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VIOLENCE REDUX

Martin Barker

From small beginnings. It was preparing a first year class on moral crises around films, using Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, that brought it into focus. The outcome: a plea and an argument for refusing to operate with the category 'violence' any longer.

Central assertions of this essay: it isn't possible to say anything very helpful about the issue of 'violence in the media' without going back into some very specific histories. Those who research and theorise about the 'possible harmful effects of media violence', who repeat mantra-like that it is 'obvious' that these are the questions we must ask, insistently drop us out of history. They stop us seeing the most obvious point: that 'violence' is not an object which researchers have discovered, in the way that Australopithecus was discovered. 'Violence' is an arbitrary re-labelling of behaviours, and then also of representations of those behaviours, which in its very act of naming achieves a number of *political* ends. It excludes many *actually* violent behaviours, by those in power and authority. It turns these into the 'solutions' to those it doesn't like. And it dismisses, before they can even posed, explanations of the re-labelled behaviours in terms of various kinds of conflict. Instead it proffers, sometimes implicitly sometimes explicitly, a wickedly narrow range of possible explanations, all of which rule out be definition the possibility that violence may be rationally conceived. 'Violence' in other words is itself a social concept with a history – and one into which, paradoxically, the very films, television programmes and other materials which are accused of being a potent cause, are deeply interwoven.

In this essay I circle between several things: that easily forgotten history of the discourses that produced 'violence'; the case of *A Clockwork Orange* as a classic exemplar; and a contemporary illustration of some of the material ways the discourses still operate – the reception of *Crash* in Britain in 1996-7.

Lest We Forget

If we have learnt anything from cultural theory, it is that a term like 'violence' cannot be simply a descriptive collection of naturally-grouping items. Rather, it is a concept, a category, of which we need to ask a number of questions. What is, and isn't, contained under it – and how are the boundaries of the concept policed against intrusions? It is for instance not intuitively obvious that the following things have enough in common to make them worth 'labelling' in the same way: a husband hitting his wife for being late with his dinner; crowds of football fans jostling outside a match; playground bullying; threats and punishment in association with an extortion racket – and mediated representations of one and all of these. Even less obvious is that the actions of authorities in response to these aren't counted as the same. What 'connotations', then, (associations of meaning, implicit explanations) go along with its adoption? In putting these kinds of (inclusive, exclusive) boundary around the concept, what potential implications are generated? And where, when and under what conditions did the concept arise? We have well learnt for instance that in the early 19th century, under the specific conditions of the medicalisation of the human body, the distinct category of 'the homosexual' emerged, whereby certain acts were reclassified and rethought as arising from inherent tendencies within the individual.[1] Must we not ask the same of 'violence' once we recognise it as a *concept*, rather than as a natural term?

My argument is this: the notion of 'violence' as an concept with explanatory force emerged in the late 1950s to early 1960s. Beginning in the United States, it took form as a response to social changes and political unrest: from the civil rights movement to the ghetto riots, the rise of student protest movements, the anti-war movements, and certain spin-offs from that range of movements that have variously been called the counter-culture, the permissive society, or sometimes simply 'The Sixties'. The concept of 'violence' increasingly did service as a way of grouping, and thus silently theorising, these behaviours and forms of action. Then in parallel, and even becoming for some a leading element within this, emerged the idea of 'violent media' as possible causal agent: a case of one arbitrarily constructed semiotic unit explaining another.

Of course there had been earlier uses and discussions of 'violence', not least claims that American history may have an exceptional interest in the issue because of the role

of violence in the formation of the American polity; or – in parallel – through the impact of Gunnar Myrdal's arguments about the dilemmas of American democracy.[2] But an array of new definitions began to emerge in the 1960s, and then – rather like the concept of 'mugging' a few years later – were exported to a number of other countries, including Britain. Unlike the earlier arguments which, for all their ambiguous attribution of praise or blame, focused on the *exceptional* nature of American history, now there was a trend towards a generalised, a-historical, de-socialised account – one, indeed as I will show, which could become in some variants a putative account of evolved human nature.

An interesting test-case in this respect is the report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence – a report which scandalised the two Presidents.[3] Produced in the aftermath of the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, this fascinating report attempted to account for the paradox that America was, in their words, the leading democratic nation in the world, the archetypical 'free society'; yet it was also world leader in crime, political violence, assassinations and so on. It should be noted straightaway that the Report guarded its borders very strictly. Whilst civil disobedience over the Vietnam War was part of the problem of 'violence' needing discussion, the Vietnam War itself was *not*. But beyond this, the report is interesting because it exists in all kinds of tension with itself, which reveal symptomatically the uneasy co-existence of three tendencies.

First, there was a residue of that older, exceptionalist account of American history, which saw a distinctive, if sometimes problematic, special 'American character'.[4] But now exceptionalism gained a definitely pessimistic thrust. American society had been founded upon the expropriation of native American lands, on the vicious system of slavery, on the refusal of union rights to workers, and so on. Perhaps these had left a 'brutalising' and 'callous imprint' (p. 12) on class, racial and sexual relations. Exceptionalism here almost gives way to a potentially radical account that understood destructive behaviour in terms of an opposition between exploitation and repression, and angry responses to the resultant appalling conditions of life – hence the reference to 'justice' in the title, and the (risky) admission that you can't expect violent acts to cease if you don't provide people with a decent life ...

From the end of the 1960s, the idea of exceptionalism gave way, if that is the right term, to a critique of the myth of frontier myths. That critique took place in many media. Films such as *Little Big* Man (1970), *Soldier Blue* (1970) and *The Wild Bunch* (1971), for instance, offered counter-narratives of the frontier – and interestingly, often were attacked for the display of the very qualities which they were critiquing. But for our purposes, the most telling moment is the publication of Richard Slotkin's revisionist account of American mythologies *Regeneration Through Violence*.[5] Interestingly, Slotkin slid in a sideswiping reference to the 'voluminous reports of presidential commissions on violence, racism and civil disorder' (p.5) as just saying what others had said before, without addressing the central issues: the role of foundation myths in justifying unparalleled violence. The vast, 650-page book went on to re-examine the history of American literature, from the earliest days to the 1860s, for the ways it embodied dangerous dreams of a special destiny – dreams which became, in Slotkin's words, a horrifying 'pyramid of skulls' of both humans and animals, as their warranty for cleansing through violence found expression.

But there is a fundamental ambivalence in Slotkin's account. Myths, he argues, are essential to us – 'Man is essentially a myth-making animal' (p. 7). But *these particular* myths have turned against us:

> A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world-view, their ethics, and their institutions. (pp. 4-5)

Once upon a time, it seems, American frontier mythologies were necessary, even if murderous. Now, the time has arrived to name them for what they are: justifications of 'violence'. Bringing these mythic concepts into full consciousness, then, is a political task. But once achieved, there is no escape – 'we' will need to find new ones, new stories to tell about ourselves which will ground, make sense of, and permit the American 'body politic' to be what it must and do what it has to. How telling that the idea of 'mythologies of violence' should crystallise for Slotkin this bridge between old and new myth-forms.

For in the Commission Report there is an awkward third, and emergent, view of 'violence' as a generic social problem – in which frame the issue of 'television violence' was posed. After all the reviewing of evidence on the historical circumstances which have promoted different kinds of violence, suddenly gears shifted markedly when, in Chapter 8, the report addressed 'violence in the media'. Here the talk was not of, say, the role of the media in marginalizing or besmirching disaffected groups, in stereotyping minorities – accounts which would have sat tidily with the emphasis on injustice. Or, a radical account of media violence (as opposed to 'violence') would have particularly examined the complicated role that images of the war in Vietnam played in public consciousness. Neither of these is present, even as a hint. Instead another account is already dominant: 'we are deeply troubled by the television's constant portrayal of violence, not in any genuine attempt to focus artistic expression on the human condition, but rather in pandering to a public preoccupation with violence that television itself has helped to generate". (p. 160) Here are allowed no distinctions of kind, genre or function. Straightaway we are off into content analyses of the 'amounts' of violence, and their putative cumulative 'effects'.

This disjunction is so marked as to require explanation. Is this just because by this time the communications model was so dominant in American academia that it simply operated here as a default? Possibly – but perhaps not entirely. The chapter following this one on the media concerned campus unrest. Here again a new conceptualisation showed its head, one that could, under the right conditions, congeal with the 'media violence' account. This chapter opens with a statement of the 'deep concern' at the 'violence and disorder that has swept the nation's campuses'. What is striking is that this is instantly expressed as a problem of an opposition between 'power' vs 'truth', 'passion' vs 'reason', 'confrontation' vs 'rational discourse'. (p.177) It is not conceivable, for instance, that an *alternative* mode of reasoning, a different critique, was at work – in, for example, the escalating resistance to the Draft and the Vietnam War. No, campus radicals were giving way to a pre-rational mode of behaviour – and that permits the classification of everything that worries our authors as 'violence'. Thus it becomes cognate with the emergent language. Thus it becomes obvious to ask what might have *stimulated* such emotional excess (look back at that word 'pandering'). Thus 'the media' become logical targets.

Turning attention to the media as likely sources/causes was, of course, not new. Historians have traced this tendency back at least a century and a half – to long before there was even a nascent 'science' of media effects. But a change was beginning in the terms of reference of the complaint. As late at the 1950s, the dominant mode of expression of fears was 'delinquency'. This has the force of limiting the issue to a troublesome minority – and even admitting that it may only be a part of their behaviour. It was thus easily possible for arch-moralist Fredric Wertham to fit his critique of delinquency-inducing tendencies in comics into a general account of goodness in young people, and then to celebrate, elsewhere, the subversive cultural qualities of comic fanzines.[6]

The turning point was around 1960. I do not have the capacity to try to tell the full story of what happened, but a definitional shift seems to have taken place then. Leonard Berkowitz's *Aggression* (1962) is one of the first embodiments of the new style. In a book set securely within American-style behavioural psychology – a style which has great trouble finding space for the role of perceptions and understandings of the world, except as entirely dependent variables – Berkowitz comes late to a chapter on the media and 'violence'. For him, some things are just givens: content analysis provides us with legitimate guides to media content; laboratory experiments are valid grounds for weighing their impact; and 'violence' is a thing-in-itself, whether it be a drive, or a conditioned response. Perhaps the key that marks the transitional nature of this book is one sentence in his Summary to this chapter, where he writes: "There is a good deal of controversy and greater uncertainty as to the possible effects of the heavy concentration of crime and violence in the mass media."[7] It is worth pausing over this virtual elision between crime and violence. First, 'crime' now excludes a host of actually illegal activities: fraud, smuggling, burglary, you name it. Second, 'violence' takes on almost synonymity with criminality: if it's legal, it can't be violence. So, State actions couldn't possibly be addressed, or even be part of the syndrome – because they are by definition not illegal (who makes the laws???).

A proper history of the emergence of the concept of 'violence' would of course find that it has been around and used for much longer than I have here indicated. And that would be right. But I am interested here in two things in particular: the emergence of a syndrome of assumptions about what 'it' may be, and how 'it' may be provoked

which has persisted at the public and policy levels, even when it has been repeated shown to be both nonsensical and untrue. And the impact of this persistence on those who feel themselves to be being *potentially included* under these definitional regimes. My argument is that the concept of 'violence' has to be re-examined much more widely, leading to rethinking its quite central position as an ideological category.

It is worth revisiting in this respect Stuart Hall et al's *Policing The Crisis*, for its broad-sweeping interrogation of the discourses which preceded and prepared for the rise of 'Thatcherism' in Britain. Although their book is centrally interested in the 'mugging' controversy around the turn of 1970 as a focal point to the storms of reaction, as their investigation and argument proceeds, the category 'violence' unequivocally rears its head. Importantly, their analysis shows the emergent *levels* at which the concept works. Early in the book, they show well how newspapers in particular deployed ideas about 'violence' as rhetorical terms. So, calling 'mugging' "apparently senseless attacks" (cited page 51, from the *Daily Telegraph*, 25 August 1971) nicely disables any sense that there might be explanations. Developing this into a theme of "Wild Boys" (cited p.275, from the *Sunday Express*, 22 February 1970) grounds it in a social location, requiring control.

But the crucial move, the one that authorises not simply policing actions, but a wholesale political and ideological response, was the depiction of a Violent Society. On p. 300 they exemplify this through a feature in the *Sunday Express* (6 February 1972) where its author manages a move from blaming the victims of the Bloody Sunday massacre as "loud-mouthed lunatic hooligans" to asserting that their kinds of behaviour are now to be found "festering all over the country". It then compiles an ideological hit-list of quite unassociated phenomena, ranging from advocates of strike action, through playground threats, to an attack on an elderly woman in her home, to construct her account of 'violent Britain'. Hall et al. capture the main point brilliantly:

> The fact is that the things being used here as a peg to hang a thesis on are not 'connected' in any tangible or concrete way at all, except *rhetorically*, ideologically. They may be part of the same nightmare: they are only in the most metaphorical manner part of the same historical phenomenon. It is not

> the similarity of the events, but the similarity of the underlying sense of panic in the mind of the beholder which provides the real connection.[8]

The authors are right, I suspect, to see this as the limit within which in this article the concept 'violence' functions. But it is important to see that other things were also in play. Strongly present among those was the debate over 'instinctual determinants'. If it might be 'in the nature of the beast' to be violent, if those 'Wild Ones' might be precisely that – by nature wild – then the solutions will have to be different. The debate was fierce and real. It is here that Stanley Kubrick re-enters.

From Emotions to Instincts

Re-reading various people's accounts of Kubrick's life, and the controversy around his (1971) film, reminds just how fiercely a new set of discourses around 'violence' took shape in that period – discourses which may have shifted ground and confidence but, I would argue, are still largely operative. Kubrick's film was of course itself accused, especially in Britain, of causing all kinds of mayhem. Along with *Straw Dogs*, *MacBeth*, *Dirty Harry*, *Weekend*, and *The Wild Bunch*, among others, it signalled to an emergent moralist movement a new climate of 'permissiveness' (another key concept) and a new 'gratuitous glorification of violence'.

Lobrutto, writing about Kubrick's life at this point, gets half the point: 'As [the Kubricks] were leaving the United States, the country was torn by the war in Vietnam, racial tension, unrest on the nation's campuses, and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King.'.[9] Of course all this was true, but to see this is to miss the more important truth: this period saw a rising tide of *talk* about these. And Kubrick's film was to be one of the vehicles for carrying abroad, both in itself and through the debates it aroused, those very American-sourced conceptualisations of 'violence'.

Not innocently, either. The film took a position, in many respects, on the nature of the problem. Kubrick was a considerable fan of the crudely speculative ideas of Robert Ardrey, whose *Territorial Imperative* (1966) theorised 'aggression' in proto-sociobiological terms. Ardrey's work was complemented by the similar ideas of

Desmond Morris, Konrad Lorenz and within a few years E O Wilson, Richard Dawkins and others – each of which posited originary impulses.[10] All these were becoming sources of popularised discourse about the nature of society. Quite contradictorily, it must be said: their work is premised on the essential unchangeability of human behaviour, yet it was promoted as a means to understand the large *changes* perceived to be taking place. Kubrick bought heavily into this, and gave expression to this kind of view, for example in the following:

> Man isn't a noble savage. He is irrational, brutal, weak, unable to be objective about anything where his own interests are involved … and any attempt to create social institutions to a false view of the nature of man is probably doomed to failure.[11]

This is beyond simple pessimism, it is a half-articulated ideology of human nature – and its supposed 'opposite' and only alternative was Skinnerian behaviourism (which Kubrick researched extensively as he was preparing to make *A Clockwork Orange*), the (equally crude) account of human behaviour in terms of operant conditioning: we are what we have been conditioned to be. *A Clockwork Orange* mounts an imaginative debate between the two approaches, in terms of their capacity to account for human 'violence' and how the State can manage this.

The debate prompted various critical responses. Some feminist accounts, for instance, simply relocated the problem to 'men' as an almost distinct species. Erich Fromm, drawing on a fading conjunction of New Left optimism and psychoanalysis, re-explained 'violence' as the response of distorted souls to inhuman conditions. But all these broadly accepted that it made sense to gather up and label a diverse set of behaviours, group and individual, as signs of 'violence'. If ever there was a case of a hegemonic concept, in Gramsci's sense, this was it. It seemed so *obvious* to talk of playground bullying, drunken brawls, rapes, confrontations with the police, and even almost bad thoughts about the state of the world as the epiphenomena of one vast problem: the problem of 'violence'.

The point is this: not simply the debates around the film, but the film itself, were constituted within the crucible of this emerging category, concept and incipient

theorisation, 'violence'. It is as clear a modern example as it would be possible to find of exactly the processes which Annette Kuhn has described in relation to early cinema, and the regulation of sexuality. As she shows very well with regard to *Maisie's Marriage* (1923), for example, the discourses around women and the control of reproduction were not simply external limits on what films were allowed to do, but permeated the films themselves, at the levels of script, address, and marketing.[12]

The debate was not one-sided, or indeed ever closed – and of course that is the point. Apart from those who stood wholly outside the terrain (I am thinking of some of those who entered the fray against sociobiological accounts of human nature from the late 1970s, and attacked the whole debate from an ideological point of view[13]), the debate about the nature, and sources of aggression in human beings rolled back and forth between the instinctivists and the behaviourists/culturalists across this period. The anthropologist Ashley Montagu was a principal critic of the ethologists, in particular for the implications of their views for thinking about 'race' – in this, he sat in line with the work produced by UNESCO from the early 1950s which sought to undercut the presumed legitimacy of 'race-talk' and race-theorisation. But he also assaulted the 'litany of innate depravity' which he identified as coming from the ethologists.[14] By the mid-1970s the terrain crucially included the work of Stanley Milgram whose studies of obedience to authority occasioned a long debate, far outside academia. Milgram explicitly challenged the 'aggression' models of explanation, arguing – in a way that had chill resonances with the politics of the time – that *soldiers'* willingness to behave brutally is a result of a kind of conditioning:

> Although aggressive tendencies are part and parcel of human nature, they have hardly anything to do with the behavior observed in the experiment. Nor do they have much to do with the destructive obedience of soldiers in war, of bombardiers killing thousands on a single mission, or enveloping a Vietnamese village in searing napalm. The typical soldier kills because he is told to kill and he regards it as his duty to obey orders.[15]

This was dangerous stuff because it redefined what would count as the 'problem' and thus include within it both the otherwise excluded actions of State functionaries. Now 'violence' reached the war-makers – and blamed its excesses on those at the top.

Since the book opened on the question of how German annihilation of the Jews had been possible, to make this equation was even more provocative – and the debate was indeed intense.

By the late 1970s, a deep fissure was opening up. On the one hand, traditionalists such as Eysenck and Nias were still presenting arguments that 'violence', and indeed 'sex', could be understood as primitive forces within humans, too easily activated by the powerful and cumulative imagery of film or television – where 'violence' (if we judge by their opening list of anecdotal horror stories to be explained) entirely exists in the sphere of the private, and the criminal as opposed to the State-instrumental and the political.[16] On the other hand, a new set of discourses – both political and academic – were fracturing the very notion of a unitary condition or problem called 'violence' – and in the course of this, pointing critical fingers at those who claimed such a condition as a part of the very problem that they claimed to be solving. In the same year as Eysenck and Nias's book, there appeared Erich Fromm's denunciation of this entire tradition – both instinctivist and behaviourist – from a neo-Marxist position.[17] Feminist critics began to emphasise the extent to which violence is a *male* issue, and how much of it indeed is directed at women. And more academic researchers increasingly demonstrated the multiplicity of *kinds* of aggression and violence, while simultaneously denouncing those who proposed, for instance, evolutionary 'explanations'.[18]

Only in relation to the mass media did the category linger on. Here, the myth of a singular force lives on. The alliance of a blind version of behavioural psychology with the worst kinds of moralising politics, liaising in strange ways with the narrower interests of some of the broadcasters[19], has somehow allowed the claim that cumulative, contextually-dissociated, generically-unbedded "images" may have the power either to *stimulate* some kind of imitative behaviour, or will *desensitise* viewers to the wrongness of what they are seeing.

How bizarre. How effective. Even good researchers seem unable to escape the taint. Here, for instance, is James Lull, excellent ethnologist, who has demonstrated repeatedly that it is impossible to understand the role and meaning of the media except in the context of everyday routines and practices, still conceding the territory:

> Only the truly cynical, massively uninformed, or profoundly compromised person could deny that this body of research cumulatively reveals that violent programming helps stir up aggressive behaviour. By studying the short-term and long-term consequences of violent TV, social scientists have documented just what parents feared all along. Despite the unusually clear experimental and survey research evidence, broadcasters have typically stonewalled the issue or denied culpability.[20]

The Effects of Effects Discourses

My argument is that the category 'violence' has sedimented around the media. It has become a concept in the rich sense of the term, with claims and implicit theories attached to it. It has also come to carry a substantial moral loading – a loading made very evident every time, in the UK at any rate, research is done to ask viewers 'What do you think about the amount of violence on television?'. This deliciously loaded question permits few answers. To answer 'Too much' is to position oneself among the righteous. To answer 'About right' is almost to duck the question. To answer 'Too little' is to say of yourself that you are a worrying, possibly rather sick individual.

But the moral loading of 'violence' operates far beyond the rarities of public opinion polling. It accompanies any and every film which, on release, is greeted with the serious moral suspicions of moral opinion-leaders: the Press, moral politicians, spokespeople of various kinds who readily gain the ear of media gatekeepers. A very clear, and instructive, example of this happened in the UK with David Cronenberg's film *Crash*. For a full year, between June 1996 to 1997, the ground of *Crash*'s release was tilled by an extraordinary campaign. Led and fronted by the *Daily Mail*, the campaign came close to preventing the release of *Crash* in Britain.

Interestingly, the concept of 'violence' was never central to that campaign – indeed, it would have been hard to substantiate, at any level, that *Crash* is a 'violent' film.[21] Instead, a series of morally-loaded terms was invoked, such as 'debased', 'depraved', 'sick', and 'degrading'. From time to time, though, as part of invoking associated

figures of a sick/vulnerable audience who might be perverted by the film, claims verging on 'violence' showed themselves. For instance, one regional newspaper editorialised about *Crash* as follows:

> Ram-raiding and reckless driving by youngsters for the fun of it are already endemic throughout the country, with a particular West country favourite being a game of chicken in which the drivers of stolen cars signal they are going in one direction before going in the other. When it is a fact that scenes of violence or depravity from other films have produced real-life copycats it is not being sensational to suggest this one's lethally reckless driving for sexual thrills, fetishism, voyeurism and sadomasochism could prove the latest game for some lunatic West thrill-seekers.[22]

'Violence' and 'depravity' ran hand in glove here and in many other reports, often in association with this kind of mock-explanatory framework. My concern here is not primarily with this hardly new or surprising aspect of this campaign (although its length and viciousness were astonishing), but with the impact of this campaign on viewers. What impact on ordinary viewers of the film did this have? How did the idea of 'violence' feature within their feelings about the film?

During 1996-7, with two colleagues, I conducted a year-long research project into the campaign against *Crash*.[23] One crucial part of this involved mounting a special screening of the film, and researching audience responses. We were not just interested, however, in judgements and responses, but also in how people had experienced the campaign against the film, and with what kinds of expectations they had approached the film. All 167 participants completed a questionnaire before seeing the film, part of which aimed to tap into viewers' expectations, and their sources. These were supplemented by a questionnaire completed immediately after viewing the film, and then – following a categorisation of audience responses according to their liking/disliking, and approving/disapproving of the film – detailed small-group interviews with 40% of our audience.

Without question, the idea of 'violence' played a significant role for a large part of our audience. The following was one fairly typical response from two people in an interview:

> *Deborah:* I had expected it to be controversial because of the reviews I'd read, and that was.. that was my expectation. … Really. And I knew it had sex and violence... well I thought it had violence in it, although I didn't think that when I saw it, but I was told it had lots of sex in it, and it was depraved, and so that's what I expected.
>
> *Int.:* So, it was unexpected in that you didn't ex .. that wasn't part of what you expected? That was a surprise?
>
> *Sunny:* That was a surprise, yeah, I think. I don't think it's a straightforward sex and violence movie.

A 'straightforward sex and violence movie': the invoking of this *kind* (which was, for many, a kind for which there are not even many clear exemplars) has a number of consequences. At the very least, it promises low enjoyment. At worst, extreme discomfort, perhaps running into feeling threatened, morally worried. If something is a 'straightforward sex and violence movie', it is to be avoided – and indeed many people did tell us that they had avoided seeing *Crash* for just this reason. They came to our screening *expecting to be miserable*, perhaps even affronted by it.

Something more of this can be seen in the following:

> *Int.*: When you actually saw the film was it like what you'd expected?
>
> *Helen:* No. No because I was expecting something violent and pornographic, and I didn't think it was either. I thought... I thought it was a very calm film in that respect, erm .. although quite intense at the same time, and I thought that the sex ... I thought... I was expecting the sex thing to be more [pause] pornographic. I'm not sure exactly what .. ooh .. it's a dodgy one, but... and I was expecting the violence to be perhaps a bit gorier, but I didn't think that either of those sort of issues ... I thought [laughs] uh - what's all this about? Really...

The expectation of 'violence' had a powerful interruptive capacity for Helen, and others. It disabled for a while their ability to make any other kind of meaning out of the film. And to associate 'violent' and 'pornographic' is to make clear how far 'violence' is beyond being a descriptive term – it is already implicitly theorised. This shows particularly clearly in a third response: Tim - 'I errmm I'd heard.. I'd read about the film, just read about car crashes and people getting off on the violence basically…' To speak of 'getting off on violence' is to its having a *mode of effect*, a capacity to reach and arouse (certain kinds of) people. And it is interesting to note that here, at least, it isn't easy to tell whether Tim is speaking of the *characters* or of the *audience*. An elision seems possible, once the term 'violence' is in play.

It would be wrong to suggest that everyone who hears that a film is 'violent' is such a tender plant that they run away, or indeed that if they are attracted to see it, there is the proof of their degradation. For a number of our viewers, the point precisely was that the controversy stimulated an interest to *see if the complaints were correct*. Sometimes, but not always, this went with a distrust of those who claimed the authority to make those judgements. (*Mary:* At the time I was saying, you know, look, you haven't seen it, I haven't seen it, who are we to judge? And now I'm saying, look, I've seen it, you haven't seen it, how dare you judge?) Most commonly, it went with an attitude of demanding the right to judge for oneself, as here:

> *David:* Umm, personally I didn't know much about it at all apart from, umm, I had heard about the umm, .. I'd read about it in the papers and I'd been watching film, Barry Norman on TV. Umm. And, and I was interested in seeing it. I think that was it, I don't think I would have been so interested in seeing it, if it hadn't caused all the controversy actually. Because I wanted to decide for myself. […]
>
> *Int.*: Right. So based on what you did know, was the film as you had imagined it would be?
>
> *David*: Partly. Umm, I um, I I, I didn't think it was shocking at all. I thought it was an interesting film, I didn't find it shocking.

But all the people so far quoted were those who, on seeing the film, found a disjunction between their expectations and their experiences. Some (Helen and Tim, for instance) became positive advocates for *Crash*, once having seen it. Others (David and Stephen) were less enthusiastic and more ambivalent, but still aware that the film just didn't for them match the implicit claims of being 'violent'.

> *Stephen:* Yeah I'd heard about it through word of mouth really and I um saw a review by Barry Norman, talking about it and umm, the controversy around it made me sit up and take notice and want to see it, but I never actually got round to, seeing it actually at the time. But then I saw your project, I thought I'd like to see the film `coz I hadn't seen it and then, but I didn't I didn't, really know, how explicit it was you know sexually or how how, how bad the violence and the drug-taking or whether it was just a combination of the two, I had no idea, I was going to it pretty blind.

'Violence' is that which will shock; if the film has not shocked, it cannot be 'violent'. The force of this syllogism again reveals the extent to which people *experience* the accusation of 'violence' as an emergent social explanation.

Some, however, did want to call *Crash* 'violent'. It is important to see how the category worked in their thought, as well. First, they too evidenced that 'bleeding' between film and life, as in the following interview

> *Horst:* No, for me that was it, and as I said before, I'm ... I'm ... it repels me and simply because of the violence. The senseless violence from my perspective. I do not think that err.. you can be as err.. ruthless to other human beings by simply saying OK, we kill them .. we kill them just for the heck of it. That is just totally alien to me, and err.. that's what I rejected in the film.

The equation of 'violence' with 'senselessness' (think also: 'pointless', 'gratuitous') is close to, albeit not quite identical with, the kinds of account that talk of 'mindless' violence. But Horst is doing more than this: he 'reads' the film for a meaning – that ruthlessness is acceptable – parallels that with a world beyond, and finds the parallel

too uncomfortable to live with. But that can have a number of motives and dimensions. Logically, it is quite possible for someone to acknowledge that *for them personally* seeing, hearing or reading about something that causes discomfort leads to avoidance behaviour. But at the back of the complaints about 'violence' is that, while I avoid, you are attracted. While I see the horror, you are attracted to it. While I see the danger, you *become* dangerous. Again, 'violence' as an implicit, emergent social theory.

But of real importance is to see how those who wished to condemn *Crash* responded to queries about their calling it 'violent'. One particularly revealing interview brought together two men who on very different grounds rejected the film. Both, however, wanted – at least at first – to call it 'violent'. Graham, for instance, early on stated: 'I found absolutely minimal storyline. It just seemed a ... a succession of err, violence and ... and sexual activities, which just didn't hang together in any sort of meaningful way. So I got no satisfaction out of it at all.' That hesitation later came back to bite him. A little later he talked of the film as 'pandering to that taste in violence, car accidents and sex.' But Graham's main objection to *Crash* was that it was badly made, dull and boring. So when questioned on the sense in which he was using 'violence' to describe *Crash*, he shifted:

> Well, for me the violence is in the road accidents and the fact that people are getting injured. But I fully accept that errm.. there.. there is no person to person violence, all the activities of the film are engaged in by consenting adults [laughs] if that's the right word. And you know that all the cars are driven by stunt men, there was about twenty of them listed at the end (laughing/indistinct). That's what I mean when I say it could have been much worse. Therefore I personally would have no objection to that film being seen, presumably it had an... an over 18...?

Faced with the direct question, Graham admits that in no literal sense is *Crash* violent – and that has to be a limit to his objections. His co-interviewee Derek was far more confident. With a religiously-based objection to the film, he saw it as not simply perverted, but even worse – it symbolised a return to the 'animal' in us, a retreat down the Great Chain of Being. It was an *embodiment* of the pre-human, a desertion

of morals, something which ‘even primitive tribes’ would shun. The force of the category ‘violence’ for him showed on two occasions, In the first, he was responding to a question about how he felt about those who did enjoy *Crash*: ‘The thing is that this type of violence, promiscuous violence really, unnecessary violence, is errm ... is err ... particularly directed now towards ever younger children.’ The hesitations in here indicated nicely the difficulties he was experiencing in managing the move from a wide, to him quite philosophically-based category, to the particular case of *Crash* – which was never going to be directed at children. When asked directly about why he insisted on calling *Crash* ‘violent’, his response is revealing precisely because at first it *appears* totally irrelevant to the question:

> Let us take just two examples. One is the emphasis on the prosthesis, the artificial limb. … Quite unnecessary. … OK, there’s plenty of people with artificial limbs, they come to some of our lectures actually. We don’t comment on it, nor are we..... we disturbed by it. They just get on with it, we get on with it, they get on with it. … But the other thing was this focussing on the lesion errr... it was a very severe lesion which had only just healed I should say. I know quite a bit about this, and errr. errr.. this seemed to me, again, quite unnecessary. Perhaps one shot to convey the severity of the injury, but that wasn’t the purpose. The purpose was to draw attention to the prosthesis and the difficulty of getting into the car.

For Derek, anything which demeans people’s ‘dignity’ is ‘violence’. ‘Dignity’ was a rich personal term for him, which he used repeatedly in his answers. It signified rising above the body, achieving a humanity in which anything purely physical is overcome. Albeit differently from the main public assaults on the film, a generalised philosophical position undergirded his insistence that *Crash* was ‘violent’.

And that precisely is the point of this essay. I believe that we have to challenge the very notion of ‘violence-talk’. My objection is not simply to the strength or otherwise of the evidence, or to the reliability of the research that has been done. The very concept and category of ‘violence’ is the problem. It has become a central repository for a set of fears about social change, which at the same time proffers an

understanding of those changes in an ideologically-skewed way. The dangers precisely lie in the compromises we so easily make with this whole language.

A Modest Proposal

We badly need a complete change of direction. I have sketched a very particular kind of history. If correct, its implications are that the concept 'violence' is irredeemably ideological and that no valid research can take place under its aegis. But my history remains just that, a thin sketch. Who else out there can extend and expand my sketch, and take it in new directions? What parallel histories might inform and enrich this one? What may explain its weird circumscription around the media and, even more, visual media? And crucially, *whose* interests precisely is embodied in this all-conquering concept?

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[1] See for instance Jeffrey Weeks, *Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality and Identity*, London: Rivers Oram 1991.

[2] Myrdal, Gunnar. *An American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* New York ; London: Harper, 1944.

[3] *To Establish Justice: To Insure Domestic Tranquillity*, Final Report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, NY: Bantam Books 1970.

[4] For a general account of the rise and decline of this mode of thinking, see David M Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism*, University Press of Kansas 2000. The survival of it as a habit of thought, of course, extends far beyond the motive forces which originated it.

[5] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press 1973.

[6] On Fredric Wertham, see James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage*, NY: Oxford University Press 1986. See also Martin Barker, 'Fredric Wertham – the sad case of the unhappy humanist', in John A Lent (ed), *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 1999.

[7] Leonard Berkowitz, *Aggression: A Social Psychological Analysis*, NY: McGraw-Hill 1962, p. 254.

[8] Stuart Hall et al, *Policing The Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, Basingstoke; Macmillan Press 1978, p. 300. They point to an identical rhetorical strategy in other press accounts, for instance a *Sunday Times* editorial which talked of three murders separated by thousands of miles. But "in death they acquired a terrible unity", linked by "the barbarism that characterises our age". (*Sunday Times,* 2 April 1972 – cited p. 301.

[9] Vincent LaBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick*, London: Faber 1997, pp. 334-5.

[10] See for instance : Robert Ardrey, *The Territorial Imperative* (1967), Robert Ardrey, *The Social Contract* (1970), Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (1967), Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape* (1968), Desmond Morris, *The Human Zoo* (1970), Niko Tinbergen, *War & Peace in Animal & Man* (1972)

[11] Quoted in Laurent Bouzereau, *Ultraviolent Movies: From Sam Peckinpah to Quentin Tarantino*, NY: Citadel Press 2000, p. 35.

[12] Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925*, London: Routledge 1988.

[13] See for instance, Marshall Sahlins, *The Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology*, London: Tavistock Publications 1977.

[14] Ashley Montagu (ed), *Man and Aggression*, NY: Oxford University Press 1968.

[15] Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, London: Tavistock 1974, p. 166.

[16] H J Eysenck & P K B Nias, *Sex, Violence and the Media*, London: Maurice Temple Smith 1978.

[17] Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1977 (originally published 1973).

[18] See for instance Jo Groebel & Robert A Hinde (eds), *Aggression and War: their Biological and Social Bases*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989. This volume opens with a copy of the Seville Statement on Violence, sponsored by UNESCO, signed by a large number of academics, with institutional endorsements behind them, itemising and condemning a series of 'Myths' about the instinctual bases of 'violence' and war. They open their own account with a series of distinctions which just in themselves make nonsense of the claims of the media-violence theorists: between instrumental/specific, hostile or teasing, defensive or reactive, and games aggressions.

[19] On this last, see Willard D Rowland, *The Politics of TV Violence*, and his contribution to Martin Barker & Julian Petley (eds), *Ill Effects: the Media-Violence Debate*, London: Routledge 1997.

[20] James Lull, *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2000, p. 88.

[21] To call *Crash* violent is distinctly odd. With one significant exception, everything act in the film is clearly and overtly consensual. The car crashes are filmed in real time, evidently avoiding the cinematic highlighting which slow motion, for instance, would contribute. The one ambiguous moment is a sex scene two thirds through the film, in which Catherine Ballard invites the sexual attentions of Vaughan, but emerges from the resultant sex bruised and shaken. It isn't clear exactly how far she either wanted or perhaps even enjoyed the rough sex. This aside, simply descriptively, it is very difficult to warrant attributing the word 'violent' to *Crash*. This didn't prevent it happening – and that is perhaps itself an important testimony to how far the word has sedimented into public debates as a resource for vague complaint, moral assault, and incipient theory.

[22] Editorial, *Western Daily Press*, 23 November 1996.

[23] Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs & Ramaswami Harindranath, *The Crash Controversy: Censorship Campaigns and Film Audiences*, London: Wallflower Publications 2001.