

5. What does Scheer find so troubling about the Orange County schoolchildren who are fans of *Beavis and Butt-Head*? Do you also find this anecdote disturbing? Why or why not?
6. Describe the solution Scheer proposes for the problem of television violence. Which solution do you find more persuasive, Cannon's or Scheer's? Why?

### Rhetorical Considerations

1. Describe the tone of Scheer's opening. What language creates this tone? Did you find Scheer's tone offensive or appealing?
2. Characterize the organizational strategy of Scheer's essay. For example, indicate where Scheer refutes opposition; where he states his thesis; where he offers evidence supporting his claims. Evaluate the effectiveness of this organization.
3. Analyze Scheer's use of the MTV program *Beavis and Butt-Head* to illustrate his argument. What points does Scheer prove using this show? How effective do you find Scheer's use of this one example?
4. In paragraphs 22–25, Scheer quotes the television producer Norman Lear at length. Critique Scheer's use of this particular authority, considering what the choice of Lear adds to or detracts from the essay.

### Writing Assignments

1. With two other students, write a group report assessing Scheer's claim that news programs "stress ambulance-chasing 'action news'" (paragraph 10). Before you begin to write, have each student watch both network and local news on one network for an entire week, assessing the coverage of violent events. Then put your observations together in order to support or attack Scheer's position, distinguishing, if possible, between network and local news and the treatment of violence on different networks.
2. Since Scheer wrote in 1993, Congress has begun to take action on the problem of television violence. Do some research in order to discover what legislation is now pending on this issue. Then write a letter to your member of Congress supporting or attacking the legislation, supporting your position both with information from Scheer and Cannon and from your own experience.

### In Praise of Gore

Andrew Klavan

Do you feel a dark and secret rush of pleasure, even joy, viewing a violent and blood-soaked scene from the latest slasher film? Well, according to Andrew Klavan,

the answer is yes—whether you are willing to admit it or not. A basic premise of his view is that people get pleasure releasing their repressed violent impulses. That said, does Klavan think this delight in violence argues for censorship? Absolutely not, for “. . . [f]iction cannot make of people what life has not, good or evil.” His fervently expressed conviction is that one should reserve art as a time and place to wrestle with and harmlessly release our darker side.

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### BEFORE YOU READ

Can you think of recent violent acts (suicide, murder, beatings) reported in the news media and attributed to a film or recent record recording? Are you convinced there is a direct link between the event and the film or recording? Explain why or why not.

### AS YOU READ

Klavan writes, “Pleasure that is unknowingly repressed is outwardly condemned.” Find one or two examples of human behavior cited by Klavan to illustrate this point.

I love the sound of people screaming. Women screaming—with their clothes torn—as they run down endless hallways with some bogeyman in hot pursuit. Men, in their triptic cars, screaming as the road ends, as the fender plummets toward fiery oblivion under their wild eyes. Children? I'm a little squeamish about children, but okay, sure, I'll take screaming children too. And I get off on gunshots—machine gun shots goading a corpse into a posthumous jitters; and the coital jerk and plunge of a butcher knife, and axes; even claws, if you happen to have them.

Yes, yes, yes, only in stories. Of course; in fictions only; novels, TV shows, films. I've loved the scary, goopy stuff since I was a child. I've loved monsters, shootouts, bloody murder; women in jeopardy (as they say in Hollywood); the slasher in the closet; the intruder's shadow that spreads up the bedroom wall like a stain. And now, having grown to man's estate, I make a very good living writing these things: thriller novels like *Don't Say a Word*, which begins with a nice old lady getting dusted and ends with an assault on a child, and *The Animal Hour*, which features a woman's head being severed and stuffed into a commode.

Is it vicious? Disgusting? Sexist? Sick? Tough luck, it's my imagination—sometimes it is—and it's my readers' too—always, for all I know. And when they and I get together, when we dodge down that electric alleyway of the human skull where only murder is delight—well then, my friend, it's showtime.

4 But enough about me, let's talk about death. Cruel death, sexy death, exciting death: death, that is, on the page and on the screen. Because this is not a defense of violence in fiction; it's a celebration of it. And not a moment too soon either.

5 Hard as it is for a sane man to believe, fictional violence is under attack. Again. This year's list of would-be censors trying to shoulder their way to the trough of celebrity is hardly worth enumerating: Their 15 minutes might be up by the time I'm done. Film critic Michael Medved says cinematic violence is part of a pop culture "war on traditional values"; Congressman Edward Markey says television violence should be reduced or regulated; some of our less thoughtful feminists tried to quash the novel *American Psycho* because of its descriptions of violence toward women and even some of the more thoughtful, like Catharine Mackinnon, have fought for censorship in law, claiming that written descriptions of "penises slamming into vaginas" deprive actual human beings of their civil rights.

6 It's nonsense mostly, but it has the appeal of glamour, of flash. Instead of trying to understand the sad, banal, ignorant souls who generally pull the trigger in our society, we get to discuss the urbane cannibal Hannibal Lecter from *The Silence of the Lambs*, Ice-T, penises, vaginas. It makes for good sound bites, anyway—the all-American diet of 15-second thoughts.

7 But Britain—where I've come to live because I loathe real guns and political correctness—is far from exempt. Indeed, perhaps nowhere has there been a more telling or emblematic attack on fictional violence than is going on here right now. It is a textbook example of how easily pundits and politicians can channel honest grief and rage at a true crime into a senseless assault on the innocent tellers of tales.

8 It began here this time with the killing of a child by two other children. On February 12, Jamie Bulger, a 2-year-old toddler, was led out of a Merseyside shopping mall by two 10-year-olds—two little boys. The boys prodded and carried and tugged the increasingly distraught baby past dozens of witnesses who did not understand what they were seeing. When they reached a deserted railroad embankment, the two boys tortured, mutilated, and finally killed their captive for no reasons that anyone has been able to explain.

9 The nation's effort to understand, its grief and disgust, its sense of social despair, did not resolve themselves upon a single issue until the trial judge pronounced sentence. "It is not for me to pass judgment on their upbringing," Mr. Justice Morland said of the boys. "But I suspect exposure to violent video films may in part be an explanation."

10 No one knew why he said such a thing. There had been speculation in some of the papers that *Child's Play 3* (with its devil doll, Chucky), which had been rented by one of the killers' fathers, had given the son ideas. But there was no testimony at the trial, no evidence presented showing that the boy had seen it or that it had had a contributing effect. It didn't matter. As far as journalists were concerned, as far as public debate was concerned, "video nasties," as they are called here, became the central issue of the case.

We finally know what we are seeing when we look upon the rampaging fire of violence in our society: We are seeing the effects of fiction on us. Got it? Our moral verities are crumbling by the hour. Our families are shattering. Our gods are dead. The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.

And it's all Chucky's fault.

The instinct to censor is the tragic flaw of utopian minds. "Our first job," said Plato in his classic attack on the democratic system, "is to oversee the work of the story writers, and to accept any good stories they write, but reject the others." Because the perfectibility of human society is a fiction itself, it comes under threat from other, more believable fictions, especially those that document and imply the cruel, the chaotic, the Dionysian for their thrills.

For me to engage the latter-day Platos on their own materialist, political terms would be to be sucked in to a form of dialogue that does not reflect the reality I know—and know I know. Because personally, I understand the world not through language but through an unfathomable spirit and an infinite mind. With language as a rude tool I try to convey a shadow of the world my imagination makes of the world at large. I do this for money and pleasure and to win the admiration of women. And when, in an uncertain hour, I crave the palliative of meaning, I remind myself that people's souls run opposite to their bodies and grow more childlike as they mature—and so I have built, in my work, little places where those souls can go to play.

The proper response to anyone who would shut these playgrounds down for any reason—to anyone who confuses these playgrounds with the real world—is not the specious language of theory or logic or even the law. It's the language of the spirit, of celebration and screed, of Jeremiad and halloo-jah. Of this.

Now, I would not say that my fictions—any fictions—have no effect on real life. Or that books, movies, and TV are mere regurgitations of what's going on in the society around them. These arguments strike me as disingenuous and self-defeating. Rather, the relationship between fiction and humanity's unconscious is so complex, so resonant, that it is impossible to isolate one from the other in terms of cause and effect. Fiction and reality do interact, but we don't know how, not at all. And since we don't understand the effect of one upon the other—whence arises this magical certainty that violence in fiction begets violence in real life?

The answer seems to come straight out of Psychology 1A, but that doesn't negate the truth of it: Pleasure that is unknowingly repressed is outwardly condemned. The censor always attacks the images that secretly appeal to him or her the most. The assault on violent fiction is not really an attempt to root out the causes of violence—no one can seriously believe that. The attempt to censor fictional violence is a guilt-ridden slap at ourselves, in the guise of a mythical them, for taking such pleasure in make-believe acts that, in real life, would be reprehensible. How—we seem to be asking ourselves—how, in a

world in which Jamie Bulger dies so young, can we kick back with a beer at night and enjoy a couple of hours of *Child's Play 3*?

How can we enjoy this stuff so much? So very much.

Not all of us, perhaps. I'm forever being told that there are people who'd rather not take violence with their fiction—although I wonder how many would say so if you included the delicate violence of an Agatha Christie or the “literary” violence of, say, Hemingway and Faulkner. But even if we accept the exceptions are incredible, the field to real gore, it does seem to me that the numbers are incredible, the attraction truly profound.

Once I picked out what looked like a cheap horror novel by an author I'd never heard of. For months afterward, I asked the readers I knew if they had heard of the book, *Salem's Lot*, or its author, Stephen King. None of them had. Later, the movie *Carrie* helped launch what has to be one of the most successful novelistic careers since Dickens. But even before that, readers were steadily discovering the nausea and mayhem and terror of the man's vision.

The moral, I mean, is this: To construct a bloodsoaked nightmare of unrelenting horror is not an easy thing. But if you build it, they will come. And so the maker of violent fiction—ho, ho—he walks among us in Nietzschean glee. He has bottled the Dionysian whirlwind and is selling it as a soft drink. Like deep-browed Homer, when he told of a spear protruding from a man's head with an eyeball fixed to the point, the violent storyteller knows that that gape of disgust on your respectable mug is really the look of love. You may denounce him, you may even censor him. You may just wrinkle your nose and walk away. But sooner or later, in one form or another, he knows you'll show up to see and listen to him. Fiction lives or dies not on its messages, but on the depth and power of the emotional experience it provides. An enormous amount of intellectual energy seems to have been expended in a failed attempt to suppress the central, disturbing, and irreducible fact of this experience: It's fun. Like sex: It's lots of fun. We watch fictional people love and die and screw and suffer and weep for our pleasure. It gives us joy.

And we watch them kill too. And this seems to give us as much joy as anything.

All right, I suppose you can talk about the catharsis of terror, or the harmless release of our violent impulses. Those are plausible excuses, I guess. It doesn't take a genius to notice how often—practically always—it's the villain of a successful piece of violent art who becomes its icon. Hannibal Lecter and Leatherface, Freddy Krueger and Dracula—these are the posters that go up on the wall, the characters that we remember.

So I suppose, if you must, you could say these creatures represent our buried feelings. Whether it's Medea or Jason (from *Friday the 13th*), the character who commits acts of savage violence always has the appeal of a Caliban: that thing of darkness that must be acknowledged as our own. Not that people are essentially violent, but that they are violent among other things and the violence has to be repressed. Some emotions must be repressed, and repressed emotions return via the imagination in distorted and inflated forms: That's the

law of benevolent hypocrisy, the law of civilized life. It is an unstated underpinning of utopian thought that the repressed can be eliminated completely or denied or happily freed or remolded with the proper education. It can't. Forget about it. Cross it off your list of things to do. The monsters are always there in their cages. As Stephen King says, with engaging simplicity, his job is to take them out for a walk every now and then.

But again, this business of violent fiction as therapy—it's a defense, isn't it, as if these stories needed a reason for being. In order to celebrate violent fiction—I mean, *celebrate* it—it's the joy you've got to talk about. The joy of cruelty, the thrill of terror, the adrenaline of the hunter, the heartbeat of the deer—all reproduced in the safe playground of art. A joy indeed.

When it comes to our messier, unseemly pleasures like fictional gore, we are downright embarrassed by our delight. But delight it is. Nubile teens caught out in flagrante by a nutcase in a hockey mask? You bet it's erotic. Whole families tortured to death by a madman who's traced them through their vacation photos? Ee-yewwww. Goblins who jump out of the toilet to devour you ass first? Delightful stuff.

And we've always been that way. The myths of our ancient gods, the lives of our medieval saints, the entertainments of our most civilized cultures have always included healthy doses of rape, cannibalism, evisceration, and general mayhem. Critics like Michael Medved complain that never before has it all been quite so graphic, especially on screen. We are becoming “desensitized” to bloodshed, he claims, and require more and more gore to excite our feelings. But when have human beings ever been particularly “sensitized” to fictional violence? The technology to create the illusion of bloodshed has certainly improved, but read *Titus Andronicus* with its wonderful stage direction, “Enter a messenger with two heads and a hand,” read the orgasmic stalking of Lucy in *Dracula*, read de Sade, for crying out loud. There were always some pretty good indications of which way we'd go once we got our hands on the machinery.

Because we love it. It makes us do a little inner dance of excitement, tension, and release. Violent fiction with its graver purposes, if any, concealed—fiction unadorned with overt message or historical significance—rubs our noses in the fact that narratives of horror, murder, and gore are a blast, a gas. When knife-fingered Freddy Krueger of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies disembowels someone in a geyser of blood, when Hannibal Lecter washes down his victim with a nice Chianti—the only possible reason for this nonreal, nonmeaningful event to occur is that it's going to afford us pleasure. Which leaves that pleasure obvious, exposed. It's the exposure, not the thrill, the sensors want to get rid of. Again: Celebration is the only defense.

And yet—I know—while I celebrate, the new not-very-much improved Rome is burning.

Last year sometime, I had a conversation with a highly intelligent Scottish filmmaker who had just returned from New York. Both of us had recently seen Sylvester Stallone's mountaineering action picture *Cliffhanger*. I'd seen it

in a placid upper-class London neighborhood; he'd seen it in a theater in Times Square. I had been thrilled by the movie's special effects and found the hilariously dopey script sweetly reminiscent of the comic books I'd read as a child. My friend had found the picture grimly disturbing. The Times Square theater had been filled with rowdy youths. Every time the bad guys killed someone, the youths cheered—and when a woman was murdered, they howled with delight.

I freely confess that I would have been unable to enjoy the movie under those circumstances. Too damned noisy, for one thing. And, all right, yes, as a repression fan, I could only get off on the cruelty of the villains insofar as it fired my anticipation of the moment when Sly would cut those suckers down. Another audience could just as easily have been cheering the murder of Jews in *Schindler's List* or of blacks in *Mississippi Burning*. I understand that, and it would be upsetting and frightening to be surrounded by a crowd that seemed to have abandoned the nonnegotiable values.

Michael Medved believes—not that one film produces one vicious act—but that a ceaseless barrage of anti-religion, anti-family, slap-happy-gore films and fictions has contributed to the erosion of values so evident on 42nd Street: I don't know whether this is true or not—neither does he—but, as with the judge's remarks in the Bulger case, it strikes me as a very suspicious place to start. Surely, the Scotsman's story illustrates that the problem lies not on the screen but in the seats, in the lives that have produced that audience. Fiction cannot make of people what life has not, good or evil.

But more to the point: Though the Times Square crowd's reaction was scary—rude, too—it was not necessarily harmful in itself, either to them or to me. For all I know, it was a beneficial release of energy and hostility, good for the mental health. And in any case, it took place in the context of their experience of a fiction and so (outside of the unmannerly noise they made) was beyond my right to judge, approve, or condemn. Nobody has to explain his private pleasures to me.

Because fiction and reality are different. It seems appalling that anyone should have to say it, but it does need to be said. Fiction is not subject to the same moral restrictions as real life. It should remain absolutely free because, at whatever level, it is, like sex, a deeply personal experience engaged in by consent in the hope of anything from momentary release to satori. Like sex, it is available to fools and creeps and monsters, and that's life; that's tough. Because fiction is, like sex, at the core of our individual humanity. Stories are the basic building blocks of spiritual maturity. No one has any business messing with them. No one at all.

Reality, on the other hand, needs its limits maintained by force if necessary, for the simple reason that there are actions that directly harm the safety and liberty of other people. They don't merely offend them; they don't just threaten their delicate sense of themselves; they *hurt* them—really, painfully, a lot. Again, it seems wildly improbable that this should be forgotten, but Americans' current cultural discussions show every evidence that it has been. Just as fictions are being discussed as if they were actions, actual crimes and atroci-

ties are being discussed as if they were cultural events, subject to aesthetic considerations. Trial lawyers won a lesser conviction for lady-killer Robert Chambers by claiming his victim was promiscuous; columnists defended dick-chopper Lorena Bobbitt, saying it might be all right to mutilate a man in his sleep, provided he was a really nasty guy. The fellows who savaged Reginald Denny during the Los Angeles riots claim they were just part of the psychology of the mob. And the Menendez brothers based much of their defense on a portrayal of themselves as victims, a portrayal of their victims as abusers. These are all arguments appropriate to fiction only. Only in fiction are crimes mitigated by symbolism and individuals judged not for what they've done but because of what they represent. To say that the reaction to fiction and the reaction to reality are on a continuum is moral nonsense.

Fiction and real life must be distinguished from one another. The radical presumption of fiction is play, the radical presumption of real life is what Martin Amis called "the gentleness of human flesh." If we have lost the will to defend that gentleness, then God help us, because consigning Chucky to the flames is not going to bring it back.

One of the very best works of violent fiction to come along in the past few years is Thomas Harris' novel *The Silence of the Lambs*. The story, inspired, like *Psycho*, by the real-life case of murderer Ed Gein, concerns the hunt for the serial killer Jame Gumb, a failed transsexual who strips his female victims' flesh in order to create a woman costume in which he can clothe himself.

When Harris introduces the killer's next victim—Catherine Martin—he presents us with a character we aren't meant to like very much. Rich, spoiled, arrogant, dissolute, Catherine is admirable only for the desperate cleverness she shows in her battle to stay alive. But for the rest of the novel—the attempt to rescue Catherine before it's too late—Harris depends on our fear for her, our identification with her, our deep desire to see her get out of this in one piece. He relies on our irrational—spiritual—conviction that Catherine, irritating though she may be, must not be killed because . . . for no good reason: because she *Must Not*. Harris knowingly taps in to the purely emotional imperative we share with the book's heroine, Clarice Starling, the FBI agent who's trying to crack the case: Like her, we won't be able to sleep until the screaming of innocent lambs is stopped. Harris makes pretty well sure of it.

At the end, in the only injection of auctorial opinion in the book, Harris wryly notes that the scholarly journals' articles on the Gumb case never use the words *crazy* or *evil* in their discussions of the killer. The intellectual world is uncomfortable with the inherent *Must Not*, the instinctive absolute, and the individual responsibility those words ultimately suggest. Harris, I think, is trying to argue that if we don't trust our mindless belief in the sanctity of human life, we produce monsters that the sleep of reason never dreamed of. *The Silence of the Lambs*, as the title suggests, is a dramatization of a world in which the spirit has lost its power to speak.

We live in that world, no question. With our culture atomizing, we think we can make up enough rules, impose enough restrictions, inject

enough emptiness into our language to replace the shared moral conviction that's plainly gone. I think all stories—along with being fun—have the potential to humanize precisely because the richest fun of them is dependent on our identification with their characters. But stories can't do for us what experience hasn't. They're just not that powerful. And if some people are living lives in our society that make them unfit for even the most shallow thrills of fiction, you can't solve that problem by eliminating the fiction. By allowing politicians and pundits to turn our attention to "the problem of fictional violence," we are really allowing them to make us turn our backs on the problems of reality.

After a crime like the Jamie Bulger murder, we should be asking ourselves a million questions: about our abandonment of family life, about our approach to poverty and unemployment, about the failures of our educational systems—about who and what we are and the ways we treat each other, the things we do and omit to do. These are hard, sometimes boring questions. But when instead we let our discussions devolve, as they have, into this glamorous debate on whether people should be able to enjoy whatever fiction they please, then we make meaningless the taking of an individual's life. And that's no fun at all.

## Topical Considerations

1. Summarize each of the seven sections into which Klavan divides his argument. If you are working with other students, assign each student (or group of students) one or two sections to summarize. After distilling the main point of each section into one complete sentence, put the sentences together in order to see the essay's overall construction. Discuss how effectively you think the different sections of the argument fit together.
2. Why does Klavan discuss the Jamie Bulger case at such length (in paragraphs 8–12)? Explain what point Klavan uses this case to prove.
3. Analyze Klavan's theory about the relationship between fiction, imagination and reality, described in paragraph 14. Do you agree with him about this relationship? Describe the importance of the theory to Klavan's argument.
4. Why, according to Klavan, does "the censor always attack . . . the images that secretly appeal to him or her the most" (paragraph 16)? Explain why you agree or disagree with Klavan's analysis of the motives of the censor.
5. Analyze Klavan's attitude toward the theory of "the catharsis of terror" (paragraph 23).
6. Why do you think Klavan relates his dispute with the unnamed Scottish filmmaker over the movie *Cliffhanger*? For you, did this anecdote prove or undercut Klavan's point, and why?
7. Restate Klavan's thesis in your own words. Explain the relationship between this thesis and other main points identified in your answer to Question 1.
8. Compare and contrast Scheer's attitude toward the appeal of violent fiction with Klavan's. Which position do you agree with, and why?