

Susan - Will try this as Op-Ed, including  
"our" copy. George

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CHILDREN AND IMAGES OF WAR by George Gerbner

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How do televised images of war affect our children? Worried parents and inquiring reporters ask me that question. They want to know if our research on television violence can help deal with this predicament.

Well, research won't tell you what to do but it can form a basis for judgment. First the facts.

Most of our children grow up in homes where television is on about seven hours a day. They see an average of six to eight violent acts per prime-time hour, including war scenes. They see four times as many in presumably humorous children's programs. They see two "entertaining" murders a night. So images of war and violence have been with them since infancy. That is the context in which we now confront images of a real war. Let us consider that context a bit before moving on to that reality.

We are awash in a tide of violent representations the world has never seen. For the first time in human history, most of these stories come not from parents, schools, church or even the local community but by courtesy of a group of distant corporations that have something to sell. While news is supposed to be more independent of commercial constraints than drama, it has an equal investment in conflict and violence as a way of grabbing and holding an audience for the dramatic program that follows.

Yes, there was gore in fairy tales and blood in Shakespeare, and it is a violent world, and all that did not make us into monsters. While the last proposition is debatable, none justifies drenching nearly every home with graphic scenes of expertly choreographed brutality.

Movies cash in on the trend. Escalation of the body count seems to be one way to get attention from a public punch-drunk on global mayhem. Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* observed that "Robocop's" first rampage for law and order in 1987 killed 32 people. The 1990 "Robocop 2" slaughters 81. "Death Wish" claimed 9 victims in 1974. In the 1988 version the "bleeding heart liberal" turned vigilante disposes of 52. "Rambo: First Blood," released in 1985, rambled through Southeast Asia leaving 62 corpses. In the 1988 release "Rambo III" visits Afghanistan killing 106. The daredevil cop in the original "Die Hard" in 1988 saved the day with a modest 18 dead. Two years later, "Die Hard 2" thwarts a plot to rescue "the biggest drug dealer in the world," coincidentally a Central American dictator to be tried in a U.S. court, achieving a phenomenal body count of 264. But the record goes to last summer's children's movie and marketing sensation, a glorification of martial-arts violence, "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles." With its 133 acts

of mayhem **per hour**, it was "the most violent film that has ever been marketed to children and given a 'PG' rating" reported the National Coalition on Television Violence.

Images of the war in the Persian Gulf fit that pattern of mayhem and madness. Except for two things. First, they are, if anything, **less** explicit and gory. The military will not allow pictures of soldiers being blown to bits. Secondly, they are of actual ongoing open-ended reality. Although we have found that children, and, in fact, most of us, derive many of our ideas about reality from what we see on the screen, this is real in a different way. The Persian Gulf story is not the contained and happy violence to which we are accustomed. Let me explain.

The pattern of screen violence and victimization presents a mean world which arouses anxiety but also contains it. Steady exposure to that pattern makes some more aggressive, others less sensitive, and most viewers relatively insecure, mistrustful, and dependent on harsh measures and often violent defenders. The tension is resolved by the time the final commercial appears. After all, television must deliver an audience in the mood to buy. Most screen violence is a stereotypic ritual calculated to --puse but not to upset. Suspense is fine to keep us tuned -- happy ending is a must. It assures us that although dark and deadly forces lurk around every corner, strong, swift, macho solutions are available to solve all problems.

The war in the Gulf fits that pattern -- up to a point. But it does not stop with the final commercial. It interrupts and even preempts favorite programs -- a clear sign of dire emergency. It kills real and basically innocent people and taints the executioners as much as the victims. Win or lose (whatever these words may mean) there is no clearly predictable happy ending. That casts its shadow over family time and talk and lives. And there is no escape. You can't turn it off. That comes as a shock. What can we do?

Altering our viewing habits or life styles, or forbidding our children to watch what their peers and we ourselves watch, can be futile and self-defeating. It may only confirm fears of things hidden from view and careening out of control.

However, viewing and discussing what we see with our children confers a measure of immunity from the most harmful consequences. Placing events in a broader perspective, appropriate to their level of understanding, and sharing thoughts and feelings, may offer some immediate assurance and balance.

Finally, we can seize this opportunity to act as the long-range guardians and protectors of our children. We play that role not only as parents and teachers but also as citizens. Whatever our position may be, discussing it, and what each of us in our own ways can do about it, provides a positive model of active citizenship. Knowing that we are not entirely at the mercy of blind fate rampant in the world, or of mindless "market forces" driving culture at home, is the best protection against false hopes and fears, against drift and despair. It is also the best contribution we can make to prepare our children to grow up as fighters for sanity and peace in their time, even if not in ours.