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HOLLYWOOD'S KILLING US

Exposing impressionable youth to violent images for the sake of a buck

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Two-hundred thirty-six murders. That's six months' worth of killings in the not-so-angelic City of Los Angeles, three months' worth in Los Angeles County, and, according to an academic who spends his time keeping track of such things, one and one-half hours' worth in "Rambo." Rated R for "strong graphic bloody violence, sexual assaults, grisly images and language", Sylvester Stallone's newest vanity project depicts the sixty-one year old actor/writer/director with the sagging pecs as a heroic Vietnam vet who sets out to rescue kidnapped missionaries. Sly's newest project, reportedly the most violent general-distribution movie ever made, has received mixed reviews. Perhaps the most damning was the *Philadelphia Inquirer's*, which called the film "action porn" and "an obscene gory game."

But in Hollywood, where any publicity is good publicity, the words were music to Lions Gate's ears. They didn't release the film to benefit society -- they did it for one reason, and one only: to make lots of money. Expecting to recover more than one-third the film's \$50 million production cost during its opening weekend, Steve Rothenberg, the studio's domestic distribution guru, proudly remarked that "Rambo" was targeted at the immensely profitable 17-to-24 year-old demographic: "Hopefully, what our advertising has done is introduce 'Rambo' to a whole new generation of younger males." Naturally, it won't be long before twelve-year olds will be watching "Rambo" DVD's and shelling out their parents' hard-earned bucks for the first-person shooter game that's certain to follow. Just listen to those cash registers jingle!

Sure, money's dandy. Just don't bother Sylvester, Steve and the other peddlers of pornographic violence with what some members of their target audience are doing with *real* guns and *real* bullets only blocks from Burbank's soundstages. In 2006 seventeen-to-twenty four year olds were responsible for forty-three percent of murders in the U.S.; those in the most prolific segment, twenty to twenty-four, committed more than one in every four. With violence in many areas on the upswing, one can't blame cities like Philadelphia from being dismayed by a plague of Hollywood shoot-'em-ups that appeal to impressionable youth, and for all the wrong reasons.

Ah, but wait a minute, you say. Anyone who's taken freshman research methods knows that correlation does not necessarily mean causation. There was violence before television, movies and video games; ergo, TV, movies and video games cannot be the cause.

If it were only that simple. Images are persuasive; if not, there would be no ad industry, no TV, and those pesky multi-color inserts in Sunday papers would be history (hmm...now there's an idea!) Thanks to technology and the entertainment industry's damn-the-consequences pursuit of the buck, grotesque visions of murder and mayhem have taken over the small and big screens and immersed video gamers in hypercharged environments where brutally dispatching one's opponents isn't one thing, it's the only thing. Even well-regarded cinema critics have been inhaling. Consider the remarks of the *L.A. Times*' [Patrick Goldstein](#), who gushed that the "two leading best picture contenders -- "No Country [for Old Men]" and "There Will Be Blood" -- are brutal, nihilistic pictures that will be studied by film students for years but aren't the kind of pictures you can recommend to your Aunt Gladys in Des Moines."

But there's a big difference between watching and doing, you say. Does exposure to violent images really lead to violence? A recently published paper (L. Rowell Huesmann, "The Impact of Electronic Media Violence: Scientific Theory and Research," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 41, 2007) says yes, definitely. Analyzing studies dating back to the sixties, the author concluded that TV, video games and the Internet have become classrooms of violence, arousing, "priming" and desensitizing young, malleable minds, and creating a public health threat second in magnitude only to smoking and lung cancer.

There was a day when the entertainment industry helped elevate society, rather than coarsen it. When the First Amendment presented an opportunity, not a shield behind which to hide. And when the measure of a man or woman was not what they earned, but what they contributed. Sylvester, Steve, Patrick...it's not too late.

Repent!