in Hollywood, the self-proclaimed 'entertainment capitol of the world.' Sadly, shamefully, I think this perspective is relevant. The mass media, in the long tradition of theatrical presentation, claims that it serves to 'hold up a mirror to society,' although in this case perhaps more of a 'cracked mirror' and to the 'unnatural' rather than to nature.

I want to offer my own little 'mirror glimpse.' I believe that the central image that Hollywood held up for our edification or entertainment or both was the portrayal of a potential mass killer. This was 'Travis Bickle,' the title character in the film, *Taxi Driver*, made in 1976.

I think Travis Bickle has become increasingly iconic during the forty years following his appearance and even more so now. He not only remains quite contemporary but, with the passage of time, we might now better understand him.

To acquaint you or refresh your memory: He was literally a taxi driver in Manhattan and a Vietnam vet, who, drawn into his own grim fantasies, erupts into violence, and, inadvertently, becomes a hero and briefly a celebrity. It is clear, given his pathology, that it is only by accident that his violent outburst wasn't an act of mass murder or assassination.

What makes Travis a revelatory character for our times is not merely his disposition toward violence, but that he is the potential hero of his own fantasy world. Toward the end of his journey into near-psychosis, he even changes his

appearance, wearing a 'tomahawk' haircut and carrying a concealed pistol. Perhaps the most chilling moment is when he poses in front of a mirror, challenging an imagined adversary by taunting: "Are you talkin' to me? Are you talkin' to ME?!" and practices pulling the gun.

It is a self-dramatization in the guise of a movie tough-guy, but the line between Travis's fantasy and the real world has become blurred. He will subsequently 'rescue' a young prostitute by killing her pimp. The media then does the rest.

Since 1976 America has seen an increasing number of mass killings, some more random and senseless than others. While some of the most recent have been related to Islamist radicalism, several others have had no such connection. Many of the past victims have been predictable targets of hate crimes, such as Black churchgoers, government and military employees and health workers at an abortion clinic, but others have been innocent bystanders at public events or fellow schoolmates.

Again, while the most publicized assailants have been purported Muslim militants, previous shooters have been zealots and fanatics with other causes or simply mentally-disturbed young men.

It is in recognizing this diversity and the growing unpredictability of the circumstances that suggests Travis Bickle as more prototypical than any 'true believer.'

How did this happen? Where did Travis come from?

His appearance in 1976 suggests that his most discernible origins can be seen in the years prior to the movie's appearance which included a vast proliferation of media images and types of 'entertainment.' I would further suggest that the prior decade from 1966 on constituted a decisive time of transformation of American society in many significant ways, and a development that would inevitably result in anomie, disillusionment and, ultimately, violent outbursts.

The statistics are clear and grim:

The divorce rate in America nearly doubled from the mid-Sixties onward. The drug epidemic, which began in the Fifties, soared as did the consumption of recently legalized pornography. The depiction of raw violence in all the media was on the rise and would become virtually uninhibited in the 70s and 80s. This was mirrored in the dismal end of a frustrating, divisive war in Vietnam and in the destabilizing trauma associated with the political assassinations of the time. I don't think any further stats or observations are needed. As I said, this isn't an analysis only a description.

However, I believe the most significant characteristic of Travis Bickle as emblematic of the age was his media-induced fantasy self-image. That this would be depicted in a movie is ironic, but then who would understand this aberrance better than image-creators? Recognizing this takes nothing away from the creative talent involved (Scorsese, Schrader, de Niro, et al) and acknowledges their insight, even courage.

Travis Bickle seems an even more illuminating prototype as the decades pass. His challenge to his fantasy-foe – ‘you talkin’ to me?! – seems now even more pointed at a time when ‘identity politics’ is rampant even among privileged college kids. The hyper-sensitivity that has produced bizarre forms of political correctness such as ‘micro-aggression’ in which references to biological identity is perceived as discrimination reveals an even more aggravated (and fundamental) loss of genuine identity than an impoverished fictional taxi driver once suffered.

But it is the blurring of the lines between ‘entertainments’ -- whether in the form of TV, movies, news or political campaigns – and ‘real life’ that now seems a ubiquitous if not insurmountable disability.

Each mass shooting becomes an instant ‘media event’ with the appropriate hand-wringing and predictable partisan political responses (ban guns or Muslims) that offer no solutions and add yet another degree of anxiety and fear.

Beyond not offering analysis, I can’t offer answers or solutions either, but again only description. However, if we recognize the ‘truth’ of the Travis Bickle character and his origins in the fear and desire-driven fantasies that now dominate, not just the American media but much of what’s left of ‘ordinary life,’ we might recognize what a long process of recovery lies ahead, and, at the very least, start looking for a ‘first step.’

Repentance, anyone?

How We Lost the War on Media Violence

The seemingly endless violent killings that continue to shock the nation provoke equally familiar questions such as how to limit or modify gun use, or how to better identify potential perpetrators.

What isn't addressed – and the silence is deafening – is the psychological atmosphere, the “culture of violence,” that is largely the result of the proliferation of violence in the media, that is to say, in Hollywood products.

I realize that this is a discomfoting perspective for many of us. While we may privately acknowledge Hollywood's role in creating this climate, we sense some genuine risk in doing so publically.

Our concerns also suggest why compromises limiting the exposure of violence have failed.

A public battle over media violence has raged in one form or another since the 1940s when calls were made for the censorship of comic books. There was seldom a real dialogue, only competing propaganda campaigns. The pattern persists to the present day; one might even call these acrimonious exchanges yet another form of “media violence.”

In the past, you had various mental health professionals and the PTA on one side, demanding restrictions on media content, and, on the other, the ACLU and the Hollywood “creative community” waging a war of resistance. The industry leaders themselves often assumed a neutral

posture, admitting a possible need for “responsible” self-governance. They were worried less about content than they were about government interference.

During the Seventies, when one of the more contentious battles over TV violence raged, I served on the Board of Directors of the Writers Guild, and along with nearly all of my colleagues I consistently took the position that the central issue was the threat to free expression posed by the would-be censors, a “First Amendment” principle which could not be compromised.

In any case, there was no effective truce that held, and the war on media violence was definitively lost. All we need to do is go to the movies or turn on TV to verify this.

Let’s resist viewing this battle as a melodrama with “good guys” and villains; it wasn’t that the defenders of creative freedom were content to simply defeat the concerned parents and mental health groups; what failed were the efforts to forge a reasonable compromise. While this dispute brought out zealots and opportunistic politicians, my experience on “the front lines” suggested that most of the combatants were sincerely concerned, and often even willing to consider compromises.

While I deplore the avalanche of violence that has saturated popular culture ever since, I have no real regret for assuming that “first amendment” position because there was no real alternative. Without common agreed-upon moral principles, any form of regulation was inherently arbitrary, and thus potentially dangerous. Our failure to compromise

was inevitable because there was, even then, no longer a social consensus about what constituted the public good. This conclusion, I realize, is even more discomfoting than to admit to Hollywood's complicity.

What is more damaging and inhibiting than the lack of a moral consensus is the pretense that this vacuum doesn't exist. By failing to recognize that the efforts to create a "new morality" have failed to replace the "old," we ignore the growing gap between our rhetoric and our behavior.

The attempts to replace recognizable moral principles has produced farce if not absurdity.

This was most evident in the efforts to curb media violence by quantifying it. The quantification approach crashed when the network's computation of so-called 'violent acts' led to a bland TV revue hosted by Donnie and Marie Osmond being classified as "excessively violent"! This was due to their offering a Punch and Judy puppet act -- aimed, naturally, at children. The cosmetic nature of this short-lived regulation was seen in Hollywood as more hilarious than discouraging.

The use of "social science" as a guide for regulation failed because there is no prevalent agreement about the effects upon viewers of the depiction of extreme violence. The television networks were always able to find their own "experts" who, probably with integrity, contradicted the conclusions of their professional colleagues.

Common sense then defeated the sometimes- desperate Hollywood argument that there were, in fact, no serious effects that could be attributed to this extensive media

exposure. Clearly, if this were the case, then the millions of dollars spent on advertising were being wasted.

What will prove equally futile in present-day campaigns to curb violence, is, above all, the reliance on media techniques for persuasion. In other words, lacking an underlying consensus as to what is "good" rather than "desirable," only emotional appeals are effective. Our political leaders will respond to a public opinion shaped, in effect, by the techniques of media advertising. Yet the dominance of this very system of non-rational emotionalism has helped create the nation's confused moral climate in the first place.

In short, the effort to shape a rational public policy based on media manipulation cannot reform society or even the media itself -- the most pervasive influence on public attitudes. The inability of those of us in the media to recognize this reality only fosters the scapegoating and extremist attitudes on all sides. The predictable polarization is already evident. Some short-term measures, some even reasonable, may result, but the "culture of violence" -- the underlying acceptance of violence in all its manifestations -- will remain untouched.

Violence, Politics and Art

Whether manifested in terrorism or abusive speech, politics and violence seem increasingly inseparable.

To understand the highly emotional and often irrational nature of contemporary politics, we must again recognize that there are deep existential fears that underlie all human efforts to exercise power over ourselves or nature – politics being the most naked form of power next to war. This is especially true of the fear of death which includes the fear of separation and 'disintegration'.

In previous historical periods, there were stronger social and familial support systems to assist people when confronting death, usually in the form of traditional customs, rites, and rituals. Most of these are almost entirely missing in contemporary America. These customs, usually related to religion but sometimes merely customary, once addressed our primal fear of death, which is initially rooted in the infant's fear of physical separation from the mother. This is a universal experience and need not be subject to any one form of psychological analysis. It is an experience as inescapable as the mother's pain in childbirth.

Contemporary efforts to evade the reality of death are among the hallmarks of modernity and have resulted in what Philippe Aries describes as the modern 'farce of death' in which death is 'masked by disease' and hence a 'problem' to be solved by medical science. This evasion denies the dying person resolution and divides the dying from the living as if they no longer have anything in common. This cultural

'lie' is perhaps also at the heart of our mass obsession with entertainment and distraction.

As the child develops and matures, a further fear emerges, also latent and unacknowledged. This is the fear of the loss of basic relationships and then later forms of 'social disintegration' due to individuation. This loss of basic relationships is to some extent inescapable, either due to death or physical separation. In contemporary America, however, the absence of males as 'father figures' – often even the biological father – is now so common that some form of separation anxiety was and is to be expected.

As familial relationships have become increasingly fragmented, a loss now of epidemic proportions, these unexpressed anxieties grow and can take many forms including anti-social attitudes. One of the most common and universal emotional reactions is the experience of 'resentment' – an attitude Nietzsche predicted would become the dominant emotion of modernity. Seventy years ago Dorothy Sayers also predicted a growth in resentment and envy that would eventually become the source and basis of wide-spread demands for 'rights'! We've had no shortage of prophets.

All of this goes a long way, I suggest, in explaining the striking degree of irrational anger and obvious 'resentment' that now dominates so much of public and political life.

If this analysis is correct, then, at present, the most useful discourse, however unwelcome, would be to engage others in an honest examination of the underlying fears and deep

anxieties about death and separation. Yet I am not optimistic about the efficacy of this approach. For one thing, the only proximate language for most Americans would be religious, and thus dismissed out-of-hand as parochial or sectarian, or, for some, even meaningless, a source of obfuscation. The lack of any philosophical orientation, even or perhaps especially in higher education, precludes availing ourselves of other and older vocabularies except in very narrow academic confines.

The other form of discourse, though under admittedly unusual circumstances, would be to seek artistic expression. Hence, the enormous challenge for today's artists, including poets and filmmakers.

Beyond pointing to the responsibilities of artists, clearly I am, admittedly, once again, declining to offer any 'answer' to this challenge, for I have none. This will not be the first time in which those of us in faith communities have few alternatives but to offer a compassionate silence.

Perhaps this is our best offering in any case.
