

several or even many selves—for instance, the self you are with a close friend, the self you are with your teachers, the self you are with customers (if you have a job), and so forth. The self that you will present in your essays—the self that you hope the readers will see from the words you put down on the page—will probably include certain specific qualities. You probably want your readers to see that you are informed and fair and are presenting a thoughtful case. You want them to be interested in hearing what you have to say. If you browse through the essays in this book, you will of course hear different voices. Although some may have an academic tone and some may sound folksy, almost all of them have one thing in common: they are the voices of people whom we would like to get to know.

An Overview: An Examination of an Argument

Now that we have covered the ground from a more or less theoretical point of view, let's look at a specific argument. The writer is Richard Rhodes, a journalist who has written for many newspapers and magazines, including *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Harper's*, *Playboy*, and *Rolling Stone*. Rhodes is also known as a novelist and as a writer of books about science and technology. We reprint an essay that first appeared in *The New York Times* on September 17, 2000.

Richard Rhodes

Hollow Claims about Fantasy Violence

The moral entrepreneurs are at it again, pounding the entertainment industry for advertising its Grand Guignolesque confections¹ to children. If exposure to this mock violence contributes to the development of violent behavior, then our political leadership is justified in its indignation at what the Federal Trade Commission has reported about the marketing of violent fare to children. Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman have been especially quick to fasten on the FTC report as they make an issue of violent offerings to children.

But is there really a link between entertainment and violent behavior?

Richard Rhodes, "Hollow Claims about Fantasy Violence." Originally published in *The New York Times*, 9/17/00. Reprinted by permission.

¹*Grand Guignolesque confections* The Grand Guignol was a Parisian theater specializing in plays dealing with brutality.

The American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the National Institute of Mental Health all say yes. They base their claims on social science research that has been sharply criticized and disputed within the social science profession, especially outside the United States. In fact, no direct, causal link between exposure to mock violence in the media and subsequent violent behavior has ever been demonstrated, and the few claims of modest correlation have been contradicted by other findings, sometimes in the same studies.

History alone should call such a link into question. Private violence has been declining in the West since the media-barren late Middle Ages, when homicide rates are estimated to have been 10 times what they are in Western nations today. Historians attribute the decline to improving social controls over violence—police forces and common access to courts of law—and to a shift away from brutal physical punishment in child-rearing (a practice that still appears as a common factor in the background of violent criminals today).

The American Medical Association has based its endorsement of the media violence theory in major part on the studies of Brandon Centerwall, a psychiatrist in Seattle. Dr. Centerwall compared the murder rates for whites in three countries from 1945 to 1974 with numbers for television set ownership. Until 1975, television broadcasting was banned in South Africa, and “white homicide rates remained stable” there. Dr. Centerwall found, while corresponding rates in Canada and the United States doubled after television was introduced.

A spectacular finding, but it is meaningless. As Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins of the University of California at Berkeley subsequently pointed out, homicide rates in France, Germany, Italy, and Japan either failed to change with increasing television ownership in the same period or actually declined, and American homicide rates have more recently been sharply declining despite a proliferation of popular media outlets—not only movies and television but also video games and the Internet.

Other social science that supposedly undergirds the theory, too, is marginal and problematic. Laboratory studies that expose children to selected incidents of televised mock violence and then assess changes in the children’s behavior have sometimes found more “aggressive” behavior after the exposure—usually verbal, occasionally physical.

But sometimes the control group, shown incidents judged not to be violent, behaves more aggressively afterward than the test group; sometimes comedy produces the more aggressive behavior; and sometimes there’s no change. The only obvious conclusion is that sitting and watching television stimulates subsequent physical activity. Any kid could tell you that.

As for those who claim that entertainment promotes violent behavior by desensitizing people to violence, the British scholar Martin Barker offers this critique: “Their claim is that the materials they judge to be harm-

ful can only influence us by trying to make us be the same as them. So horrible things will make us horrible—not horrified. Terrifying things will make us terrifying—not terrified. To see something aggressive makes us feel aggressive—not agitated against. This idea is so odd, it is hard to know where to begin in challenging it.”

Even more influential on national policy has been a 22-year study by two University of Michigan psychologists, Leonard I. Eron and L. Rowell Huesmann, of boys exposed to so-called violent media. The Telecommunications Act of 1996, which mandated the television V-chip, allowing parents to screen out unwanted programming, invoked these findings, asserting, “Studies have shown that children exposed to violent video programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children not so exposed.”

Well, not exactly. Following 875 children in upstate New York from third grade through high school, the psychologists found a correlation between a preference for violent television at age 8 and aggressiveness at age 18. The correlation—0.31—would mean television accounted for about 10 percent of the influences that led to this behavior. But the correlation only turned up in one of three measures of aggression: the assessment of students by their peers. It didn’t show up in students’ reports about themselves or in psychological testing. And for girls, there was no correlation at all.

Despite the lack of evidence, politicians can’t resist blaming the media for violence. They can stake out the moral high ground confident that the First Amendment will protect them from having to actually write legislation that would be likely to alienate the entertainment industry. Some use the issue as a smokescreen to avoid having to confront gun control.

But violence isn’t learned from mock violence. There is good evidence—causal evidence, not correlational—that it’s learned in personal violent encounters, beginning with the brutalization of children by their parents or their peers.

The money spent on all the social science research I’ve described was diverted from the National Institute of Mental Health budget by reducing support for the construction of community mental health centers. To this day there is no standardized reporting system for emergency-room findings of physical child abuse. Violence is on the decline in America, but if we want to reduce it even further, protecting children from real violence in their real lives—not the pale shadow of mock violence—is the place to begin.

The Analysis Analyzed

Let’s go through Rhodes’s argument step by step, looking not only at the points he makes, but also at the ways he makes them.

The title does not clearly announce the topic and the thesis, but it does give the reader a hint: Rhodes will be concerned with “hollow claims” (i.e., with assertions he thinks are insubstantial) about something