

In Praise of Sex and Violence

by Thomas Fleming

All the best authorities agree: there is too much sex and violence in America. Social critics say that pop culture is reinforcing a cult of violence, which they trace back to the savage days of the American frontier; preachers launch jeremiads at the explicit eroticism of MTV, and Planned Parenthood pretends to have the jumps over teen illegitimacy, when their main objection is to life itself; police chiefs blame gangsta rap for inciting violence against the cops and think that disarming the suburbs will restore peace to the inner city; and Jesse Jackson responds by pointing out that the worst pop-cultural cop-killer is not Ice Cube but Terminator Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was a frequent guest of the last Republican occupant of the White House. This must explain the explosion of white-on-black crime.

If you suppose the critique of sex and violence is confined to the experts who make their living telling us what to think, take a look at the many polls showing time after time that a majority of the American people say there is too much sex and violence in the shows they watch every night on television. What do these surveys mean? A few days before the Academy Awards, *USA Today* conducted a poll to determine which film was expected to win best picture. A substantial majority—more than two thirds—picked *Schindler's List*, although only a bit more than 10 percent of them had actually seen it. Roughly the same proportion of Americans says, simultaneously, that they are satisfied with their own health care arrangements but think the system needs reform. We live, quite obviously, in two different worlds: an ever-dwindling realm of private life, where we have some idea of what we are doing, and the fast-expanding empire of publicity in which we all know the

right thing to say, no matter what our own personal experience has been:

Sex and violence, violence and sex;
TV is a gulag, the viewers are zeks.

Despite the inevitable coupling of sex and violence, the critique from the left—which constitutes the greater part of cultural criticism—is directed toward violence alone. Films featuring Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Mel Gibson are part of a culture of violence, the critics tell us. As modernists, they are in a bit of a bind in deploring the growth of violence, particularly since they are fond of championing senseless brutality when used by avant-garde novelists or by performance artists who shoot themselves in the arm. Graphic violence, like graphic sex, was supposed to shake us out of our Victorian complacency and put us in touch with those reptilian forces that Dr. Freud found lurking beneath the placid surface of conscious life. But now that D. H. Lawrence and William Burroughs have been translated into street language for the masses, the pundits want to draw the line, where they always want to draw it, right at the point where their opinions might affect themselves.

The usual solution to the dilemma is a dog-eared cliché: the stark brutality of contemporary films is not so evil as the cartoon-like violence of John Wayne movies, in which people are killed in a graceful ballet, without bloodshed or horror. By graphically depicting the carnage, Sam Peckinpah and his successors have shown us the horrors of violence, etc., etc. This sort of defense inevitably reminds us of the prefaces that used

to be included in erotic novels: "The tragic lives of these disturbed people will serve as a warning to all"—Robert Alzheimers, M.D., New York City.

What the modernists really object to in a John Wayne movie is the moral context. Old Westerns were, for the most part, morality plays, in which good men did their best to defend themselves, their families, and their communities against violent and anarchic outlaws and Indians. Bad men were not portrayed as victims of an insensitive world but as ruthless individualists who knew what they wanted and would stop at nothing to get it.

This formula, of course, applies only to the serials and B-movies. The really great Westerns—*The Searchers*, *Red River*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *High Noon*, and *The Shootist*—are among the most serious and complex films made in America, and yet the moral lines were always etched in crystal. To consider only the last of them, Don Siegel's *The Shootist*, it is the story of youth and age, of a nation growing up and perhaps growing old, but above all it is the story of how a young man (Ron Howard) turns from the cult of violence for the sake of violence as he learns to appreciate the code of the gunfighter J.B. Books (John Wayne): "I won't be wronged. I won't be insulted. I won't be laid a hand on. I don't do these things to others, and I require the same from them."

In the end, Books (who, like John Wayne, is dying of cancer) sacrifices himself in a gunfight, where he manages to kill all of the boy's hoodlum heroes—Hugh O'Brian, Richard Boone, and Hugh McKinney—and the boy tosses the gun away, in an ending reminiscent both of *High Noon* and Siegel's own *Dirty Harry*. In the gun fight, Siegel had wanted Wayne to shoot one of the gummen in the back, but the old man refused: "Whatever the cause, I would never shoot anyone in the back. It's unthinkable for my image." The story is told in Siegel's recently published memoir (posthumous, of course), *A Siegel Film: An Autobiography* (Faber & Faber).

But it was not a question of image so much as it was the code of John Wayne—and John B. Books, and Clint Eastwood, who almost never observes the proprieties, makes his Wild West show hero Bronco Billy very tender of his image in front of the "little pards" because he knows the influence he has over them. John Wayne's view of Clint Eastwood was necessarily ambiguous. When Siegel tries to argue that Eastwood's films contain "very little gratuitous violence, sex, or bad language," the Duke explodes: "Bulls--t! His films are full of f--king, g---amn obscenities. It's a bad image to paint himself into. A f--king shame"—and Wayne insisted on having the profanity lifted from the script of *The Shootist*.

In view of the Duke's own colorful way of speaking, Siegel found his on-screen prissiness amusing, but Wayne knew something that once upon a time we all used to know. He came from an age when men, who could cuss a blue streak in saloons or behind the barn, did their best to keep a civil tongue in public, especially when there were women and children present. Setting aside pornography, the makers of movies and television shows have to assume that their productions will end up in the living rooms of American families. Then why should films not conform to the same rules that govern the family parlor? In Terry Southern's script for Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*, Robert Morley (playing a stuffy English actor) declares that he would never do in front of the camera what he would not do in his own home. The line is pompous and absurd but truer than Southern probably imagined.

I cannot speak for the families of the 90's, where fathers may spend the evening flipping through *Penthouse* as their children watch a retrospective on Madonna's classic videos, but until not too long ago, there were certain decencies and proprieties—perhaps too many of them—that had to be observed: "Please, not in front of the children" could silence discussions of biblical inerrancy or the plays of George Bernard Shaw. As most mothers know, it is better to be on the safe side. "Little pitchers have big ears."

Then what are we doing, letting this flood of toxic waste into our very homes? Nude scenes, blood baths, smarmy sex jokes, repeated over and over with the mechanical efficiency of Sade. In despair, parents may choose to escape to the brainless sitcoms and heartburning dramas of The Family Channel. What you will find, at the dinner hour no less, are advertisements for products relating to what we used to call female complaints. "What's that for, daddy?" is an inevitable question, and I wonder how evangelical parents handle it. Rather than face these commercials, I think I would prefer attending an erotic film festival or being strapped to a chair in front of a continuous double-feature of *Straw Dogs* and *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid* (arguably the dumbest film ever made by a serious director, if you exempt the complete *oeuvre* of Robert Altman). This is no idle boast, since I once spent the night in an all-night movie theater in Manhattan, fending off aggressive queers and trying to shut out the horror of Li'l Abner and Jerry Lewis as *The Bellboy*.

The Athenians, who were a civilized people, did not portray either sex or violence in their tragedies, even though the themes of these plays ran the gamut from incest to parricide. The sex and violence were limited to lyric songs or messenger speeches. Peter Arnott, who used to do puppet-theater versions of the classics, told me that he once had occasion to put on a repeat performance of the *Oedipus* at a high school in Detroit. Sophocles was a big hit, even the second time around, but one of the students wanted to know if the principal had made him cut out the scene where Oedipus takes the brooches off the dress of his hanged wife and plunges them into his eyes. The student had, of course, "seen" the episode recounted by the messenger.

Why should words be less corrosive than live-action scenes? Perhaps it is because poetry turns even the reader or listener into a quasi-artist, who makes what he can out of the material, and in recreating the dramatic stuff, we master it. Stage performances and, even more so, films overwhelm our imagination and fill our heads with the artificial memory of experiences that we have never had but cannot forget. They are like the artificial memory implant that haunts the dreams of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Total Recall* (a film based on a brilliant idea of Philip K. Dick).

Sex and violence are the stuff of life, and real human cultures circumscribe them with rituals and rules that make it possible to incorporate these basic forces into society. These proprieties are infinitely varied, but they are observed in savagery and in civilization, by Calvinists and cannibals. We, of course, know better, and think nothing of drenching ourselves in blood or sticking our noses into projection-screened copulations of the male and female prostitutes who win Academy Awards. My students used to protest the barbarity of gladiatorial games, and when I pointed out the numbers of people they saw murdered every night on television and in movies, they invariably replied:

"But those aren't real." But is that what you are thinking, as you watch the bloodbaths in *The Untouchables*? This isn't really happening? That's why you spend \$7.50 to see an attractive stand-in flash her privates for a less well-endowed "access," just to keep in mind that it is only a movie?

The last time I heard an intelligent comment on this question was years ago on the *Tonight Show*, when Tiny Tim, sanctimoniously decrying sex on the screen, told Mr. Carson that they ought to take sex out of the theaters and put it back where it belongs—in the home. But that solution would no doubt disturb the directors of Planned Parenthood.

There is nothing wrong with either sex or violence, any more than wind and water and fire are evil because of the damage they sometimes inflict. Eros and Eris, desire and conflict, are the magnetic poles of human social life, more essential to us, as human beings, than air, food, and water. But on this side there is no end to strife

Where violence has taken love to wife—
A pagan tale of Venus and of Mars
Matter of fact and heedless as the stars
Of carnage down in our too human wars.

The Romans made love and war their national gods, and Lucretius used Mars and Venus to explain the nature of the universe. We, on the other hand, are content to put them on the stage and make them fight and fornicate for the spectators' nickels. Ours is a peep-show culture. Since we dare not face life in the raw, we first drug ourselves then peep through the electronic blinds to catch a glimpse of our more interesting neighbors—like Jimmy Stewart, in *Rear Window*, but at least Jimmy Stewart had the excuse of a broken leg.

In the film version of Nabokov's *Lolita*, Clare Quilty (Peter Sellers), begging for his life, offers to arrange for Humbert

Humbert to see executions: "You like to watch?" And when in Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There* the prostitute asks the retarded manservant (Peter Sellers again) what he likes, Sellers' answer, "I like to watch," is a kind of response, delayed by decades, to his own question in *Lolita*. Of course, he just means TV, but Sellers' dimwitted valet—so reminiscent of Kosinski's friend, the equally dull and impotent Andy Warhol, whose greatest kick was to watch his friends making it—is the American Everyman who, by the end of the film, is both *President and Messiah*.

The trouble with America is not that there is too much sex and violence, but too little, or rather too little of the real things, which also go by the names of love and courage. There are all too many middle-class Casanovas who lack the imaginative conviction required of a faithful husband, or even of a French husband who enjoys his mistress and loves his family; and there is an infestation of punks who have the nerve to shoot defenseless strangers, knowing full well that even if they are caught, they will only be transferred from one welfare system to another. All they lack is the courage to take a minimum-wage job and defend their building against the feral dogs that roam the halls.

If America were really a sexy-violent society, we would see middle-class men, armed and dangerous, protecting their teenage daughters from the high school basketball players who treat them like so much pork, and they would march upon the television station, like a national liberation army, and seize control. In fact, all the whining about sex and violence in our society, when it is not mere cant repeated by rote, reflects the instinctive fear that cowards feel when they are confronted by real life, by men who love a woman so passionately that they do not become disenchanting when she reaches 35 and who would, like an earlier generation of New Hampshiremen, prefer to live free or die. <

LIBERAL ARTS

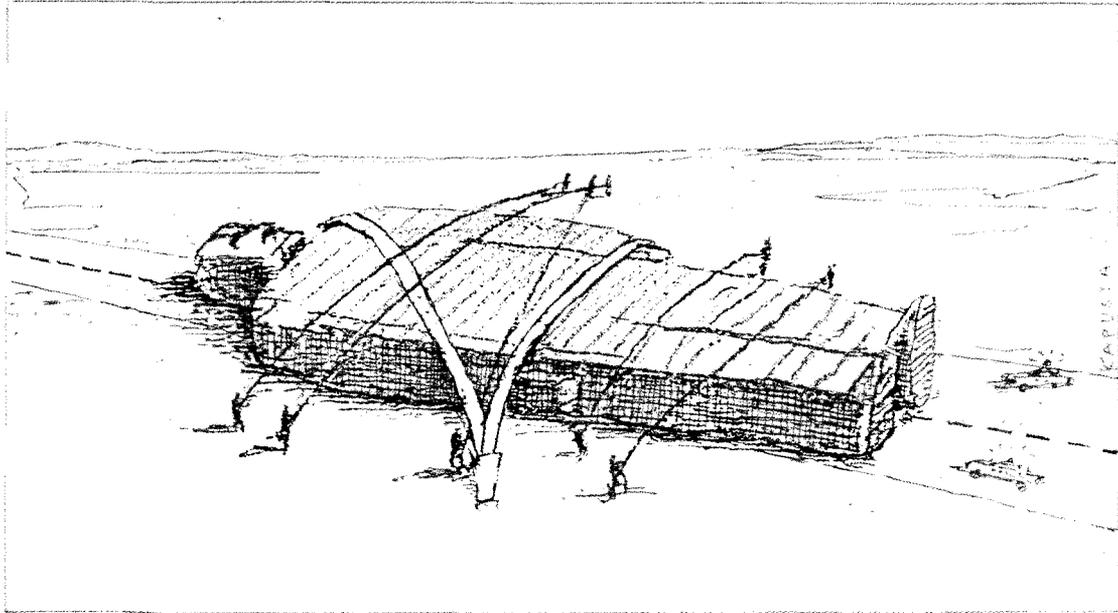


P.C. SMOKE

"The *New York Times* has found a new venue for politically correct moralizing," reported Scott McConnell in the *New York Post* last May: the obituaries. "Readers were gratuitously informed that French geneticist Jerome Lejeune, dead at 67 because of lung cancer, was 'a heavy smoker.' The *Times* obit page hasn't yet begun informing us whether various people who have died of AIDS were promiscuous homosexuals, or whether heart attack victims were fat and avoided exercise—and, truth be told, we don't really expect it to. In PC land, smokers are the one social group made to feel responsible for the deleterious consequences of their own behavior."

Anarcho-Tyranny, U.S.A.

by Samuel Francis



On the morning of September 22, 1993, a law-abiding citizen named B.W. Sanders was driving his car down the street in Raleigh, North Carolina, when all of a sudden he found himself flagged down by a policeman and presented with a ticket for \$25. Mr. Sanders, it turned out, had not been wearing his seat belt, and under a new state law, that crime carries the penalty he received. But in this case it was not just a traffic cop who flagged down Mr. Sanders. It was a force of some six dozen police officers as well as the governor of North Carolina himself, James B. Hunt. The governor was searching for a photo-op with which to advertise both the new seat belt law and his own personal devotion to law and order. Not only the 70 or more police officers but also an innumerable supply of newspaper reporters and TV newsmen were on the scene to record the governor's triumph over the forces of lawlessness, and the next day Mr. Sanders' wicked ways were recorded in the public press for his family, his employers, his neighbors, and indeed posterity to gander at. To make doubly certain that criminals like Mr. Sanders got the message loud and clear, Governor Hunt held a news conference near the state capital and harangued a crowd of some 150 police officers and state troopers, who were able to take time off from the apprehension of public enemies like Mr. Sanders to attend the governor's words. "I took an oath to protect the people of North Carolina," intoned the Tar Heel State's answer to Dirty Harry, "and this is one way we must do it. . . . Folks, we're serious. We mean it. We're going to do this." And indeed, serious he is. As part of

the war on the unbuckled seat belt crisis, the *Raleigh News and Observer* reported, "Law officers in all 100 counties [of the state] will intensify their efforts to find and cite motorists not using their seat belts. Agencies will compete against each other, winning cash for turning in the best performance."

Governor Hunt's grandstanding might be harmless enough were it not for certain other facts about certain other crimes in North Carolina that also sometimes make the news. Only a week before the apprehension and public humiliation of Mr. Sanders, the same newspaper reported on the state's prison crisis. It seems that North Carolina has another new law in addition to the one on seat belts. This other law, passed by the General Assembly, imposes a cap on how many inmates can be incarcerated in the state prison, and the crisis is that, under this cap, most of the inmates now eligible for parole were imprisoned for violent and assaultive crimes. Most of the less dangerous criminals have already been turned loose, and now the prison system must release public enemies even more dangerous than drivers who do not buckle their seat belts. Since last June, no less than 14 parolees (including one of the men now charged with the murder of Michael Jordan's father) have been arrested and charged with murder, and another parolee, a veteran of the state's death row, murdered his girlfriend and then committed suicide, thereby unfairly depriving Governor Hunt of yet another photo-op. Last August alone, North Carolina paroled 3,700 prison inmates. One might think that if the governor of the state and the 150 police officers and state troopers who took time out of their public jobs to listen to him slap himself on the back for busting poor Mr. Sanders were really interested in upholding their oaths of office, they might turn their attention to the results of releasing hardened and vi-

Samuel Francis, a nationally syndicated columnist for the Washington Times, delivered this speech at the 1993 meeting of the John Randolph Club.