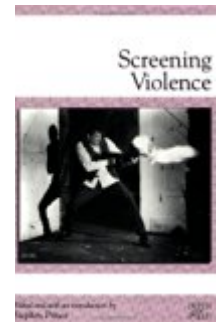


**Stephen Prince, ed..** *Screening Violence*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 240 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8135-2818-2.



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A Bit of the Old Ultraviolence: Bringing the Debate on Media Violence into the Classroom

Stephen Prince's anthology *Screening Violence* features an impressive scope of articles on the problem of media violence and its increase since the 1960s. In his introduction, Prince states his editorial goals, which are to examine "the origins of ultraviolent movies, the long-standing controversies over the effects of viewing film violence, the evidence furnished by social science about these effects, and the inherent characteristics of screen violence that subvert its progressive, legitimate uses (the reasons why, in other words, filmmakers cannot control the reactions of viewers to the graphic violence they put on screen)" (1). The topic of the book, as well as Prince's agenda, contribute to a public debate that has its roots in the late 1960s, and, given the trends in contemporary media, is not likely to subside any time soon.

The three sections of the anthology -- "The Historical Context of Ultraviolence," "The Aesthetics of Ultraviolence," and "The Effects of Ultraviolence" -- establish a clear internal structure for the

individual essays. The first section consists of reviews and articles from 1967 and 1968, years that see a significant increase of violence in the media with the release of Arthur Penn's *Bonny and Clyde* and Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* and *The Dirty Dozen*. Besides the "Statement by Jack Valenti, MPAA President, before the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence," the section features commentaries originally published in *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and *Variety*. All three sources provide insights into the non-academic debate at the time. They illustrate the strong emotional response of contemporary viewers, whose judgments always tend to lie somewhere between disgust about the celebration of antisocial behavior and the defense of artistic freedom. The arguments presented and considered in these articles -- whether films passively reflect the culture around them, or whether they help to establish its general rules of conduct; whether film violence desensitizes the viewer; or whether viewers will have to be educated to see beneath the surface of violent entertainment -- are in themselves not particularly interesting; anyone following the public discussion between

now and then will have heard them already, a familiarity Prince acknowledges by giving the last word of the section to Jack Valenti, who defends the film industry pushing the envelope by summarizing all prior arguments in defense of artistic freedom. What is more interesting about these pieces than the arguments themselves is their shared acknowledgment that specific historical events and social developments during the second half of the 1960s are the reason why the quality and quantity of media violence increases during this time. The Vietnam War is mentioned over and over as the most crucial factor why America becomes a more violent society. Its gruesome realities, as well as its disturbing visual presence in the media, become the touchstone for much of the debate on media violence. Vivian Sobchack's essay from the anthology's second section corroborates this historical interpretation, adding a slightly more theoretical spin. "Our films," Sobchack writes, "are trying to make us feel secure about violence and death as much as it is possible; they are allowing us to purge our fear, to find safety in what appears to be knowledge of the unknown. To know violence is to be temporarily safe from the fear of it" (117). The necessity of having one's fears temporarily anaesthetized stems from the increasing awareness that no one is safe from violent death in American society, a recognition that Sobchack attaches to events ranging from the Kennedy and King assassinations to the Kent State shootings. Like *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther, whom Prince gives the opportunity to refine his first condemnation of ultraviolent films in a second essay, Vivian Sobchack is allowed to add a postscript to her piece. In it, she modifies her initial support of screen violence as a means of staving off mortal fears. Written twenty-five years after the first piece, this postscript pauses to consider a new wave of films that are not only ultraviolent, but in which ultraviolence is "no longer elevated through balletic treatment or narrative purpose." Under these circumstances, violence "is sensed--indeed appreciated--as senseless.

But then so is life under the extremity of such technologized and uncivil conditions" (124). Sobchack's harsh judgment, which sees little, if any, redeeming social or psychological value in films like *Pulp Fiction*, *Payback*, or *Scream*, is topped off by her admission that she stopped watching "compulsively" and now merely watches "casually."

Just like Sobchack's essay has a distinct autobiographical bent, director John Bailey speaks from personal experience in his piece condemning all on-screen violence that is solely justified by technique. But autobiographical writing in this section is supplemented by more straight-laced academic essays. Prince himself, for example, analyzes in detail the aesthetics of slow-motion and montage in Sam Peckinpah's films, while Devin McKinney suggests a way of making a basic classificatory distinction between certain forms of violence. McKinney distinguishes between "strong" and "weak" violence, that is, between images that engage the viewer emotionally, sometimes to a degree of painful intensity and proximity, and images of distant, casual violence. Gratuitous violence is dangerous; all violence, he argues, should matter, to the characters as much as to the viewers.

The third section of the book features two essays summarizing the bewildering flood of psychological research on the effects of media violence on the viewer. Referring to some of the same studies, both authors, Leonard Berkowitz and Richard Felson, admit that there is no clear, equivocal result to all of this research; audiences are too diverse, and causal relationships take place in a social field determined by too many factors acting simultaneously and in combination. Both agree, however, that there must be some sort of impact of these images on society, given the vast size of audiences and the mass quantities of media violence they are exposed to. Unsatisfactory as this conclusion may be, the theoretical overview presented in both essays provides a fascinat-

ing glimpse of an approach that most readers who come from the humanities are unlikely to come across otherwise. All three sections add up to a latter-day cultural Jeremiad. Committed to the premise that media violence does in fact constitute "a problem"—a premise that is itself an ideological construction—the anthology stands its ground against theories of catharsis. Prince's choice of words in his introduction ("the inherent characteristics of screen violence that subvert its progressive, legitimate uses"), as well as the argumentative revision Sobchack's postscript performs upon her original essay, indicate an editorial tendency to give short shrift to all positions from which ultraviolence can be ethically and socially defended. Though cathartic theories are mentioned in a few of the essays, Prince's position prevails; most viewer responses, he cautions, "should make us pessimistic about the psychological health promoted in viewers by much contemporary visual culture" (1-2). Since all of the essays in *Screening Violence* are reprints, most readers are unlikely to encounter arguments they have never heard before. McKinney's discussion of how viewer positions are constructed in regard to violence has been developed more systematically by Laura Tanner in her 1994 book *Intimate Violence*. The longest, most detailed, and theoretically most solid essay in the anthology, Carol Clover's "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," constitutes Chapter 1 in Clover's seminal and well-known *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* from 1992. The rest of the material Prince has collected provides the foundation for Christopher Sharrett's anthology from 1999, *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, where they are applied to "sexier" primary texts and examined in a greater variety of social contexts. While academic readers may pass up Prince's anthology in favor of Sharrett's, *Screening Violence* offers an excellent introduction to the topic for use in the classroom. The inclusion of autobiographical essays makes the anthology as a whole more readable than Sharrett's and Tanner's book, and the variety of

sources invites selective courses of reading. Students will also appreciate the focus on the historical moment, before their time, when the discussion of media violence begins to take the shape familiar to them from their own experience.

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