



WHEN I WAS A CUB REPORTER STARTING OUT AT *THE ALBUQUERQUE TRIBUNE*, I FOUND A REPORT IN THE POLICE BLOTTER ABOUT A PAIR OF 16-YEAR-OLD LOVERS WHO GASSED THEMSELVES IN A CAR. I ABOUT CHOKED ON HOW GREAT A STORY IT WAS, DID A LITTLE REPORTING, FOUND OUT THEY DID IT IN A CLOSED GARAGE AND THAT THEIR BODIES WERE DISCOVERED BY THE VERY SAME PARENTS WHO WERE TRYING TO SPLIT THEM UP. THEN I PITCHED IT TO MY EDITOR. NO WAY, HE SAID. I SAID, "WHAT? ARE YOU CRAZY? IT'S ROMEO AND FUCKING JULIET!" HE GAVE ME A SAD LOOK. "IF I RUN THIS STORY, AND GIVE IT BIG PLAY AND A NICE LAYOUT, I GUARANTEE YOU THERE WILL BE A COPYCAT SUICIDE. MAYBE A BUNCH OF THEM. DO YOU WANT THAT ON YOUR CONSCIENCE?"

MY
HISTORY of
BY JOHN H. RICHARDSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT KLEINMAN

VIOLENCE

*A rumination on art, death, truth, hubris
and the unsexy call for media accountability*

I said, it's not my responsibility what crazy people do. It's the truth and that's what I want to write, the truth. Would you tell Shakespeare to stick to comedies? Would you tell Tolstoy to write *Peace and Peace*? I may have even cited my old college professor Sylvère Lotringer, who taught a class on death and who once told me that the cheap horror movies I loved in those days (from *Halloween* to *The Evil Dead*) were "an inoculation" against the violence in society. And I may have quoted Theodor W. Adorno, who said that "Writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric," so the only moral thing was to celebrate guys like the Marquis de Sade because he reflected the ugliness of the world without sentimentality or prettification. I also may have mentioned the Sex Pistols

("I'm gonna go over the Berlin Wall") or quoted Joy Division ("Don't speak of safe messiahs") because those were the days when I had tons of theories and came to every conversation armed with quotes.

Somehow, my editor managed to resist my blinding rhetorical onslaught. He didn't run the piece. And I thought, this little burg is just too small-town for me, baby. These people don't understand art. They don't understand *transgression*. So I went to Hollywood. And just after I got there, some guy made a movie called *The Program* that had a scene where some kids lay down on a highway divider as a dare—and sure enough, there were copycats out in Pennsylvania who laid their dumb asses down on highway dividers and got squashed. And the studio said, hey, it's not our responsibility what crazy people do. These people just don't understand art.

Not long after, I introduced a David Cronenberg movie at some Hollywood event, and I vividly remember saying that people who rejected the work of people like Cronenberg and William S. Burroughs refused to understand that “in order to heal a wound, you have to probe it.” I said those exact words. And added a few choice details about what you were likely to find in a wound when you probed it. And I remember that afterward, a very nice person came up to me looking puzzled and asked if I really meant all that—obviously too kind to wonder outright how someone so smart could be so stupid. And I remember feeling a tiny bit of shame accompanied by the first hint of a clue that maybe I had let myself get caught

movie by accident. And it’s not just the kids. Judging by the canonization of Cormac McCarthy, who writes about scalpings and coin-flipping symbols of death and babies roasted on spits and the Apocalypse Blooming From Every Man’s Evil Heart, nihilism is now so universally confused with profundity that even the serious literary establishment can’t see that he’s really just Stephen King without the entertainment value.

And now—because life is a comedy—I’m complicit in the very same racket. No sooner did I agree to write this essay than I got a call from my agent asking if I wanted to write a violent thriller. It would have to be constant action, she said, with a cliffhanger at the end of every chapter and

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up in something that made me feel cool and justified my teenage rejectionist impulses while also gratifying my intellectual pretensions. Back then I was so fucking dumb that I actually took a date to see *Dead Ringers*.

But then I got married, had a couple of kids, adjusted the drug mixture a bit, and one day I found myself at lunch with David Fincher at one of those L.A. restaurants so impossibly cool it looks like a warehouse from the outside. Although he was rich and cordial and the dictionary definition of a successful young man, Fincher had just ruined the *Alien* franchise by shaving Sigourney Weaver’s head and setting *Alien 3* on a prison planet populated by ugly guys with bar codes on the backs of their skulls. He told me about this movie he wanted to make about serial killers. I said, “David, you’re a handsome young movie director who hangs with Madonna. What the fuck do you want to make a movie about serial killers for?” He said he was fascinated with the “hum” that came into their minds just before a kill. I tried to talk him out of it. “Make something human instead,” I begged him. “Something about real people and real problems, not fantasy bullshit about psycho killers you never met and have nothing in common with.” But no, that polite and likeable young man went out and made *Se7en*, a movie only a sociopath could love. Then *Fight Club*, another nauseating piece of “cool” bullshit about how everybody else is crazy except us artists who are just using all this violence as... *social criticism*. And now there are fight clubs and *Saw* sequels all over this American Gladiator Land we call home—and *Fight Club/Grand Theft Auto/God of War* kids are in Iraq killing to the soundtrack of Slayer and Megadeth amidst other soldiers (some of them so good and decent it breaks your heart) who try to be kind and stay alive and pass on Decent American Values that all those smug hipsters would laugh at if, say, Netflix sent them a Barry Levinson

a splash of blood on every page. “You have to embrace the commercial aspect of this,” she said.

A few days later, my friend Astrid helped restore my usual state of confusion. She’s a sweet, responsible, kind-hearted woman in her late 30s who loves to be spanked—and spanked *hard*. I’m talking implements. I’m talking bruises. And there’s no doubt in my mind that her kindness is somehow connected to her taste for pain. “I love Chuck Palahniuk and *Fight Club*,” she told me. “*Choke* is my favorite book and I totally get the violence thing. Did you know Chuck’s father was a sex addict and was murdered by someone he met while trolling for sex?”

Actually, it was the jealous ex-husband of a woman he met through a personal ad. But still, a point worth noting. Astrid [not her real name] went on to tell me that her friend who works as a psychotherapist with abused teenage boys also loves Palahniuk and thinks he gives voice to these battered kids—to their anger and their dark survivor’s humor and anarchistic desire to blow the whole fucking thing up. She mentioned the pit bull that killed her dog when she was a kid, how it snapped the dog’s neck and blood poured out all over her patio. She discussed her fascination with the more gruesome things on TV. “Look at *Law & Order: SVU*. I love that show. It’s the most depraved thing—every week a new story line about a sick bastard who tortures children.” She was also grateful to Angelina Jolie for being so open about cutting herself because Astrid did something similar and totally gets that, too. “I only did it once but I completely understand why people resort to violence,” she told me. “It’s like, if you don’t have the language and the capacity to formulate thoughts about what you’re feeling, you can’t properly feel it—so you have to *physically* feel it.”

Soon afterward, I went over to a friend’s house and saw

Se7en on his shelf of videos. This is a gentle ex-stoner hippie guy with two kids who has never been in a gang, never been to war, never even been in a fight. “How can you like that movie?” I asked.

“It’s everything you’re not supposed to do,” he said.

Then Astrid called me again. She couldn’t stop thinking about this stuff, she said. For example, she had recently visited the National Gallery of Art in Washington with her adorable four-year-old nephew. “There was this one guy who had arrows puncturing his chest and blood oozing out,” she said. Her little nephew, who we’ll call Timmy, “wanted to hear all about how and why they would torture him. He stared at it, completely entranced. And that was a day at the National Gallery, observing the finest art.” When Astrid toured Europe, she saw castles and dungeons and moats and shining armor and guillotines. “It’s all related to completely fucking depraved human practices.”

And of course, she saw churches—at the center of every one, a man being tortured to death.

So I tried looking at it from the pain-artists point of view. The beast is already there in every heart, and muzzling him just rouses a nasty temper. So why not let art take him out on a leash? Why not write a thriller and let him romp a little?

Good little beast. Watch the teeth.

As self-serving justifications go, it’s a popular one. Cormac McCarthy rarely does interviews because he’s too busy playing with scorpions and Mojave rattlesnakes, but 16 years ago

he gave this response to a question about his use of extreme violence: “There’s no such thing as life without bloodshed. I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.”

Impressively phrased. The guy did win a MacArthur genius grant after all. But it’s also exactly the same thing Mitch Albom—the author of sentimental sob-fests like *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*—once said to explain his bestseller formula. “If you’re going to write a book that’s going to teach anybody about how to live a good life or the important things in life, you need a death, because otherwise they don’t pay attention, because everyone thinks they’re going to live forever and says, ‘Well, I’ll get to the good stuff later, I’ll get to the important stuff later, right now I want to make my money or I want to do whatever.’ But if all of a sudden you say, ‘Well, it could end tomorrow,’ then they’re thinking differently.”

Ditto Fincher, who has described violence as just “a metaphor for feeling” and Palahniuk, who can be a surprisingly effective and witty writer but tops them all in sheer relentless stupidity when he opens his mouth. “We are afraid of pain or assault because we associate it with instant closure,” he said in 1996, in one of his very first on-the-record interviews. “We are afraid of death because we have no familiarity with it.” If we want to “get out of the paradigm of compromise

in which most of us find ourselves,” he suggests, we have to get beyond our media-induced coma and learn to take a punch because “the idea that you can take a punch and it’s just a punch is not in TV or movies. You’re not dead. You’re not crippled. You are capable of enduring so much more than you think you are capable of, that you never dreamed you were capable of. These things we perceive as gigantic risks really are not!”

But then, this is a guy who was offended because the star of *Fight Club* insisted on changing his bomb recipes. “Ed Norton changed one ingredient in every one to make them useless. So that really pissed me off because I really research those really well.”

Then he gave the correct recipe, which I will not repeat here. “It makes the most incredible explosive!” he said.

So these people have no conscience, no heart and very little between their ears besides platitudes about living on the edge that were better expressed in *Conan the Barbarian*—or *Mein Kampf*. Even if you take Astrid’s generous view that they are merely expressing the pain that has been inflicted on them, how is that any different than an abused child growing up to beat his wife? How about sucking it up and striving for a little decency? But when you turn to the placid bromides offered by the Guardians of Culture, it’s enough to send you screaming back to cynicism.

Start by skimming the think-tank research or reading some news articles on the matter—many make the connection between real-life violence and filmed entertainment seem rock-solid and indisputable. “There is now solid evidence to suggest a relationship between exposure to violent television and movies and aggressive behavior,” according to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center. “The analysis clearly indicates that brief exposure to violent dramatic presentations on television or in films causes short-term increases in the aggressive behavior of youths, including physically aggressive behavior,” says another typical report on youth violence, compiled by the Surgeon General. But how do researchers measure aggression? Some get kids to watch something violent and then pop balloons or punch a doll—in these studies, more flattened balloons and pummeled dolls equals more aggression. They’re just measuring one fantasy using another fantasy. Another typical scare line is that the homicide rate increased 93 percent in the 30 years after TV became popular in the U.S.—but they don’t mention the general population increase and also the baby boom that poured 79 million people in their prime crime years into that same time period. When you take the long view over the last 60 years, starting with those halcyon days of the *Leave It To Beaver* 1950s, the homicide rate barely moved at all. And it’s actually declined in the last 15 years.

The impulse behind these jeremiads is the fear of “desensitization,” the ever-popular theme of preachers and politicians—that a nation of droogs is about to put down its joysticks and get all horrorshow on your ass to the tunes of Ludwig Van. It’s true that there are lots of troubling studies, including one where kids who watched violent TV hesitated to call grownups when they saw a fight and felt less sympathy for the victims. But do TV and movies really desensitize us more effectively than old-school methods like going to war or slaughtering animals in the barn? On this point, Palahniuk may actually be right—it’s the *lack* of real violence in modern

life that makes us crave fantasy violence. Which is why he's thrilled that real fight clubs are popping up in backyards across America. "It has to be meeting a need," he says. "If there wasn't a reward or big pay off, why the hell would people be doing it?"

But there's one thing nobody can dispute. However dubious the general cultural critiques are, the copycat effect is real. After *The Deer Hunter* opened, at least 31 kids died imitating the Russian roulette scene. After watching *Beavis and Butt-head* setting fires, a five-year-old burned down his own house. When *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* got popular in Norway, kids who tried copying the martial arts beat a five-year-old girl to death. When the World Wrestling Federation started airing in Israel, there were broken bones and cracked heads in every other elementary school in the country. A kid who saw Woody Harrelson shave his head and shoot people in *Natural Born Killers* shaved his head and killed his stepmom. After watching a guy barbecue himself on *Jackass*, a couple of bozos tried to recreate the scene by dousing a buddy in gasoline and lighting a match. After watching an episode of the *The Sopranos* where Tony and his buddies dismember a body to get rid of the evidence, two California kids cut off their mother's head and hands and dumped the parts in a ravine. And so on.

The problem here is that it's not just movies and TV. People will imitate anything, and you never know what it's going to be. In 1774, Goethe published a novel called *The Sorrows of Young Werther* about a romantic lad who shot himself because he was in love with the 18th-century version of Jessie's girl. Soon "Werther fever" swept through Europe: Some 2,000 young men killed themselves. The real-life crimes of Jack the Ripper inspired at least three copycat murders at the time and many since, including those by the "Düsseldorf Ripper" and Son of Sam. After the execution of Saddam Hussein was broadcast, the copycats included a 10-year-old in

But then I consider the remarkable story of William Mastrosimone. A playwright and screenwriter who has penned some incredibly violent scenes (the woman who tortures a rapist in *Extremities*, the tank that crushes a man in *The Beast*, the man set on fire in *The Burning Season*), Mastrosimone started getting queasy about his profession when he saw audiences cheer on the murderous Mickey and Mallory in *Natural Born Killers* and chortle at the sadism of *Pulp Fiction*. Then a wave of school shootings swept across the country. Then his son came home from school and said someone had written a threat on the blackboard of his English class: *I'm going to kill everyone in this room.*

As the town went into panic mode, Mastrosimone had a dark night of the soul. He always told himself that the tank-crushing scene in *The Beast* was justified because it really happened, that the torture scene in *Extremities* was a valid human reaction to the violence visited on women every day. But was he really just deluding himself? He put aside the screenplay he was working on and spent the whole night writing a play about a school shooting called *Bang Bang You're Dead*. Three weeks later a kid walked into a school cafeteria in Oregon and killed two his classmates, and Mastrosimone contacted the school's drama teacher to suggest that maybe his new play would help the kids cope. It ended up being performed by the kids who were in the cafeteria that day, including one girl who still had a bullet in her body on opening night.

The experience changed him forever. The next thing he wrote was called "Confessions of a Violent Movie Writer," a goodbye-to-all-that essay full of furious zingers: The kids cheering *Natural Born Killers* were "drunken Roman citizens watching humans thrown to the beasts in the Colosseum," the kids watching *Pulp Fiction* "weren't seeing black comedy. They were loving the total freedom of these two men

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Texas and a 9-year-old in Pakistan and a 15-year-old in India. And every few years some bonehead *penitente* dies on the cross after taking the whole imitation-of-Christ thing a little too seriously. If you're going to be serious about solving this problem, the only real solution is to censor *everything*.

So the answer is obvious—go ahead and write that thriller, John, splash some blood around. Nobody's forcing people to read it. You'll just be responding to the call of the marketplace, to the democratic expression of social currents that artists are supposed to feel and not analyze. If your heroine parks a low-rider on a bad guy and hits bounce, call yourself cutting edge and reach around to pat your own back. It's never been done before! Joel Silver would love it! Coming up with fresh action scenes is an *art*, dude!

to rove about with guns." The Hollywood filmmakers who denied the connection between entertainment and violence were "no different than the cigarette companies who lied for decades that there is no cause-and-effect between smoke and cancer."

After that, he didn't get a job in Hollywood for years. When I called him for the juicy details, he refused. "I can't open that door," he said. "It will hurt my career. If people think of you as the Boy Scout, you never get that call."

But it didn't take much to get him wound up again. "By my crude estimate," he told me, "70 percent of all Hollywood movies are about revenge. Look at the posters—it's all a star with a gun. Most movies try to find situations where violence is justified. That's why we worship cops. That's why the cop movie will never die, because a cop in Hollywood is a guy with a car and a gun—contrary to reality, where most cops

"IT'S ONLY A DREAM IN THE MOVIE," MASTROSIMONE SAID, "AND THAT'S WHAT PEOPLE IN HOLLYWOOD SAY—'IT'S ONLY A DREAM.' BUT IT'S NOT JUST A DREAM FOR THE PEOPLE WATCHING IT. IT HAS AN EMOTIONAL IMPACT."

never fire their guns—this guy has a license to shoot up the world."

Which is exactly what I was trying to do in my thriller. But as he went on, I found it hard to dismiss his remorseful intensity. "There is such a thing as taste, and I have violated it at times," he said. "I've written some really ugly lines. And don't give me that 'holding a mirror up to nature' shit, because some of the things we do are really awful."

Then again, it's not like Mastrosimone completely turned his back on violence. After all, he massacred a whole Indian village for *Into the West*. So if a guy goes into the Bada Bing Club and smacks a stripper, fine. Gangsters smack strippers. But why keep hitting her? Why show the blood? Why kick her in the teeth? Because certain things do trigger people. The kid who murdered three classmates in West Paducah, Ky., said he was inspired by Leo DiCaprio in *Basketball Diaries*, the scene where he's humiliated and comes back and shoots them all. "It's only a dream in the movie," Mastrosimone said, "and that's what people in Hollywood say—'It's only a dream.' But it's not just a dream for the people watching it. It has an emotional impact."

And it dovetails perfectly with the school shootings, he said. In all of them, the kids were so bullied and humiliated that they created a little bit of theatre called *The Shooter* that takes place in a cafeteria or lecture hall, casting themselves in the role of the Arnold Schwarzenegger protagonist who shoots the bad guys. *It's a piece of theatre*. These kids aren't weird loner freaks. *They're ordinary kids who live our fantasies*. "We pull these levers hoping to get a reaction from the audience," Mastrosimone said. "And they really did. Shouldn't we be concerned?"

Yes, we should be concerned. Although the desensitization phenomenon is neither new nor all that statistically significant, certain types of things seem to trigger imitation, especially violent public revenge against bullies, and also some forms of suicide—my editor back in Albuquerque was right about that. Children are especially vulnerable. But I'm still writing the thriller. In fact, I just wrote my first really violent scene and it was more fun than I've had at my desk in years. It was actually weird how writing bloodshed made me feel unleashed—to quote the famous lines from *Conan the Barbarian*. "What is best in life? To crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentation of their women." But as I continue I will keep two voices in my head. One is my friend Astrid, who explained the need for pain better than any of those famous guys: "If you don't have the language and the capacity to formulate thoughts about what you're feeling, you can't properly feel it—so you have to *physically* feel it."

The other is Mastrosimone: "In every line that I write, I wonder if I'm crossing a line." *Fun*

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