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Blood, Guns, and Plenty of Explosions:

The Evolution of American Television Violence



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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	III
ABSTRACT	IV
INTRODUCTION	1
I. BONANZA, THE TV WESTERN, AND THE LEGITIMACY OF VIOLENCE	16
II. THE INTERVENING YEARS: 1960S – 1980S	30
III. COUNTERING THE ACTION EXTRAVAGANZA WITH NUCLEAR FIRE IN THE DAY AFTER	36
IV. THE INTERVENING YEARS: 1990S – 2010S	48
V. THE WALKING DEAD: PUSHING THE ENVELOPE	57
LOOKING AHEAD: VIEWER DISCRETION IS ADVISED	77
WORKS CITED	81

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Abstract

American television, as a mass medium of storytelling, often gets scrutiny over its content, facing industry standards, censorship, and audience pushback. While sex and obscenity have been intensely studied, TV violence has had most scholarship aimed at the effects of viewing violence. This study is focused in a different direction, seeking to analyze the evolving presentation of violence on American airwaves. TV violence is composed of two parts: The first is the graphic portrayal of violence through fights, gunshots, and death. The second is the role violence serves within TV narratives, which has morphed from acts of justice and self-defense to plotlines intertwining moral indifference with pointless killing and righteous vengeance. Three case studies utilizing close reading and image analysis of various shows are used to analyze both aspects of TV violence. The first case study centers on *Bonanza*, a TV western that presents violence within strict moral boundaries. The second looks at *The Day After*, a TV movie that employed special effects, dialogue, and set design to portray the aftermath of nuclear Armageddon. The third case study analyzes *The Walking Dead*, a culmination of the changing TV landscape of the 2000s that led to a hyperreal level of graphic violence and storylines that emphasized moral ambiguity, villains that escaped punishment, and endless death. The portrayal of violence on American television has changed drastically in the last 80 years, and this study hopes to reflect the reciprocal relationship between a changing TV industry and a shifting American society.

Introduction

The Turmoil of 1968

In 1968, American media was consumed by a year of violence. In the midst of the Cold War, tensions flared both within and outside of the United States, from the Tet Offensive to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, the chaos at the Democratic National Convention to the Prague Spring and the beginning of The Troubles. 1968 also marked the year in which television began to play an insurmountable role in influencing the American public, capturing all of these events and broadcasting them worldwide. Most notable was the Big Three networks' coverage of the Vietnam War.¹ The destruction of Hue, the attack on the American Embassy in Saigon, and the siege of Khe Sanh were juxtaposed to the May Lai Massacre, antiwar protests at Columbia, and terse interviews with soldiers, generals, and politicians. Every night was headline news, broadcasting to millions of Americans through the Big Three's anchors a graphic portrayal of war, up close and personal for Americans. In contrast was the talk of limiting the scope of violence on scripted television programming in the United States. Westerns had propagated across the small screen in *The Lone Ranger*, *Gunsmoke*, and *Bonanza*, while *The Twilight Zone* terrified with its supernatural horror, crimes in paradise starred in *Hawaii Five-O*, *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk and crew battled dozens of aliens across the galaxy, and Adam West and company fought the Joker, Catwoman, and the Penguin on *Batman*.

For as long as television has been a popular medium of entertainment in the United States, there has been a concern over the effect television may have on its audience. Young viewers of syndicated programs like *I Love Lucy*, *The Lone Ranger*, and *The Twilight Zone* were

¹ American Networks: CBS, NBC, & ABC

particularly susceptible to the influences of the small screen. Sex, violence, and obscenities were treated with the same careful regard as Hollywood's Production Code, and soon enough, politicians and social organizations grew heavily concerned with the content that TV was producing. TV westerns like *The Lone Ranger* and *Gunsmoke*, crime shows like *The Untouchables*, *Dragnet*, and fantasy series like *The Adventures of Superman* represented a danger to those concerned with the development of children and their constant perusal of these programs with weekly adventures of gunfights and death. It was no surprise that by 1972, Congress had held ten separate and distinct hearings and subcommittees exploring the impact of television violence. Testimonials from the TV industry, as well as scientists and social organizations, resulted in a steady stream of funding for research into the impact of repeated viewings of TV violence, culminating in the landmark 1972 Surgeon General's Report on TV Violence, drawing a link between the violent content on television and possible aggression. Qualifications of the findings and possible counters were also presented in the report, but subsequently ignored by the general public. These endless hearings and debates over television violence have led to a healthy scholarly and public debate over the impact of television violence on audiences, and plenty of research has been conducted into links between repeated viewings of violence and a rise in aggression amongst audiences. However, this never-ending debate has largely ignored the general reaction of audiences to violence, and the reciprocal nature violence has gathered from the society it seeks to capture and entertain.

Like radio, comic books, and movies before it, television faced the same criticisms: that it was corrupting the nation's youth, that it was influencing people to commit crimes and other acts of violence, and that it was a waste of time. The American TV industry set out to deal with these concerns, mainly to avoid legions of angry protestors and congressmen and prevent the loss of

their economic power. After all, television faced the same problem as radio broadcasting before it: television was a commercial, private industry created for entertainment, but simultaneously imbued with the role of educating and informing the populace by the government. The regulation of the airwaves was governed by the licensing powers of the Federal Communications Commission, while the almighty dollar, sponsors, producers, and audiences ruled the creation of content. Thus, TV faced the most difficult task of trying to please all its stakeholders at once, with the virtual guarantee that some members weren't going to be satisfied with the results.

Of the many issues television tackled in this vein, violence was often the most troublesome, leaving a trail in news coverage and fictional storylines, evolving over the 20th century as technology, cultural standards, and audiences changed. Ironically, violence was also the least likely to inflame television's critics (which mostly focused on obscenity and sexuality), despite its lingering presence in the medium and criticism launched against it. Violence was all over television, but until it seriously offended someone, nothing was going to be done about it. Over time, the debate over violence primarily erupted about the appropriateness of its appearance on television, primarily centered on its possible exposure to children and the safeguards against obscene and indecent content. Violence on American television thus evolved in its eras, ramping up the special and practical effects that portrayed the violent act, and analyzing the degree to which violence's role within the narrative changed from one of cause and effect to one centered on its centrality to the show's characters, plot, and themes. Violence has always held a central role in human history, and for the United States, violence's expression on television was no different to that of film, radio, or books. Television violence was the next natural step in narrative media, shaping how audiences thought about entertainment's impact and how entertainment reflects its audience's own values. American television violence has changed

significantly over the last 80 years, both in its portrayal and its role, and this changing form and function of violence is indicative of parallel changes within the TV industry and its American audience, both of which directly and indirectly influence each other in significant ways. Through close analysis, a survey of several programs, and the consultation of related scholarship, this thesis will explore just how violence has changed throughout the years in terms of graphic violence and narrative violence, and examine the subsequent relationship of cause and effect resulting from changes in television, audiences, and the medium.

A Brief History of Television and Violence

After the proliferation of radio across the American continent, entertainment was looking for its next big innovation. The invention of the cathode ray tube, which allowed for the projection of images, combined with the iconoscope, which allowed for the capture of images for television, helped to create television around the 1930s. An expansion of developments in radio, television took the role of combining film projection and radio's broadcasting range. By the 1950s, TV was the new medium, threatening radio's place in the home and cinema's role in nightlife. Millions of TV sets were in the households of Americans, and their proliferation increased exponentially throughout the decade. Radio stars and new talent found their way onto television, setting the foundation for television's staying power. *Amos 'n' Andy*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Lone Ranger*, and *The Honeymooners* paved the way amongst nightly newscasts, quiz shows, and variety anthologies. As concerns over the content of television mounted, the Big Three Networks of CBS, NBC, and ABC employed censorship through Broadcasting Standards and Practices departments, which often acted as the final wall of approval in what was shown on TV.

Color TV became popular in the 1960s,² as coverage of the Cold War and domestic news reached new heights alongside popular shows such as *Hawaii Five-O* and *The Brady Bunch*. It became abundantly clear during this decade how powerful television was as a national influence, and with the release of the Surgeon General's Report on Television Violence in 1972, the primary focus of regulating television content became protecting children.³ The domination of the western, as well as the introduction of other particularly violence-focused genres like police dramas and superhero shows fueled conversations and congressional hearings about how violence was portrayed on television, how often it was portrayed, and how popular those programs were. Concepts such as the Family Viewing Hour and the Fairness Doctrine clashed in the 1970s with American's fusion of the 1960's counterculture and mainstream culture,⁴ resulting in a variety of shows from *Happy Days* and *Three's Company* to *Charlie's Angels* and *M*A*S*H*. *M*A*S*H* would prove incredibly influential as a sitcom about war, chronicling the Korean War with comedy/drama and simultaneously commenting on the current Vietnam War, all the while avoiding the direct depiction of combat, but rather, its consequences. The 1970s also saw an increase in the diversity of television programming and its widening base in American culture, with African Americans being represented in *Julia*, *The Jeffersons*, and *Sanford and Son*, the discussion of culture and its divisions in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Dallas*, *Soap*, and *All in the Family*, and the emergence of PBS and educational programming targeted towards children, primarily through *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*.

² Color TV was officially introduced by NBC in the Tournament of Roses Parade on January 1, 1954. Color TV became more popular during the 1960s, and ABC aired their final black and white programming in December 1967.

³ "Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence – Report to the Surgeon General United States Public Health"

⁴ The Federal Communication Commission's mandate that 8:00 – 9:00 prime time programming must be "family friendly." Repealed by Federal Court order in 1967. The FCC's mandate that presentation of controversial issues must be fair and balanced, with equal measure given to both sides of the debate. Introduced in 1949, repealed in 1987.

As Cold War tensions heated up and Ronald Reagan took office in the 1980s, television had taken a liking to violence and action with the proliferation of action dramas such as *The A-Team* and *MacGyver*, and police dramas in *Magnum, P.I.*, *Hill Street Blues*, and *Miami Vice*. These shows reveled in the violence central to their stories and portrayed a general aspect of bravado and excitement found in their escapist, and at times exotic, characters, locales, and plotlines. In contrast, sitcoms had steadily shifted away from the familiar realm of the family comedy, and cemented a new family in coworkers, friends, and associates in *The Golden Girls*, *Cheers*, and *Newhart*. In addition, the fragmentation of audiences from the Big Three Networks started with the introduction of deregulation, furthered by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the rise of media conglomerates, and the entrance of alternatives to the networks through cable, premium cable, and the Internet. As computer technology evolved exponentially in the 1990s and 2000s, cable television grew from MTV and CNN, premium cable's prominence rose with HBO's increasing quality, and animation, special effects, and larger production values created television programming that would revolutionize the entertainment industry. This was an explosion of television's ability to graphically recreate the world's they envisioned; blood realistically looked like blood, war dramas accurately portrayed war's evisceration, and crime was no longer campy and often featured the horrific crimes themselves.

Communications innovations allowed for "Live TV," popularizing CNN and the 24-hour news cycle, resulting in the mass broadcast of live events as a shared experience to millions around the world. Simultaneously, reality TV rose with *Survivor* and *American Idol*, and seemingly captured a new type of ardent realism, fraught with manufactured drama and storylines. An adherence to the perception of realism also sprung up in police procedurals such as *NYPD Blue*, *NCIS*, and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, as well as in dramas like *JAG*, *The*

West Wing, and *Law and Order*. In this vein, however, realism applied more to mimicking (or at least seeming to mimic) the reality they portrayed. Special effects allowed for science fiction and fantasy to take root in the networks and become more accepted within the mainstream media, evident in the popularity of *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *LOST*. This in turn launched new methods and perspectives to portray violence, as the timed-out genres of westerns, cops, and wars reemerged in popular re-imaginings of these stories through new genres. Alien wars, supernatural private investigators, and magical time travelers opened up numerous possibilities, and the progress of special and practical effects made these universes that more believable. Computer technology allowed for a renaissance of animation, which crafted iconic shows such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Spongebob Squarepants*, and opened a Pandora's box regarding violent content within animation. Finally, premium cable rose as television uncensored, a refutation of the limits that networks and their basic cable affiliates had to conform to under the FCC and Hollywood self-regulation.⁵ Breaking out in the 1970s, HBO led the way for other premium channels with its concentration on story, effects, and quality, helping to build the perception that premium cable was more than just violence and sex. Thus, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Game of Thrones* became the epitome of cinematic standards applied to television, with few limits aside from the creators' minds and their respective budgets. One final element of American television is the creation of streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu, which have helped to propagate cord-cutting and open television to a new form of distribution, unrestricted like premium cable.

⁵ Home Box Office (HBO) became popular primarily in the 1990s, especially with *The Larry Sanders Show* and *The Sopranos*. Founded in 1972.

Understanding Violence and its Role in the Media and Society

Violent television is defined as the portrayal of violent acts on television. This primarily includes physical violence amongst humans, but natural destruction, animal violence, gunfights, and explosions may also count. What is considered violent may be subjective, varying from audience to audience. However, violence can easily be identified, regardless of the degree and clarity.⁶ A punch is a punch, and a gunshot is a gunshot. In this vein, violence can range from a slap to a planet's implosion. What television adds is the extra layer of visual tangibility. Whereas gunshots in radio dramas of the 1920s and 1930s were distinctive and their effects imagined, television now attributed the loud pop to the revolver/pistol, the flash of smoke and light, and the death of a character. In identifying violence's role in the media, it may take various forms and levels of importance depending on the genre. Physical contact in sports, especially in American football, hockey, and boxing/MMA, is essential to their broadcast. Similarly, violence is typically integral to police procedurals, action dramas, and war dramas. Thus, these genres hold certain expectations on the level of violence included. The abnormal instantly stands out.

For instance, comedic violence is often played up for humorous effect: think of the escapades of *The Three Stooges* and *The Benny Hill Show*. When violence emerges unexpectedly however, it often becomes part of a central focus on the show's content. Analyzing the content of television programming with regards to violence must include a description of the violent action, the reason for it, the level of violence depicted, and its overall relevance to the show and its audience. As with any medium, the cultural influence of a media text can be measured in its effect on audiences at the time of its release, the influence of the media on texts that follow it, and the significance of the media text in pop culture and society. It is important to remark that

⁶ Similar to SCOTUS Justice Potter Stewart's "I know it when I see it" argument from *Jacobellis v. Ohio*.

television can often be thought of as a more than the traditional mirror; TV violence is no longer rooted solely in the TV industry, but also in the participatory audience that helps to craft the environment that television is situated within. TV is a product of its time as much as it is a product for its time.

There has been plenty of scholarship examining the prevalence of violence on television and its effect on audiences. In Heather Hendershot's *Saturday Morning Censors*, Hendershot chronicles the battles regarding the censorship of children's television programming. In Hendershot's first chapter, "Attacking (TV?) Violence," an analysis of the emergence of the debate over children's television is crafted through the consideration of what would be considered decent for children's programming. Through an anecdote about MTV's *Beavis and Butthead*, a copycat incident of the show's arson scene, and MTV's shifting of the show to a later timeslot, Hendershot analyzes self-regulation by the channel, noting that the *Beavis and Butthead* example is a microcosm of the debates revolving around the censorship of violence, sex, and obscenity in children's programming. Either children are inherently dangerous and will copy anything they see on television, or that they are inherently innocent and must be protected from any type of corrupting influence. The problem, Hendershot notes, is that the critics often simplify child audiences into these two categories, and forget that children are often much more knowledgeable than adults' perception of them.

Furthermore, there is an assertion about American television: "Regulation is legal, whereas censorship is illegal" (Hendershot, 14). Ultimately, this boils down into the matter of subjectivity, which plagues the entire process of understanding how standards and regulations are established. Censors may consider existing FCC policies and precedents on TV censorship, but without an established standard for the TV industry, censors often follow their own

judgment. A blunt assessment of this subjectivity comes from PCA (Production Code Administration) staffer Jack Vizzard, who noted that when it came to PCA director Joe Breen: “if, by some accident, a rare legal eagle challenged Joe with a claim that there was no Code clause to cover his objection, Joe would fire back, ‘I don’t give a fiddler’s fuck ... whether it’s in the Code or not. I won’t pass your scene’” (Hendershot, 25). Thus, Hendershot poses this question: when does regulation become censorship? This can loosely be translated into a follow up question: When does the violence portrayed onscreen become indecent for the public interest? Drawing from a multitude of communications and television scholars, Hendershot arrives at the same conflict of interest of private enterprises controlling television that is meant for the public interest. Children’s programming on cable, such as Cartoon Network, Disney Channel, and Nickelodeon, thus are not required to abide by the regulatory standards for networks, but often choose to do so as a matter of public relations.

Hendershot closes out the chapter by highlighting the rebirth of the debate of violence in children’s programming as being rooted in 1968, particularly with the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. Kennedy’s assassination has become a beacon, an ideological myth, that scholars have used as a marker for the proliferation of the idea of reducing violence in children’s programming. Kennedy’s status as the icon of the liberal movement, his support for the advancement of education through television, and his championship of the media’s importance in culture, became a flame to the scholar moths. Many violent acts were captured the same year on American television, but the backlash against violent television was seemingly attributed towards this singular event, a convenient scapegoat to avoid the association of cultural shifts within American society. External pressures and internal regulation within the TV industry, as well as the ongoing Vietnam War effort and the various crises of 1968, in addition to the assassinations of RFK,

Martin Luther King Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi were more likely to have combined to a boiling point. That boiling point, was the rejection of TV as portrayal a real experience or TV's mirror image of society. Instead, Hendershot proposes the idea of TV as a windowpane, reflecting the culture that feeds into its production, while also contributing to the changing cultural landscape of the United States. Thus, the problem with TV violence is no longer rooted solely in the TV industry, but rather also in the participatory audience, that helps to craft the environment that television is situated within.

Another important entry in the field of television violence and its scholarship was the landmark 1972 Surgeon General's Report, "Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence," the culmination of years of congressional hearings on the matter and public funding of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior. This report drew several conclusions from its laboratory research and survey of the television industry and its programs, most notably the connection between viewing violence and aggressive behavior. This eventually boiled down to this: "that the viewing of violence causes the aggressive behavior, or that both the viewing and the aggression are joint products of some other common source" (112). Furthermore, children who were exposed to violent television programming tended to exhibit some increases in aggressive behavior. However, multiple caveats are noted by the report's authors. First, the correlation between viewing violence and aggression is substantial for short-run aggression, but longer lasting forms of aggression lack a convergence of evidence in this regard (113). In addition, the correlation of viewing violence and aggression is "most likely applicable only to some children who are predisposed in that direction," suggesting that those who imitate violence onscreen already have a preponderance to do so regardless of viewing violence. Lastly, the conclusions of the report suggest that the

presentation of violence can affect how it is viewed by children. Content, context, parental supervision, and fantasy vs. reality can affect how violence is seen by child audiences. From here, the Report offers a glimpse into future research that may be conducted, such as TV's connection to other mass media, aggressive behavior, teaching and learning about violence, and most importantly, "Symbolic functions of violent conflict in fiction" (115).

There are two types of violence that are discussed within this paper: graphic violence and narrative violence. Graphic violence is the effect of force inflicted upon a body or the environment. This ranges from violent acts such as gunfights, stabbings, and fistfights, but may also include slapstick violence, explosions, and the inflicting of pain or death upon a subject. This has clearly changed through television's lifespan, as technology, budgets, and stories have become more and more advanced, allowing for graphic violence to transition from smoke fired from a gun in *The Virginian* to the evisceration of bodies in *Band of Brothers*. Narrative violence, on the other hand, is violence that is inflicted within the story and pushes the development of plotlines, characters, and thematic elements within. This has largely changed over time, with early television like westerns posturing narrative violence in terms of moral equivalence, likening violence to justified actions such as defending the innocent and stopping outlaws. Over time and as different genres gained popularity, narrative violence has shifted its role within television, ranging from the central point of contention with police and war dramas, to the morally ambiguous survival of post-apocalyptic shows and terror TV. Narrative violence itself has subsequently evolved to become more important than graphic violence in defining how violence can shape storytelling in American television.

The Business of Television

It is important to lay out the business of television and the principal players of the industry's conduct and production to understand a discussion of television violence. The main agents involved in the cycle of television production are: 1) the production studios, who make television shows, 2) the networks and affiliate stations, which broadcast shows and syndicated offerings, as well as occasionally produce their own content, 3) audiences, who are the main target of television studios and affiliates, 4) advertisers, who are the main purveyor of funding for television production and hold immense power over the content of shows, 5) the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), who hold indirect power and influence over violent content through the power of granting and revoking broadcasting licenses and levying fines for violations, and 6) cable providers, who have recently come into power by offering consumers an alternative to network television through subscriptions. In addition, alternatives to the three networks emerged as television expanded with money and cable television. New networks such as Fox and UPN represented a traditional challenge to the Big Three Networks, while cable television offered thousands of different channels for consumers. In addition, cable television relies upon a dual income strategy of subscribers and advertisers. With the launch of HBO in 1972, premium cable has risen in popularity and remains largely reliant upon its subscriber base, while the rise of the Internet has enabled streaming services like Netflix and Hulu to provoke traditional television with its subscriber-based content and its possibilities (movies, reruns, specials). Both premium cable and streaming services are largely subject to content regulation only via audience feedback.

Other principle players also hold limited power over television. These include Internet Service Providers (ISPs), the film industry (which initially fought against television, and then

grew to adapt and enter the industry itself), and the Internet (primarily through sites like YouTube and Vimeo, which offer a new diversity of content outside of the television spectrum). It is also important to understand the channel-advertiser-audience dynamic, which entails that television networks and channels produce content to attract audiences, which are then sold to advertisers to funnel the production of shows. In essence, advertisers pay for customer attention, and the supposedly free entertainment offered by network television is paid by audiences in their exposure to advertising. However, only the fundamentals of the business of television and the interactions of the main players are required for the upcoming dissection of television violence.

A Methodology of Analysis

It should be made very clear that the goal of this thesis is to examine how American television violence has changed over time. Thus, the primary research question is as follows: What has changed regarding American television violence in the last 80 years? What has changed and why has it changed? In order to provide a possible answer to this question, this project follows a methodology that stems from a survey of various television programs spanning TV's lifespan, utilizing close analysis of specific episodes and scenes as well as the consultation of academic scholarship and commercial magazines to understand how specific television programs had an effect on audiences and producers. A deep analysis follows three primary case studies, along with bridging sections analyzing the years in between. These three case studies are designed to summarize the plotlines and impact of the program, analyze the graphic and narrative violence within the program, and reflect on thematic elements and relevant legacies. In doing so, each case study shall represent the progression of how the portrayal of graphic violence has evolved with technology, bigger budgets, and a changing American audience. In addition, the evolution of narrative violence will also be tracked, as it changes from justified violence and

moral boundaries in early TV to more morally ambiguous, rarely-defined, and sometimes unexplainable violence that impacts a show's plot, characters, and mass appeal. The first case study is an examination of *Bonanza*, a popular western of the 1960s that emphasized a family dynamic in the genre and was one of the first color TV shows. The second case study examines *The Day After*, a landmark TV movie about nuclear war that reached a record number of viewers and shifted the conversation of violence on TV towards one about the effects of violence within stories and its connection to reality. The third case study centers on *The Walking Dead*, AMC's incredibly popular post-apocalyptic zombie thriller that uses gory graphic violence to tell a story about the breakdown of civilization and the reintroduction of anarchy, tribalism, and extreme Darwinism. All three of these case studies are emblematic of their TV time-period, and had a tremendous impact on shows during their respective eras and the audiences that watched them. It is through this examination that the evolution of American television violence should be made clear, advancing year by year in its increasing graphic realism and complexity within stories.

I. *Bonanza*, the TV Western, and the Legitimacy of Violence

In 1949, ABC's *The Lone Ranger* captivated audiences across America with its tales of the Lone Ranger and Tonto's adventures of enforcing the law in the Wild West.⁷ Those who could afford the new medium of television were gripped with a new form of entertainment, one that promised to erode cinema's nightly outings and radio's place in living room with images and sound beamed straight into the house. The promise of free entertainment was a communication revolution. The western genre exploded, being one of the first few types of shows on television (news broadcasts, quiz shows, variety shows, and sitcoms were the others). Relatively easy to produce with clear character tropes and genre expectations, the western easily bypassed major controversies and audience experience with the genre through film helped the transition. Clear lines of morality, little bloodshed, and generally tame dialogue coupled with repetitive yet entertaining plotlines and the legendary discourse of the Wild West in American culture made the genre an easy sale to American audiences.⁸ TV westerns discovered their scope and limits in the 1960s, building upon the experiences of the 1950s and additional technological updates that brought television from a niche part of the American populace to the whole of American society. In addition, TV narratives evolved into more complex storylines and characters, and themes of morality, diversity, and American history made its way into the western, helping *Bonanza* soar to the top of the Nielsen ratings and become one of the longest-running primetime television shows in history.

In 1959, NBC premiered *Bonanza* (1959 – 1973), a western set in Lake Tahoe revolving around the Cartwright family's ranch. Initial disappointment resulted, as *Bonanza*

⁷ *The Lone Ranger* was adapted from the popular radio serial which premiered in 1933. The subsequent TV adaptation by ABC ran from 1949 to 1957, and was one of the most popular shows of the 1950s.

⁸ The Western's general plot formula essentially follows the path of 1. A crime occurs, 2. The wronged or lawmen go searching for justice, and 3. The confrontation climax of revenge, justice, or realization.

underperformed in its first season. However, *Bonanza* had two principal points keeping it from the cancellation block. As one of the few color television shows on air at the time, *Bonanza* drew on the same factor that film drew from Technicolor: visuals mattered as much as the story itself. *Bonanza*'s setting of Lake Tahoe and the wilderness of Nevada captured in sparkling color made the landscape and its characters shine. In addition, RCA was NBC's parent company,⁹ and used its sponsorship of *Bonanza* and other color TV shows to spur sales of RCA color TV sets in a bid to increase their market share on the emerging market of color TVs and cement an audience for its content.¹⁰ Thus, NBC's persistence with the show slowly built up an audience, until it was drawing an average of 30 million viewers a night at the top of the Nielsen ratings from 1963 to 1967.

As for *Bonanza* itself, the western emerged on a crowded market where TV westerns made up a large share of television programming. Yet it stood out from the competition due to the nature of its story. The Cartwright's family farm, the Ponderosa, was home to four principal members. Ben Cartwright, played by Lorne Green, was the widowed Cartwright patriarch, and ran the Ponderosa with his three sons from three different wives, Adam (Pernell Roberts), Eric/Hoss (Dan Blocker), and Joseph (Michael Landon). There was a clash of personalities between the brothers, whose disputes with each other were featured alongside their excursions to nearby towns and the defense of the Ponderosa from bandits. The result was a western form of a family epic, told in serial installments for 14 years with plenty of guest stars to incorporate new storylines for every episode. Everything in a western was present here: the homestead, bandits and Native Americans, sheriffs and federal marshals, wagon trains, revolvers, rifles, and

⁹ Radio Corporation of America (1919 – 1986)

¹⁰ NBC and RCA's television dealers reported that an increase in the sales of color television sets were primarily attributed to *Bonanza*. This was further helped by NBC's push for color TV, which ABC and CBS had on the backburner (Castleman and Podrazik, 134).

cannons, and elegance of ranching the American mythos of the western frontier. *Bonanza* also had many unique storylines, which involved family conflict, crime and the law, racism and domestic violence, the harsh reality of the western wilderness, and the federal government's hands-off approach to the West.

In particular, the western's take on violence in this early period of television would be considered less than tame today. J. Fred MacDonald stated the core principles of the Western:

The Western possesses a classic formulation recognizable to all audiences. Here is the cowboy, frontiersman, or lawman operating on or near the furthest reaches of civilized life. Here is the cruel wilderness in which incipient American society struggles against adversity to survive and even flourish. The classic Western contains familiar ingredients: heroes and guns, horses, cattle, outlaws and Indians, and the like – usually situated in desert locales on the nineteenth-century U.S. frontier. (MacDonald, 3)

Combat within this genre essentially revolved around common weapons of the era. Most fight scenes involved hand-to-hand combat, gunfights, or roughhousing. Typically, hand-to-hand combat was similar to that of its film counterparts, with fists being thrown and a simulated effect of being punched acted by the recipient. Grappling and wrestling was common as well, and characters rarely wore makeup or any other indications of their wounds and injuries. Blood too was a rarity. For gunfights, scenes had a more dramatic flair. Revolvers, rifles, Gatling guns, cannons, and other firearms were used often in westerns, relying on practical effects and pantomime. For example, whenever a revolver would be shot, blanks were typically used to simulate the effects of bullets, complete with the smoke rising out of a gun's barrel. In addition, squibs and controlled explosives would simulate bullets hitting the ground or other people, often sending up a scatter of dirt. When characters were shot, actors would imitate death, usually by

clutching their supposed wound and collapsing. Sound effects might also be added on to simulate gunfire, explosions, impacts, and screams. These effects would also be applied to scenes with horses, arrows, trains, etc., creating a consistent visual vocabulary for audiences to understand each scene's details. Essentially, violence within *Bonanza*, and to a larger extent, TV westerns, was derived from the violence embedded within the genre. A holdover of cinematic westerns, violence was used to portray the harsh reality of the western frontier, to envision the mythos of the Wild West, and to enforce cultural idea that the outlaws, bandits, and other criminals that targeted innocents should be punished for their crimes. Graphic violence was emboldened by the necessity of gunfire and death, while narrative violence came to terms with legitimizing violence to tell each episode's story.

The Arrival of Colorized TV Westerns

While *Bonanza* followed the genre style of the western, there were several differences that made the show stand out from its main competitors, *Gunsmoke* and *The Rifleman*. The first and perhaps most obvious, was the introduction of color. Most westerns (and much of TV itself) were still airing episodes in black and white, and most American households had not made the conversion to new color televisions.¹¹ *Bonanza* was leveraged by NBC and RKO as a marketing tool for the invention of color TV, and the difference color made was clear. Like the transition from silent film to sound film, color revolutionized television. For the western in particular, the spirit of the western frontier was made all the more real, as mountains glowed white, horses varied in shades of color, and people populated towns and cities filled with the full scope of the color palate. Every outfit was detailed, the sunsets could capture a radiant glow, wide open

¹¹ It is important to note that while *Bonanza* was the first color TV western, it was not the first color western. Color western films had been around for several years, and audiences were generally accustomed to both the genre and the impact of color on the genre. The first color western film was *Wanderer of the Wasteland* from Paramount Pictures, circa 1924, and has since been lost.

expanses looked natural and realistic, and the hustle and bustle of the Ponderosa ranch was that much more energized.

As for the violence within *Bonanza*, the color was particularly effective within the genre and the show's storylines. Guns fired with the classic smoke effect, but now the smoke was a crisp white, the sound of the gun echoed, and the victim of the gunshot would display a small splotch of blood, in addition to the fatality being blown back by the bullet. Color's enhancement provided a new visceral reality to the violence, most prominently with blood, explosions, and gunfire, and *Bonanza* actively leveraged this in their marketing. For example, in the show's pilot episode, "A Rose for Lotta," a closing message at the end of the show specifically thanks the audience for watching one of the first shows to be broadcast in color.

As for the nature of the violence, *Bonanza* recalls familiar tropes in the western genre. The family, the outlaws, the law, and civilians all live and die in the same western frontier. The Ponderosa ranch is a wide expanse, Virginia City is the archetype of the western outpost, and the surrounding deserts and plains of the Lake Tahoe region set the scene for spats between sheriffs and bandits, cowboys and Indians, and townsfolk and their aggressors. These conflicts manifested themselves in the show's episodes, each with a flair for storylines and themes endemic to the western genre. For example, the pilot episode, "A Rose for Lotta," primarily revolved around a group of conspiring politicians and businessmen hiring an actress to lure one of the Cartwrights into Virginia City. From there, he would subsequently be held at ransom for the rights to the lumber on the Ponderosa Ranch. Corrupt politicians and businessmen aside, the episode also featured the tropes of the seductress and the hired henchmen. This is further prodded by the clear differences of opinions within the Cartwright family, resulting in a fistfight between the brothers within the first five minutes of the show. From then on, the violence is

relegated to another showdown between Little Joe and two henchmen trying to kidnap him, said henchman and a bunch of Chinese workers (The henchmen had started a fire that burned down one of the Chinese worker's tents. This promptly leads to the entire workcamp ganging up on the henchmen, who had already harassed and caused a disturbance looking for Joe Cartwright.), and a quick draw between Ben and a hired bodyguard, resulting in the bodyguard being shot after a flurry of insults and threats. The gun's smoke rising from the barrel contributes another classic trait of the genre (See Figure 1). However, while the round of fistfights in the show is nothing particularly revolutionary, the sheer amount of people involved with the mob fight as well as the burning tent in the background are vividly displayed in vibrant colors that amplify the nature of revenge justice.



Figure 1: Adam shoots a bodyguard. - *Bonanza*, "A Rose for Lotta"

By *Bonanza*'s fourth episode, "The Paiute War," the show drastically raises the scale for violence on its program, helped by color and a strong plot. A trader looking for malicious revenge, frames Adam Cartwright for the assault of two Native American women. The situation quickly grows out of hand, and by the end of it, two armies are fighting a skirmish. The final combat sequence is long, special effects heavy, and filled with a litany of deaths. First, there is a confrontation of Virginia City's militia and the Paiute Tribe, in which the leaders of the two sides try to come to an agreement regarding the assault of the two women. While the leaders negotiate, the rest of their forces are perched precariously behind rocks, bushes, and other natural

barriers, aiming rifles at one another. However, when the malicious trader (who started the whole mess) takes the opportunity to kill an Indian, he starts a chain reaction that leaves dozens dead. Each side fires their rifles at each other, with scores of men being killed and small splotches of blood appearing on each victim's wound. By the time the whole ordeal is over, the militia has retreated back to town, and Adam is captured by the Paiute Tribe. The next scene shows the extent of the injuries inflicted on the militia, as men are set up in a makeshift hospital. All of the men onscreen have some sort of injury, are covered in bandages, or are assisting in the medical care given.

After a discussion, the two parties agree to meet once again to exchange for Adam, this time with the Paiute Tribe confronting the U.S. Cavalry. The moments are a measure of calm and tension, as the Paiute warriors gather their rifles and set up locations all around the rocky plateau. The U.S. Cavalry, on the other hand, prepares several cannons and sends a main contingency of their soldiers on foot towards the meeting. Adam, who has been held up at this point, manages to escape captivity and runs for the middle of the field, with the son of the Paiute Tribe's chief chasing after him. Adam reaches a rock and attempts to warn the U.S. Cavalry about the trader's lies, but is tackled by the chief's son. Seeing this, the trader, who is traveling with the cavalry, opens fire and kills the chief's son. All hell breaks loose. The Paiute warriors open fire, and the U.S. Cavalry responds; the outcome is fairly similar to the last confrontation, with dozens dying from rifle fire, keeling over as they are shot and red blood seeps from their mortal wounds. However, the introduction of the cannon completely changes the balance of power, as it fires several shots, each with a dramatic special effect. The cannons fire, the shots land in a blaze of yellow and white fire that changes the color scheme of the screen, and several Paiute warriors are blown away and killed. This continues for several minutes, while Adam confronts the trader, and

kills him with a knife throw to the chest. The knife protrudes for a couple of seconds, before the man falls, dead.

What is evident after this confrontation is the sheer number of dead, which is commented upon by Ben Cartwright, the cavalry commander, and the Paiute Chief (see Figure 2). The somber notion of death for a prejudiced lie becomes clear, and the cavalry commander orders his lieutenant to tell the men of what had happened and why it had transpired, in a show of cynicism that hopes to prevent another tragedy. The cameras slowly pan over dozens of dead bodies from each side, and linger of the clear blood stains and signs of death, as the Paiute Chief and a shaman mourn over the chief's dead son. All of the cavalry pass by, as well as the Cartwrights, and the episode ends with the final image of a father grieving for his dead son and the slaughter of his people. With this, *Bonanza* begins to introduce the discussion of morality that appears in cinematic westerns.¹²



Figure 2: A U.S. Cavalry Commander observes the dead.
Bonanza, "The Paiute War"

Bonanza also diverges, along with most TV westerns, in how the genre was adapted to television. Typically, western films seek a conclusion, in which the hero conquers the villain, justice is served by those wronged onto the perpetrators, or the heroes ride off into the sunset. This is primarily why cinematic western

¹² Film examples include *How the West was Won*, *True Grit*, *The Magnificent Seven*, *Once Upon a Time in the West*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and *Unforgiven*. Violence was questioned in its usage against individuals, even in supposedly clear-cut moral cases. In addition, its effect on the protagonists was also probed.

sequels are incredibly rare; the story is designed to be resolved with few loose ends. TV however, changed that. The TV western needed to be a weekly installment, and could not have a definite end. The stagecoach couldn't reach its destination, John Wayne couldn't have a monologue about the dying west, and Clint Eastwood wouldn't have the climatic showdown only to disappear. All of the typical endings of the western, made famous by John Ford and Sergio Leone could not be employed.¹³ TV westerns utilized a more episodic and serial nature; the main characters must be available for the next episode. This is primarily reflected in *Bonanza's* cast and characters. While *Bonanza* retained the classic family dynamic, it also included a rotating host of guest stars and recurring characters, all of which expanded on *Bonanza's* story and refined character and world building. The main force of the Cartwright family, Sheriff Roy Coffee, Hop Sing, and "Candy" Canaday remained central figures throughout the show, while guest stars laid the foundation for each episode's new crisis to be solved. Driven by the necessity of TV's format, this format was common for most TV westerns, and became standard procedure for productions of westerns.

As the series progressed, what emerged clearly and consistently was the usage of violence primarily as one of moral consequence and genre fulfillment. Episode after episode of *Bonanza* parried back and forth between seemingly mundane episodes about digging wells, climbing mountains, and driving cattle to action-filled western tropes of saving damsels in distress, gang raids on the Ponderosa Ranch, conflicts between Native Americans, the U.S.

¹³ Western films are a key contrast to western TV. The episodic nature of TV heralds that the main characters in the western could not be eliminated, killed, or otherwise rendered unusable for future episodes. That meant that plotlines could not have tremendously detrimental effects on the main characters, and *Bonanza's* usage of guest stars helped to pivot the violence and disposability onto characters that could be shifted out with regularity. The western film didn't have the luxury of being a serial, and this often meant that any manner of violence and characterization had to be rapidly built into the characters, whether they died or were heavily injured. Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* or Henry Hathaway's *True Grit* are the best examples of this. TV shows last for seasons, movies last for three hours.

Army/Cavalry, and the people caught in between, and the abundance of jailbreaks, bounty hunters, and mysterious outlaws. Yet, throughout all the change in cast, technology, and the show's rise to the top of the ratings, *Bonanza* still kept the similar stirrings of the western on TV. Blood was rarely seen, the good guy always triumphed over the bad, and violence was always reserved for the justified or acted upon as vengeance. Gunfights were as plentiful as the horses and the western landscape, and even with the usage of more advanced weapons such as the Gatling gun, the same smokescreen effect and classic ricochets were synchronized to a much tamer death rate. *Bonanza* fulfilled the genre expectations of the western of the time, complicated by the burgeoning myth that was the Wild West. Violence in the western served a different purpose than that of a crime drama, a sitcom, or a war drama.

Violence, as John Cawelti described it, was determined for a different cause: "In the Western violence is characteristically the hero's means of resolving the conflict generated by his adversary" (Cawelti, 12). In *Bonanza*, and like many other westerns in TV, radio, and film, the family of the Cartwrights became the recurring heroes of the story, the shining knights in armor protecting righteousness and justice in the face of a lawless west, miles away from major civilization centers. All of their adventures were the epitome of the continual hero, never subject to the problems of the film or radio format, broadcast weekly in their adventures in which they were portrayed, with their faults and all, consistently as the ideal men of the western frontier. The gunfights, the fistfights, and the constant pursuit of justice was combined with the particulars of making ends meet, handling the seasons and demands of farming, and maintaining the connection of friendly hostility. In this regard, *Bonanza's* level of violence conformed to the genre's expectations and TV's limits, as well as brightening its scope week to week with a new

adventure by the Cartwright family, working within the law and the moral boundaries of their time to popularize, once again, the western myth.

The Moral Status of Legitimate Violence

TV westerns were one of the most popular genres of American media during this time, and because of its mass appeal and large audience, were subsequently placed under scrutiny by critics of violent content. The western symbolized the corrupting influence of television, complete with gunfights, fistfights, immoral characters, and the exuberance of the wild west archetypes. The weekly format only made this criticism more evident to the genre's opponents, as repeated exposure week after week constituted a tradition of viewing violence. Much like animated cartoons to follow in the 1970s and 1980s, the TV western was a hotbed for the recurring protest of protecting the children, who made up the largest audience demographic for westerns such as *The Lone Ranger*. *Bonanza* and other westerns would receive the same treatment as before.

But this raises the question of why the violence was acceptable in the first place, and to such a degree that every network had several major western shows during the early 1950s and 1960s. Primetime was filled with everything from *Gunsmoke* and *The Maverick* to *Have Gun, Will Travel* and *Rawhide*.¹⁴ That much content, in terms of a genre that generally considered violence as part of its DNA, surprisingly also became a safe bet with networks for garnering viewers and sponsors. What seemed to emerge in showcasing violence was a general trend of dividing the lines between legitimate violence and illegitimate violence. Legitimate violence would be the suggestion that violence enacted onscreen was justified. This appeared in many of

¹⁴ In 1959 alone, 26 westerns were slotted for primetime, and a general transition from half-hour serials to hour-long dramas led to a general decline in the number of new westerns. Still, every season had a newcomer at the plate.

the older westerns as the “mythical code of the west,” the ideal between lawmen and outlaws. As the western evolved with newer interpretations of the genre, more “new wave” westerns emerged in *Maverick*, *Sugarfoot*, and *Have Gun, Will Travel*, all of which emphasized that even with new anti-heroes, flawed motivations, and mercenaries, the western ideal was that violence was only enacted upon with the aim of self-defense, defense of the righteous, and the elimination of evildoers.¹⁵ Other shows like *Zorro* and *Wagon Train* also epitomized this, albeit in their more different scenarios.¹⁶

Bonanza pretty much follows in these familiar lines of moralizing violence, with legitimacy given to those who defend innocents, to those who seek vengeance for wrongdoing inflicted upon them, and to those who seek to use violence only when forced to, when other options no longer exist. Such is the case in every episode of *Bonanza*, when Joe shoots a man to stop him from killing anyone, but doesn’t aim for a killshot and lets the man live,¹⁷ when Hoss and Ben rob a bank to defend a depositor who is being foreclosed upon,¹⁸ and when Joe pursues a killer who used a legal loophole to get out of jail.¹⁹ *Bonanza* echoes similar ideas that violence, especially when used against those who commit unlawful acts and seek to harm innocent people, is justified. Thus, the narrative function of *Bonanza*’s violence remarks of similar themes from early westerns, both on TV and film. *Bonanza* also addresses illegitimate violence, such as the tragic deaths of soldiers in a skirmish between the U.S. Cavalry and the Paiute Tribe, all of

¹⁵ *Maverick*’s anti-heroes in the Maverick brothers traveled as playboys, con men, and pranksters, who came to the rallying defense of underdogs like Robin Hood. *Sugarfoot* featured Tom Brewster, who resolved to avoid violence as much as possible, and relied on his charm and wit to solve disputes. *Have Gun, Will Travel* revolved around Paladin, a mercenary with little redeemable qualities, who just happened to be hired for good causes.

¹⁶ *Zorro* revolved around Don Diego’s exploits of heroism in Spanish California, while *Wagon Train* starred the adventures of western adventurers leading pioneers across the Midwest.

¹⁷ “A Rose for Lotta” – Season 1, Episode 1

¹⁸ “Bank Run” – Season 2, Episode 19

¹⁹ “The Last Haircut” – Season 4, Episode 19

whom died in a struggle that was caused by a man who assaulted Paiute women and used his own bloodlust to kill more natives. In this context, illegitimate violence is addressed in a more mournful manner, as the search for meaning and significance runs dry and the tragic deaths are shown onscreen as being all for naught. While not uncommon for westerns to approach such topics, the widespread popularity of *Bonanza* made its approach to justifying righteous violence and attacking unlawful violence all the more important for the evolution of the genre and discussions about the nature of violence on television.

In addition, *Bonanza* readily complied with the western's characterization of the hero figure, a reflection of U.S. culture embedded in the western mythology, and regularly valorized violence through its legitimacy, episode to episode. It can be said that the members of the Cartwright family were akin to the heroes in *Gunsmoke* and *The Rifleman* and held the attitude composition of the town's defenders in *The Magnificent Seven*. Their primary feature was that they were a family that stuck together through strife and disagreement, always abiding to the moral codes of self-defense, defense of the innocent, and the protection of one's blood against aggression. In this light, the violence exhibited by the Cartwrights mirror the western hero: "The hero rarely engages in violence until the last moment and he never kills until the savage's gun has already cleared his holster" (Cawelti, 40). This is further emphasized by the audience's detachment to the men killed by the heroes, the lack of characterization given to them for their motives. They are the faceless outlaws, that are characterized simply by their actions, rather than motive or deeper backgrounds. Thus, when they are cut down by Joe, Ben, Adam, or Hoss, the audience is inferring that their act of violence is legitimate, mainly because of the show's (and the genre's) portrayal of the villainous outlaws as such. Furthermore, this legitimization of violence was foregrounded by the nature of *Bonanza's* family dynamic. The family is as much a

central aspect of American society, and the western, typically devoid of families as the central characters, championed this within *Bonanza*. The Cartwrights, it seemed, represented a subtle mix of both the western's masculine and violent appeal, and the promise of American cultural values of moral imposition and just deliverance: "the series emphasized human concern and charity. If in concept the family was the primary social unit of mutual support and shared love, *Bonanza* accentuated the fact that even in times of great challenge, humane interests were critical to lasting, effective social values" (MacDonald, 98). Violence, if utilized to defend the family, to defend one's values, and to defend one's livelihood, was a matter of application and principle, rather than right or wrong.

It becomes clear that *Bonanza's* family story of the west utilized violence in a manner of attraction and justification. With color, special and practical effects, and a rotation of guest stars, *Bonanza* treated graphic violence as an enhancer of its storylines, maintaining the core element of the family amidst all the violence of their surroundings. With narrative violence, *Bonanza* walked a fine line between inclusion within the story for attraction and inclusion for larger themes and ideas. The legitimacy of violence, inflicted and received, becomes paramount to describing violence, and supersedes notions of moral conflict, ambiguity, and complex storytelling. The western was a genre of violence, but until the rise of neo-westerns and darker themes beyond the 1960s, it was one of a guaranteed ending, where good triumphed over evil.

II. The Intervening Years: 1960s – 1980s

The TV Violence Question in War Dramas

The roots of the portrayal of violence on American television persist in three major genres: the western, the police drama/procedural, and the combat drama. We'll examine the combat drama here. In Anna Froula and Stacy Takacs's *American Militarism on the Small Screen*, Froula and Takacs collected an anthology of essays on the portrayal of the United States military on television. Their introduction highlights the transition of the United States military from film to television, primarily through the World War II combat film defined by Jeannine Basinger. Basinger's tropes of the father figure hero, the melting pot squad, national identity, and duty before anything else dominated most war TV programs up until the late 1990s and early 2000s, when *War and Remembrance*, *Band of Brothers*, and *Generation Kill* challenged these notions. The other important theory with regards to TV's depiction of war is Guy Westwell sees of Hollywood's justification for war, which primarily consists of crafting a national identity of its participants and labeling the enemy as an alienated other. There are four primary types of war shows: the war sitcom (*Hogan's Heroes*), the command drama (*Twelve O'Clock High*), the combat program (*Baa Black Sheep*), and the hybrid (*M*A*S*H*), which mixed elements of various genres together to depict war. Naturally, the level of violence, simulated, off-screen, or described was often a hard sell to advertisers and general audiences; the result was that most TV shows on war were targeted towards niche audiences.

A. Bowdoin Van Riper's "Baa Baa Black Sheep and the Last Stand of the WWII Drama" chronicles the ill-fated *Baa Baa Black Sheep* (1976 – 1978), NBC's attempt at reviving the combat drama in 1976. Lasting for only two seasons, *Baa Baa Black Sheep* told the exploits of American pilots during the battles for the Solomon Islands. Based on the real Black Sheep

squadron, the show was realistic for its time, and was geographically and chronologically accurate. Riper would describe it as a blended form of an “illusion of reality,” simulating combat through a mixture of newsreels from WWII, filmed scenes, and special effects. In this, the portrayal of war reached a somewhat realistic notion, with transitional shots from gunfire from a fighter’s cannons switching to historical footage that captured a supposed shoot down of a Japanese fighter. Despite the promise of the show’s production values and the tried-but-true genre of the combat drama, audiences were likely fatigued from coverage of the Vietnam War, and *Baa Baa Black Sheep* suffered. The volatile mix of reality and fiction almost mirrored images of air combat over Vietnam, and the combat drama reignited topics of war that the populace was unwilling to venture through again. In addition, Riper describes the persistence of death throughout the show: “Hutch is the only member of the central cast killed in the course of the series, but guest characters and (generally unnamed) members of the squadron die with surprising regularity. These losses, and the emotional toll they take on the surviving Black Sheep, account for the grimness that often pervades Boyington’s voiceover narration” (Froula and Takacs, 87). Naturally, the type of regularly occurring death just one year after the conclusion of the Vietnam War was ostracizing potential members of its niche audience.

*M*A*S*H* (1972 – 1983) is perhaps the most famous of the combat dramas, embracing its focus on the Korean War (and lasting way longer than said war), attracting large audiences during its run and 125 million for its series finale. Its focus was on that of the medics and doctors at a United States Army Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) away from the frontlines, and portrayed war’s effects and consequences rather than war itself. Exploring a variety of characters, the show analyzed the lingering pains of war in mental and physical wounds, as well as the toll the war took on medics treating the injuries soldiers received at the front. The show

notably started off a comedy, without a laugh track, and gradually shifted its tone towards that of a drama with comedy, commenting on the act of war and those caught within it during discussion of the Vietnam War in the cultural context. Episodic and plot-driven, *M*A*S*H* utilized violence to project its moral undertones, to start conversations about the effects of war and its primary motivations, and to endanger the consequences war had on the soldiers involved in fighting them. Castleman and Podrazik explain the program's effectiveness the best: "With such powerful descriptions, complex characters, and the very real terror of dealing so closely and continuously with death, *M*A*S*H* became one of the best sitcom-drama combinations ever on television" (235).

Both *Baa Baa Black Sheep* and *M*A*S*H* represent the evolutionary change of the depiction of violence within the war genre, which surprisingly changed little over the course of the 20th century. Violence is used to set the tone of each show; enough violence is used to advance the plot, characterization, and necessary stylistic elements. Violence is not used constantly; the same could not be said of war dramas to follow. The war genre itself is a mixed bag with regards towards TV violence, ranging from completely absent to horrifically graphic, but each instance of violence is used purposefully for the telling of the most violent of human actions.

The 1980s Action Extravaganza: Guns, Cars, and Explosions

With the familiar drumming and blaring tone of brass instruments, *The A-Team* (1983 – 1987) blares its way onto the screen with a cornucopia intro sequence, complete with gunfights, fistfights, car crashes, helicopter maneuvers, and of course, explosions. Nothing perfectly captures the trend of 1980s television than *The A-Team*, which symbolized the expanding budget and production capabilities of television, combining film cameras and production values to craft

engaging dramas and action-adventures. Aside from sitcoms like *Cheers* and dramas like *Dallas* and *Hill Street Blues*, action-oriented shows dominated the airwaves and pop culture. Building off from similar action shows of the 1970s such as *Charlie's Angels*, *Wonder Woman*, and *Hawaii Five-O*, the action-adventure genre rolled off the production line on every network, and encroached on primetime. *Miami Vice*, *Magnum, P.I.*, *MacGyver*, *Knight Rider*, and *The A-Team* represented the best of the trend, and brought networks large ratings, explosive entertainment, and plenty of advertising revenue. Gunfights, car crashes, explosions, helicopters, and masculinity dominated the television landscape as much as the action movie dominated theaters. Developments in TV technology and budgets increases allowed for large multicamera shots and sequences, of which car chases became increasingly popular. In addition, action TV took a more international approach, as storylines and characters travelled across the world with each episode, from *The A-Team* and *MacGyver* travelling the globe, *Magnum, P.I.* doing investigative work in Hawaii, *Miami Vice* finding splendor in the booming metropolis of Florida, and *CHiPs* focusing on the highways of the Southern California. All in all, action TV in the 1980s was a product of its era. The Reagan era and heightening tensions of the Cold War, innovations in electronics, cars, and American capital, the excess of Wall Street, and the general enthusiasm for escapist entertainment fed into the creation of action TV. This action TV in turn normalized the escapist entertainment, complete with morally bound heroes, death-defying stunts, and a penchant for pure adrenaline over realism. Violence, was once again a side effect of the plot, but nevertheless integral to these types of programs and their stories.

Focusing on the extravaganza of violence and action of 1980s action TV warrants a dissection of the practical and special effects themselves, as well as their Hollywood counterparts. *Charlie's Angels* and *Wonder Woman* gave producers a lesson that pure, escapist

entertainment, combined with beautiful lead actresses and a penchant for practical effects could lead to ratings gold. With 1980s action TV, the script flipped with the American consciousness and return to conservative principles, featuring masculine and morally unambiguous heroes. The bad guys were the bad guys, and the good guys were destined to save the day. Eccentric personalities, individual faults and fears, and nifty quirks mattered little if the characters were morally good and represented law and order. For example, one of the most common tropes with TV heroes was that “they waived the fee if you were broke but had a truly hopeless cause” (Castleman and Podrazik, 311).

Such is the case of the A-Team, composed of four special forces veterans of the Vietnam war falsely court-martialed for a crime, who then broke out of military prison. These four, composed of Colonel John “Hannibal” Smith (George Peppard), Captain H.M. “Howling Mad” Murdock (Dwight Schultz), Sergeant B.A. “Bad Attitude” Baracus (Mr. T), and Lieutenant Templeton “Face” Peckman (Dirk Benedict), made the A-Team and gave their services as soldiers of fortune for any number of exaggerated, impossible, and suicidal missions. The key formula of the show was built around this premise and the interactions and quirks of the main characters, along with a healthy dose of gunfights, car crashes, and explosions that always left the heroes unharmed. Exaggeration and hyperbole was the draw of the show, whose heroic antics attracted NBC’s first hit in years, and became emblematic of escapist 1980s action TV.

Audiences kept coming back week after week, despite the fact that the same basic plot was used for every episode with variation: the A-Team must take on an impossible mission, used gadgets, weapons, and their surroundings to complete their task, and culminating in a big action finale followed by Hannibal uttering “I love it when a plan comes together”. After all, you needed a catchphrase in every action movie, so why not TV? This idea of the moralistic heroes, soldiers,

cops, and special agents took hold in the 1980s during the midst of the Cold War, and became characteristic of popular TV and film. Add in the plenty of action entertainment and escapism from the daily news, and the action genre became a sure shot ratings victory. Violence in this corner of mainstream television was more fluff than substance, more explosive than its effect, and much simpler than what was to follow. Clear lines of morality, the triumph of the heroes, and the defense of the innocent now came with machine guns and helicopters, rather than just horses and revolvers.

III. Countering the Action Extravaganza with Nuclear Fire in *The Day After*

The Day After was not the first media depiction of nuclear warfare, nor was it the last.²⁰ By contemporary standards, the special effects are nothing special, and many productions since have portrayed nuclear war in a more horrific fashion. But what director Nicholas Meyer and writer Edward Hume's *The Day After* represents is a case of thermonuclear war broadcast on television to the American public at the height of increasing tensions in the Cold War, unprecedented in its mass audience.²¹ In the case of *The Day After* (1983), Alfred Schneider,²² director of ABC's Broadcasting and Standards Department, dealt with the broadcast of a TV movie imagining a nuclear attack on Lawrence, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri, and the devastating aftermath. The violence featured everything from nuclear vaporization, a war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and the aftermath of nuclear radiation and a blackened wasteland. Garnering over 100 million viewers with its premiere, sparking a national discussion on nuclear war, and winning two Emmys, *The Day After* had a tremendous impact on the TV industry and US society. Schneider and his team (Bret White, Tom Kersey, Brandon Stoddard, Stu Samuels, Steve White) set the limits for the film's production and its broadcast. The task at hand was to broadcast a drama that didn't make a political statement on nuclear deterrence or proliferation, but rather to focus on the effects that such weapons could have on the lives of Americans. While it was inevitable that political motives and rhetoric would be deployed against the film, it ultimately succeeded at portraying the devastation of nuclear warfare on average Americans. Schneider and his team faced the following question: "How were we to present a program that would deal with death, devastation, vaporizing of human beings, firestorms, burnt

²⁰ *The Day After* premiered on ABC on November 20, 1983.

²¹ Reportedly, ratings place total American viewership during *The Day After*'s premiere at over 100 million people in 39 million households. It remains the highest rated TV movie of all time.

²² Head of ABC's Broadcasting Standards and Practices Department – 1960 to 1990.

flesh, miles of hospital cots, misery, frustration, stillness, darkness and apathy, and loss of friends, family, countrymen, without making a statement?" (Schneider, 59).

The centerpiece of the film was the depiction of the nuclear attack itself. While the more gruesome and horrendous depictions of nuclear ICBMs detonating in Lawrence and Kansas City were cut²³, there remained a clear five-minute sequence of death and destruction. Kathy Stephens's²⁴ editing report detailed Dr. Harold Brode's reaction to the initial script's segment on the attack:²⁵

He gave general notes on the depiction of the blast itself: the flash would be brighter than anything conceived, stronger than the sun. the first reaction would be to turn away from it, to somehow duck. The light so intense, it causes everything to smoke, even metal. This creates clouds of dust and fine particles. He envisioned an effect such as the screen going pure white, totally overexposed, then fading back into an image. It would be edifying to have more than one blast, as multiple blast problems would be clearer to understand. (Schneider, 61)

Meyer's final incarnation of the film was similar: nuclear missiles launch from silos in the Kansas countryside as soldiers helplessly watch and confirm the nuclear attack. A mass panic erupts as people realize an attack is coming; people run in all directions looking for shelter, cars crash into each other in the street, and car horns, screams, and air sirens wail as people flee the city. An initial detonation occurs high in the sky, sending an electromagnetic pulse sending all electric devices to a standstill. A brief moment of silence grips the city; the people fleeing the

²³ The film took a middle ground approach to the depiction of the devastation following a nuclear attack. Survivors should be present, and while some effects were dramatized (the EMP), others were reduced (the impact of the fallout, the incineration of everything, including rubble, little sunlight due to dust and ash).

²⁴ ABC Editor

²⁵ A scientific consultant hired for the film's production. Brode consulted on the portrayal of nuclear detonation.

city in their cars try to restart the cars, and some try their luck at running away from them. Others, who are still unaware of the incoming attack, go about their day: nurses treat people in a hospital, a teacher continues teaching a classroom of students, and moviegoers are distracted by the silver screen. This is interrupted by a power blackout across the region, and darkness envelops all of those inside buildings. Then the missiles detonate. A white flash fills the screen. One giant black mushroom cloud erupts in the glow of hazy orange and yellow sky, slowly rising into a towering behemoth over the Kansas countryside. A sequence of bright flashing lights fills the screen, perfect white, abyss black, and a horrendous shade of orange illuminating the sky. People are vaporized to shadows with burning hues of red, yellow, orange, and a quick flash of the black outline of their skeletons, and this occurs over and over, each flash quickening in its pace. People inside rush and clamor against each other in a mad dash for cover. A second mushroom cloud emerges alongside the first. The endless destruction of buildings hits with a daunting echo in a sealed chamber, as buildings burn, implode, and are struck with a force greater than a rampaging mountain. Some buildings are incinerated in seconds, others break apart as if a giant wrecking ball were to smash through them. All the while, a horrid sound fills the air, a mixture of screams, explosions, and the screech of the missile. One man attempts to hide in his car, several are depicted running away from the blast only to become vaporized. A boy becomes blinded by the explosion as his father tackles him to the ground, a family is consumed by flames, and another man jumps into a bar for cover as the shockwave hits. The shockwave of the blast continues, almost rising through the air like a tsunami of ash, pushing

aside all resistance in its path. Fires erupt everywhere in its path, and the screen fades to black (See Figure 3).

What follows this is the slow decay of multiple characters, some from radiation sickness, some from sheer desperation, others from the lawlessness of the radioactive wasteland. The immediate image is the devastation that remains from the blasts, with rubble all around and a constant influx of gray ash raining from the sky. The sunlight is marred in a desaturated tint, filling the landscape with the remnant of nuclear fallout and human misery. Rubble remains all around, animals and humans lay dead everywhere (if they weren't vaporized, radiation slowly killed them), and a thick blanket of ash lays across everything in sight. Sheer hopelessness is codified by empty airwaves, the constant ticking of a Geiger counter, and the absence of the Kansas City skyline. From here on, *The Day After* doesn't portray any physical violence (aside from the murder of a man and a firing squad execution), but uses the rest of the film to portray the horrific aftermath of nuclear war. In this treatment of violence, what becomes highlighted is the remainders of war, and the imagination is intensified by the portrayal of war on average Americans.²⁶



Figure 3: The first nuclear ICBM detonates over Lawrence and Kansas City. - *The Day After*

²⁶ Prior to the September 11 Attacks, the last major act of war on American soil was the Japanese Navy's pre-emptive strike on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii in 1941.

The film's graphic violence was going to have to be addressed in some form. The biggest concern was that of the emotional reactions of the public and the effects on children watching the film. Schneider and the ABC BS&P team came up with the repeated use of warnings and an ABC News *Viewpoint* special following *The Day After*'s broadcast.²⁷ Moderated by Ted Koppel, the special featured a panel including Henry Kissinger, William F. Buckley Jr., Robert S. McNamara, Carl Sagan, Elie Wiesel, and a short interview with current Secretary of State George Shultz in the Reagan Administration, with discussion centered around the politics concerning nuclear weapons. *The Day After*'s controversy also led to a drop in advertising sales for a total of \$9 million by the time of broadcast. Only two ad spaces were utilized during the film's broadcast,²⁸ and as a whole, advertisers generally avoided the film due to its subject matter and possible political affiliations. It didn't help that numerous political organizations protested the film's premiere and advocated boycotts of advertisers associated with the film.²⁹ Nevertheless, viewer reaction was generally positive: "The first indication of viewer reaction came from telephone calls. New York and Los Angeles tallied 6,634 calls after the telecast. Positive calls out weighed negative ones three to one" (Schneider, 66). The reaction of the general public had been worried over by critics and organizations, with frequent focus on children's viewing and discussion about the film. ABC's *Viewpoint* special, as well as its various disclaimers, 1-800 lines for therapeutic help, and general assertion that no one should watch the film alone anticipated the public's reaction. The short-term effect was a populace more aware of

²⁷ The parental advisory: "Because the graphic depiction of the effects of a nuclear war may not be suitable for young viewers, parental discretion is advised." This was played numerous times throughout the broadcast, and highlighted before the nuclear attack sequence. In addition, an initial introduction to the broadcast of *The Day After* included a discussion on what the audience was about to watch.

²⁸ These ads were only used prior to the nuclear missile launch (Niccum, 1).

²⁹ According to Tom Shales of The Washington Post, High Frontier objected to the characterization that the U.S. might have launched the missiles first, and Nuclear Energy Inc. said that a compiled list of advertisers during the movie would be subject to 'negative publicity' (Shales, 1).

the consequences of the tensions between the world's two superpowers. The effect was a new understanding of the Cold War, one marked by nuclear disarmament, where the use of nuclear weapons represented not only a last resort move, but the end of civilization. Such a disposition supposedly had an impact on President Ronald Reagan, who was deeply affected by the film.³⁰ It seemed appropriate that *The Day After* would air to its audience a tale of death and destruction following nuclear Armageddon after a buildup of tensions in the Cold War,³¹ bringing to life the fact that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were nothing compared to the power of Minuteman II ICBMs.

Politics, Peace, and the Pursuit of Narrative Tolls

For all the effort made by the team behind *The Day After*'s broadcast to keep politics out of the program, it was inevitable that a film about mutually assured destruction would provoke political discussions across the country. Multiple perspectives emerged from the film's viewing, the most common being a fable of suing for peace in an age where humanity had the power to destroy itself, or that of propaganda (Republican, Democratic, Russian, etc.). Ultimately, *The Day After*'s issue with its violent apocalyptic nature coincided with its method of storytelling, in that the film's graphic death and destruction generated a narrative purpose of showing what people would do in nuclear wasteland and the power of educating through entertainment just how disastrous a nuclear war between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. could be.³² The plot of the film plays a central role in how the violence becomes part of the narrative for the average American citizens of Lawrence. Violence is not seen for the first half of the film. Instead, the main

³⁰ In his journal, Reagan wrote that "It is very effective and left me greatly depressed" (Niccum, 1).

³¹ In 1983, there were a number of incidents that heightened tensions in the Cold War. First was the announcement of SDI "Star Wars" program to counter ICBMs in March. Fast forward several months, and there was the Soviet shootdown of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 on Sep. 1, the Soviet early warning system false alarm on Sep. 26, and the Able Archer 83 wargames conducted by NATO (Nov. 7 – 11).

³² A BBC TV film, *Threads* (1984), also followed a similar premise, and expanded upon the long-term impacts of nuclear war on society and Earth.

characters that the story follows are introduced, and the audience is shown their daily lives. Tucked away in the background of these characters' lives are radio and TV broadcasts of escalation in Europe, starting primarily in the East Germany as Soviet forces are massed on the East Germany-West Germany border and around Berlin. After NATO and U.S. ultimatums to withdraw are ignored by the Warsaw Pact, small ground offensives begin with an attack on Berlin and all across the Rhine. This soon escalates through to air strikes across Germany, naval combat in the Persian Gulf, and the detonation of low-grade tactical nukes on Soviet forces crossing the Rhine. As more and more nukes are dropped, the situation rapidly deteriorates, as broadcast anchors, military personnel, and politicians hear breaking and conflicting information, before mass evacuations are ordered across the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Thus, the film seeks its portrayal of narrative-oriented violence through exterior means, utilizing world events as a backdrop for how escalation has occurred. In addition, this escalation is further portrayed through constant confusion, as the situation quickly becomes muddled and unclear once the war erupts. The film's war becomes vague and purposefully murky, and the question of who shot the missiles first is unanswered. All the audience knows by the halfway point of the film is that nuclear missiles have been fired en masse by everyone at everyone, and that the two missiles aimed at Lawrence and Kansas City are on their way.

When the actual nuclear explosion occurs, the story, both literally and figuratively, has reached its climax, and the aftermath imagines the consequences of the minutes of destruction for weeks to come. The slow radiological decay of the survivors of the nuclear blast is the narrative portrayal of the lasting damage of the blow of nuclear war; in essence, it is the consequence of the nuclear exchange, as the survivors must now carve out a living amongst the wasteland and the incoming nuclear winter. Those who perished in the initial blast are the lucky

ones at this rate. From here on, people slowly die to radiation and related ailments, looting and crime due to the collapse of government, and the imposition of a winner takes all mentality to the populace outside of the city centers (See Figure 4).



Figure 4: A makeshift hospital inside a stadium. – *The Day After*

In the end, when the President's broadcast is aired across the nation, stating a ceasefire between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. and the general threat that the U.S. will never surrender, there is a conclusion that the war's toll was not worth the price. Blame for the violence, still unclear, lingers at the heart of the President's declaration, which is

juxtaposed to the ruins of Kansas City, where rubble and corpses strewn across the screen for all to see. In the end, a final radio broadcast transmission is sent out, with a plea asking "Hello. Is anybody there? Anybody at all?" The film's fade to black at this point cements the total divestiture from the reality of the situation, and preempts that the narrative of the film is poised directly on the shoulders of one specific violent act that obliterated millions across the world. The question of who or what caused the nuclear exchange is no longer the focus; rather, the audience is subjected to the undaunting reminder that in the face of raining radioactive ash, blame isn't important anymore. The act of violence doesn't matter, it's the consequences that do. We are left with the understanding that John Corry elegantly laid out: "The special quality of 'The Day After,' however, is its feeling of despair. No crops will grow in irradiated Kansas; the

farmland is covered with contaminated ash. Infants will be born deformed. Medicine has no cures. The world has been arrested, and continuity is gone” (Corry, 1).

The aftermath of *The Day After*'s broadcast was built upon weeks of hype and discussion about the film across mass media and represented a record-breaking critical success for ABC, despite the film's financial losses. The immediate response from critics was praise for the film's special effects and impact of the images of nuclear Armageddon. By this point, *TV Guide*, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications had covered the impending release of the film; by the next day, everyone across the country was covering it. The film supposedly affected the upper echelons of government as well, as Ronald Reagan cited the film's impact on him as devastating, and possibly leading towards his stance at deescalating nuclear conflict in international summits. The film was screened in 40 other countries afterwards, including a 1987 premiere in the U.S.S.R. (likely due to Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika). For the average American citizen however, the film's effect could broadly be seen as depressing and sobering. The possible end result of the Cold War's escalation was laid bare,³³ and it was not a pretty picture.

Even today, television centered around the 1980s have featured the film and its effects on their characters. In *The Goldbergs*,³⁴ *The Day After* is seen by the protagonist's brother Barry as a means to rebel against the wishes of their high school staff. Expecting a fun action film that he and his friends could make fun of, they are instead treated to the horrifying implications of the

³³ *The Day After* notes in the film's ending that the nuclear apocalypse unleashed upon the Earth would be even greater than depicted in the film, as the capacity of the world's nuclear weapons at the time would have been much more devastating.

³⁴ ABC Sitcom, 2013 – Present. Centers around the Goldberg family living in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania in the 1980s. “The Day After the Day After” (Season 4, Episode 22) focuses on the film viewing by the protagonist's father, brother, and his brother's friends, and the effect of the film on the populace of Jenkintown. The sideplot involves the protagonist and his sister feuding over their mother's favor and features the protagonist unaware of the film.

movie, with all of the teenagers becoming somber and terrified. The rest of the episode then features Barry's growing fascination with building a bunker to survive nuclear winter and his father's coming to terms with the possibility of the film's premise. In addition, outside of the family, the high school is filled with people upset about the film, and the school's assembly to help students cope ends with the school's guidance counselor cancelling the assembly as he realizes how frightening the film was.

In *The Americans*,³⁵ the film is viewed in "The Day After" and features many images from the film, including the viewer discretion warning prior to the film's broadcast. The subsequent effect of the film's viewing is explored, primarily through the main couple's daughter Paige, who is terrified by the images of nuclear holocaust and wonders if there is anything that can be done to stop it. In contrast, the two KGB agents Elizabeth and Philip question their own motives and their role in the film's fictional premise, as one of their contacts alerts them to the presence of a weaponized hemorrhagic virus in American labs. All of the major characters watch the film, including two resident spies in the Russian consulate, one of whom remarks with concern the similarity of *The Day After*'s premise with his knowledge of the Soviet nuclear false alarm incident of September 26, 1983.³⁶

³⁵ FX drama series, 2013 – 2018. Centers on two deep cover KGB agents, Elizabeth and Philip Jennings, living in the U.S. during the 1980s, working to balance their espionage activities for the USSR and maintain their cover amidst their two American-born children and their FBI agent neighbor. "The Day After" focuses on the film's viewing by the entire family and their neighbor, and the effect it has on their daughter Paige and Elizabeth and Philip's reasoning for their espionage.

³⁶ On September 26, 1983, Officer Stanislav Yevgrafovich Petrov of the Soviet Air Defense Forces was alerted by an early warning system of five U.S. Minutemen ICBMs heading towards Russia. Officer Petrov concluded that this was a false alarm (as a U.S. attack would likely utilize hundreds of nuclear missiles) and alerted his superiors of such. Further investigation revealed that the cause of the false alarm was a rare alignment of sunlight reflecting off the clouds giving the illusion of an ICBM's trajectory. Petrov has subsequently been dubbed "The Man Who Saved the World".

In a time when TV for the majority of the populace was the three big networks of ABC, NBC, and CBS, *The Day After* was a pivotal moment for American television, still holds the record for the largest TV movie ratings, and started a national debate about the Cold War's nuclear arsenal. The graphic level of violence depicted in the film's nuclear detonation sequence remains largely unparalleled for its mass audience and was cited as impressive for the time³⁷. In addition, the film's premise and nuclear violence was utilized in a manner that equipped both shock and awe and the motivations of character and story development. *The Day After* can be viewed in this context as a film that horrified millions, using this horror to tell a larger story about the consequences of war and aggression and start a discussion amongst its audience about the future of the Cold War. Carl Sagan summarized it best: The Cold War and nuclear-enabled mutually assured destruction was like two men in a room, waist high in gasoline, holding matches in an eternally dangerous standoff. *The Day After* was a prediction of the result.

In direct comparison to *Bonanza* and other westerns of the 1950s and 1960s, *The Day After* marks a stark contrast in both the advancement of graphic and narrative violence. Graphic violence was a natural upgrade since television from the 1960s, with the rise of early computer special effects and access to declassified nuclear bomb test footage. With the improvement of cameras and other recording equipment, as well as the quality of color broadcasts coupled with the wide access of television and the communal approach to family viewing helped propel the level of graphic violence into the American mainstream. However, the fundamental shift of narrative violence became cemented in *The Day After*'s treatment of nuclear war. Whereas westerns promoted moral routes of interpreting television violence, *The Day After* offered a

³⁷ Just a year ago, *Tron* was released by Disney in 1982, the first film to prominently feature computer graphic effects.

much more bleak and decisive role for violence's role within the story. Instead of just being a side effect of the show's plot and characters, the nuclear explosion within *The Day After* is the central focus of the show. The avenue of nuclear destruction instead acts as the main consequence, the primary driver of action, and the motivation for the development and treatment of the story to follow; without the pivotal scene, the movie would not have a central storyline to follow. In this regard, narrative violence has now shifted to a larger role within television narratives. This isn't only represented within *The Day After*. In general, television narratives experienced a shift in how narrative violence was employed and characterized throughout the 1980s. Shows like *Miami Vice* and *The A-Team* represented police and adventure genres where violence was the main motivator of episodic plotlines and helped to piece together longer story threads.

IV. The Intervening Years: 1990s – 2010s

From Three to 100: Cable TV

In the 1990s, cable television took off. While MSOs and cable had been around for decades,³⁸ cable channels and networks themselves were much smaller in number, and accounted for only about 20 channels towards the late end of the 1980s (Castleman and Podrazik, 296). However, out of these few channels emerged some of the most important cable networks, including CNN, MTV, ESPN, A&E, and Nickelodeon. By the 1990s though, cable television exploded as its access expanded across America, and “[by] 1995, cable reached 66.8 percent of U.S. homes, totaling over 64 million subscribers” (Hilmes, 357). The Cable Act of 1992 also reinforced old must-carry rules, put a cap on cable profiteering, and introduced “retransmission consent,” or “Broadcast stations in a local market could opt for either guaranteed automatic carriage status and instead bargain with cable operators for payment” (Hilmes, 353). In addition, MSOs began building control in the industry while media companies began a series of mergers that would dramatically increase with the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which deregulated the field and opened the gates for media conglomerates. What then, was the result of all of this?

What is clear is that the rise of media conglomerates and cable television has fostered larger budgets for television programs, but in a manner that has also expanded the amount of television programs themselves. Essentially, with cable television, the floodgates were opened to the amount of content that could be produced, and the niche markets of various audiences that became more and more fragmented over time. It became exceedingly rare for a television show

³⁸ MSOs or Multiple Systems Operators: Born out of cable systems operators, who ran cable through towns are charged a monthly fee for content, MSOs rose in the 1980s and started to claim the territories not yet managed by other telecommunications corporations.

to surpass 50 million viewers, and the Big Three Networks now had to compete with many more channels. However, with this audience fragmentation, a pathway for more unique and diverse content opened. Specific channels targeted specific audiences and their content reflected this strategy. ESPN, BET, Cartoon Network, MSNBC, Fox News, Discovery, and many others became indicative of the amount of choices now allotted for consumers, albeit for an extra fee of course. In addition, cable still held the primary advantage of a dual income basis; cable channels received income both through advertising commercials and viewer subscriptions.³⁹ Hendershot subsequently described the resulting dilemma for the regulation of content that “is paid for, does not use the spectrum, and is not required by law to operate in ‘the public interest, convenience, and necessity’” (24). Violent content on cable could now get away with a lot more in terms of graphic and narrative options than its network cousins.

The 1990s: Buffy, Walker, Mulder and Scully

The 1990s represented an expansion of relaxing standards with regards to violence on television, and it clearly showed in the type of content produced in the decade. A rapid expansion of shows where violence was central to the storyline emerged, with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Walker, Texas Ranger*, *The X-Files*, *Charmed*, *NYPD Blue*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Stargate SG-1*, and a whole plethora of shows all ramping up its portrayal of violence with the subsequent increase in the availability of computer graphics and quality special effects. The supernatural and fantasy genres of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess* remarked of a resurgence of their respective genres, as well as the validity of female action stars and protagonists championed by *Wonder Woman* and *Charlie’s Angels*. *Buffy* and *Xena*, in particular,

³⁹ In general, it may be important to note a shift in advertising on television as well, with the rising popularity of product placement, similar to the sponsorship era of television in the 1950s, and the infomercial, which directly sold consumers products through a hybrid advertisement/entertainment program (Hilmes, 342 – 343).

showcased extensive stunt work and choreography for its various hand-to-hand combat scenes and featured extensive usage of swords and wooden stakes. In contrast, police programs like *Walker, Texas Ranger*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Law and Order* featured an upgrade on the police procedurals and dramas of the past, with more brutal crime scenes, more exploration into the crime's effect on cops, criminals, and the victims, and the fights between police and their suspects. Furthermore, science fiction also featured a resurgence, as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Stargate SG-1*, and *The X-Files* featured more futuristic violence. *Star Trek* and *Stargate* frequently focused on war and special operations, complete with starship engagements, futuristic weapons, and plenty of alien races. Meanwhile, *The X-Files* took a different approach, using disturbing crimes scenes and supernatural phenomena as its twist on the police drama. Centered on FBI Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, the show was inspired by anthology series like *The Twilight Zone* and *Tales from the Darkside*, and featured an exploration of crime scenes and events surrounded by conspiracies, supernatural elements, and the presence of extraterrestrials. Violence in this regard, became more psychological and after-the-fact, messing with the mindsets of the lead investigators and traveling the lines of horror television. Profoundly influential, its format and approach to violence and crime would be replicated in future shows like *Fringe* and *Supernatural*. Through these resurgent genres of television, violence now had more fantastical, more realistic, and more unique outlets to showcase special effects and how violence was becoming more and more central to the direction and stories of these programs.

Animated Violence

Animated violence is difficult to ascertain, due to the wide margins that encompass animated violence within television. For instance, children's programming, such as *Spongebob Squarepants*, *Codename: Kids Next Door*, and *The Powerpuff Girls* occupies a different zone

than that of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *South Park*, and *Samurai Jack*. There are several similarities with all animated violence however. For the majority of children's cartoons, violence inflicted upon individuals resonates with clear pain, but few lingering consequences. This is observed in the antics of *Tom and Jerry*, *Looney Tunes*, and *The Pink Panther*, where the main characters are frequently subject to being shot, smashed, crushed, broken, and all other manners of injury. Modern animation also presents this with *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Pokémon*, and *Spongebob Squarepants*, where the animated violence is often used for comedic purposes and is rarely inferred to be a more insidious act.

The same cannot be said of adult-oriented animation, where blood and gore may be observed in the aftermath of violence, and lingering effects such as broken bones and death may persist throughout the storyline of a show. This is best observed in *Samurai Jack*, where the titular character carves through his enemies (mostly robotic, until the fifth season), and permanent harm is inflicted upon the character by his enemies. In addition, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* showcases this as well, utilizing a mixture of violence inflicted, violent aggression, and the consequences of war to tell the story of Aang and his friends trying to stop the Fire Nation's conquest of the world. Many characters are killed or permanently scarred throughout the show, and the animated effects of violence are no different from their live action counterparts in terms of story purpose and character development. How animated violence differs from the rest of this study is that it is never assumed to be real, and as a result, can often be more fantastical, more outrageous, and even more stylistic. Blood, gore, explosions, and injury can be more pronounced and exaggerated, and depending upon the genre, affect how the story continues. The fusion of graphic and narrative violence here can be entertaining and problematic.

Blood, Drama, and (Realistic) Scenarios

In the early 2000s, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000 – 2015) launched on CBS and became the network's flagship,⁴⁰ becoming one of the most popular shows of all time and a ratings juggernaut. Consistently in the top ten of the Nielsen ratings for the decade, it spawned several equally successful spin-off shows, a horde of merchandising, and staged a launch point for many up and coming actors and actresses. A police procedural in Las Vegas about the forensic investigative team of CSI, it often blurred the boundaries (at least initially) of what violent content could be shown on television, as its detailed recreation of crimes and their aftermath featured graphic violent and sexual content. In addition, while it helped to popularize police procedurals even more and became synonymous with the CSI effect,⁴¹ the show was also heavily criticized for portraying an unrealistic version of forensic science that surpassed any notion of what technology was actually available and what the job entailed.⁴² Decapitations, stabbings, shootings, and all the manner of brutal, strange, or just plain absurd deaths were created on the show, often in a contrasting manner that had the original crime caked in a neo-noir style memory sequence and the following investigation of the crime scene in more clear-cut, vivid and episodic reality.

⁴⁰ *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* ran from 2000 – 2015, a total of 15 seasons that remained in the top ten Nielsen ratings from 2000 – 2010.

⁴¹ The CSI effect is the resulting influence the show has had on the public's understanding of forensic investigation. First coined by Richard Willing in a 2004 USA Today article, it has been recognized to be leading to juries in courtroom proceedings demanding more forensic evidence and placing less weight on circumstantial evidence.

⁴² *CSI* frequently showed high tech equipment that allowed for almost miraculous discoveries, and science that was able to piece together entire mysteries. Furthermore, CSI teams were portrayed to be part of the investigative team and arresting criminals. This is rare and actual investigations and arrests are typically handled by the police detectives and main force.

In addition to *CSI*, several other shows contributed to a heightening level of graphic violence on television, the most pertinent being *24* (2001 – 2010).⁴³ When *24* first premiered in 2001, its subject matter of Agent Jack Bauer of the Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU) trying to prevent a terrorist attack on U.S. soil was unfortunately all too real, as the show's premiere in November came after the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks. Aside from the unfortunately timed premise, the show also attracted praise for its visceral reality, as the structure of the show meant that each episode coincided with an hour in Jack Bauer's day. Each season subsequently unfolded as a political thriller or espionage tale, with Jack Bauer's Machiavellian approach to solving the ticking time bomb plot leading to a round of controversy over the depiction of torture, brutal deaths and fistfights, and lots of gunfights. As the show evolved, the plots widened its scope of destruction, as presidential assassination plots gave way to suitcase nukes, biochemical warfare, and drone hacking.

The most violent of these scenes was always the aftermath of an attack. For example, in the season 5 episode "Day 5: 6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.," terrorists are able to acquire nerve gas canisters that can be used as chemical weapons. In one of the most pivotal scenes of the series, the terrorists successfully infiltrate CTU and release nerve gas into the ventilation system. The result is mass evacuation and panic, as the gas seeps through the entire building and kills 40% of CTU's staff. They are seen choking and gasping for air, before stumbling to the ground dead. Jack Bauer, Chloe O'Brien, and several others are forced to watch their friends and colleagues die in this horrific fashion as they are trapped in an airtight-sealed conference room. For the next episode, the group in the conference room are surrounded by their friends and colleagues'

⁴³ Running from 2001 – 2010 in its original run, with a TV movie (*24: Redemption*, 2008), a revival series (*24: Live Another Day*, 2014), and a sequel (*24: Legacy*, 2017 - Present), *24* has become one of the longest running espionage shows, garnering plenty of critical acclaim and industry awards, as well as defining Kiefer Sutherland with the iconic role of Jack Bauer.

corpses as they deal with the encroaching threat of being unable to escape. Other brutal scenes such as a suitcase nuke going off in Los Angeles and FBI agent Renee Walker sawing off a man's hand during an interrogation helped to pave the way for graphic violent content to appear on network television. *24* was a general purveyor of limited graphic content mixed in with an abundance of narrative violence. Violent events literally drove the show forward, hour by hour, as the ticking bomb pushed Jack Bauer into situations where he was faced with violent decisions and certain casualties. Over the course of the series, Jack's callousness and harsh demeanor became emblematic of the character's experiences, mostly formed through traumatic violent events that continued to scar him years afterward. Cable wasn't the only place where characters could be brutally attacked or killed anymore.

Perhaps the most vital show that led up to the hyper-realistic violence that exists on 2010s network and cable television isn't really a show by itself, but the shows that dominated the premium cable network of HBO. Unlike network and cable television, premium cable was not restricted by FCC licensing, guidelines, and fees, which meant that show producers, writers, and directors could get away with anything. In addition, premium cable also had the distinct advantage of not having to cater to advertisers, who typically would not relish associating their shows with brutal graphic violence, controversial documentaries and series, and gratuitous amounts of graphic sexual content. Furthermore, audiences wouldn't usually complain about their content, as premium cable was paid for by audiences exclusively for this purpose (complaints by audiences usually led to a direct response). The result is that HBO, Starz, Showtime, and other premium cable channels were allowed a lot of freedom by their executives as long as they delivered content that was of high quality and brought in subscribers. Initially, when HBO launched in 1972, it struggled for a few years before it found its footing on standup

comedy (where the comedians no longer had to censor themselves) and sporting events such as the Thrilla in Manila.⁴⁴ In addition to the screening of uncensored films, standup comedy, and sporting events, HBO became a television juggernaut when it began producing its own original content, the most prominent being *The Larry Sanders Show*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Sex and the City*, and *Band of Brothers*. Each of these shows became staples of their respective genres, with *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Band of Brothers*, and *Game of Thrones* portraying incredibly graphic levels of violence in their episodes.

The Sopranos became known for its depiction of mob violence, with intimidation, executions, and savage beatings serving as inspiration for other similar shows like *Sons of Anarchy* and *The Shield*.⁴⁵ *Band of Brothers* brought the intensity of *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line* onto the TV miniseries, garnering several Emmy Awards for its portrayal of the story of Easy Company during World War II.⁴⁶ Translating a war genre onto TV led to a high-octane level of graphic violence from warfare, but also from the horrors of war, highlighted in episodes that detailed the failed Operation Market Garden and the liberation of a concentration camp. *The Wire*, on the other hand, dealt with the intertwining stories of Baltimore crime, viewed from various perspectives including the illegal drug trade, the city police, politicians, and the press.⁴⁷ Featuring an acutely realistic portrayal of Baltimore's urban jungle, the violence within the show often took the reins of policing, crime, and those caught in between. Finally,

⁴⁴ The Thrilla in Manila is generally considered to be the showcase that made HBO a household name. HBO's acquisition of the third and final fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier in the Philippine Coliseum (which resulted in Ali's victory) made the channel the first to deliver a continuous stream of content through satellite.

⁴⁵ *The Sopranos*, running from 1999 – 2007, featured the story of a mafia patriarch, Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) told through his therapy sessions as he attempts to balance his home life with his criminal life.

⁴⁶ In 2001, *Band of Brothers*, based on Stephen Ambrose's book, garnered critical acclaim and the Emmy and Golden Globe for best miniseries. Praised for its dramatic storytelling, unflinchingly realistic portrayal of war, and its documentary interview sections, the miniseries led to a spiritual sequel in *The Pacific* (2010).

⁴⁷ *The Wire* ran from 2002 – 2008, and has come to be regarded as one of the greatest television series ever, due primarily to its literary format, its realism, and a plot that expands on multiple perspectives of Baltimore.

with *Game of Thrones*, HBO hit a high mark of medieval fantasy that has become one of the most popular shows on television, wielding the well-constructed world of Westeros, complex characters and storylines, and high production values contrasted against a reputation for relentlessly killing off its characters in particularly gory ways and featuring a large amount of nudity and sexual violence.⁴⁸ Events such as the Red Wedding and the Battle of the Bastards highlight this level of violence, as people are killed left and right in a variety of ways, which include stabbing, burning, decapitation, evisceration, and explosions. All in all, HBO's lineup of original programming has become vastly influential, as executives, producers, and writers for other channels try to emulate their success. The intermixing of storytelling and no holds barred content has solidified HBO's impact on television's evolution. For television violence, HBO's content represented the current blend that airs on programs considered high quality or critically successful: graphic violence is inherent, observed, and realistic, while narrative violence is ordained through the program's events, the change in character development brought out by these events, and the lasting impact of the story's violence on audiences and television. It's no surprise that the networks, as well as basic cable networks, have followed HBO's success with shows that also probe similar boundaries for violent content on television. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones instill the importance of HBO's legacy, in that "Profanity, nudity, and graphic violence are more than simple forms of titillation, shock, or brand differentiation for HBO. They are important by-products in its ongoing reformulation of standardized television genres from the gangster to the situation comedy to the western and the documentary, among many others" (325).

⁴⁸ *Game of Thrones* is HBO's flagship series, running from 2011 – Present, and has brought in accolades of Emmy and Golden Globe Awards, as well as critical and fan praise. Featuring the largest audience base for HBO, it has also attracted controversy for its violence and sexual violence, and has also been the most pirated show for several of the 2010s.

V. *The Walking Dead*: Pushing the Envelope

On the cusp of a new decade in 2010, AMC introduced *The Walking Dead*, a television show based on Robert Kirkman's long running comic series about a group of survivors in a zombie apocalypse in the southern United States.⁴⁹ Running on themes of pandemic, paranoia, and visceral brutality, the comic book adaptation was ordered for a limited season of six episodes. When it premiered on Halloween, Frank Darabont's adaptation was a hit,⁵⁰ averaging five to six million viewers across the season's scope and garnering praise across critical circles. AMC subsequently renewed the show, and the show's growing success, both critically and commercially, made it the hallmark of AMC's lineup. With audiences currently averaging above 14 million an episode, and a record cable television high of 17.3 million for its season five premiere, *The Walking Dead* became a cultural phenomenon, reversing the trend of viewership decline and matching network TV ratings of long-established shows such as *NCIS*, *American Idol*, and the NFL.⁵¹ AMC took advantage of the show's popularity, utilizing merchandising, social media, and spectator interactivity to promote and expand the show's appeal, most notably with spinoff series such as *Fear the Walking Dead* and its companion talk show *Talking Dead*. In a time where AMC had been struggling to find an audience for its original content, *The Walking Dead* served as a beacon alongside critical darlings such as *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*, reverberating across the TV landscape, affecting everything from HBO to NBC.

⁴⁹ Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*, black and white, Image Comics, 2003 – Present

⁵⁰ Based on Nielsen ratings system. Average premiere audience numbers can range from 1 million to over 14 million (*NCIS*). Considering the extra difficulty in getting cable viewers vs. primetime network viewers, over 5 million viewers for a premiere season is a solid performance.

⁵¹ Television shows typically have big premieres and decline in audience numbers as seasons go on. Few shows grow after their premiere, and these are usually indicators of a popular show. For instance, *Cheers* premiered to low ratings, before gradual growth led to it becoming part of the top 10 Nielsen-rated shows of the 1980s.

The Walking Dead is based primarily on themes of zombie apocalypse fiction, where zombies are reanimated corpses of the dead, spread by bite or infection, that haunt the landscape. In keeping with George Romero's classic image of zombies,⁵² they are slow, shambling "walkers," who are often more dangerous when least expected or in large mobs. The survivors of the apocalypse must battle with the zombies, as well as hostile survivors, malnutrition, a lack of resources, and a completely altered world. Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) awakens from a coma in a dilapidated hospital, and must lead a group of survivors through the Southern and Eastern parts of the United States to find sanctuary and solace in a world filled with monsters. As Rick's group travels from Georgia to Virginia, the initial focus on the horror of reanimated cannibalistic corpses starts give an equal share of time to the horrors humanity could unleash upon itself, centrally focused with a debate on how to approach the new world: strive to live by the morals and ethics of the old world, or adapt to a new survival of the fittest mentality. The introduction of villains such as the Governor, Terminus, and Negan's Savivors tested the bounds of human morality, often in a question: How do you fight an enemy without stooping down to their level?

The Walking Dead presented a new type of gratuity in its violent content, featuring violence towards animals, humans, and zombies in a manner that had formerly only been featured in premium cable shows like *The Sopranos* or *The Wire* and sparingly tested on cable and network shows such as *Sons of Anarchy*, *24*, and *Criminal Minds*. The primary caveat of these shows was that they were police and crime dramas, which held expected norms for violent content. In contrast, *The Walking Dead* was one of the few post-apocalyptic shows to achieve mass popularity, engaging themes of survival, death, and war. What proliferated from *The*

⁵² George Romero define the modern image of the zombie with *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

Walking Dead was a new type of graphic violence for American television, surrounding its depiction of gore and death in the realm of survival and human resilience. Gunfights are common across the TV landscape, but *The Walking Dead* takes the gunfight and adds in the effect of bullets hitting zombies and people. Add in evisceration and people being eaten by zombies, decapitation and amputation, brutal physical fights, and the typical affair of swords, knives, and buckets of blood, and *The Walking Dead* seeks to match the kill count and effects of a grindhouse horror film. Less quantifiable is the direct impact the show had on violent content across the medium, which frequently had more graphic representations of violence following *The Walking Dead*'s success. Everything from *Criminal Minds* to *Twelve Monkeys* had a slight, but noticeable uptick in violence.

In a landscape where graphic violence was typically the reign of HBO and Showtime, *The Walking Dead*'s first season comprised of zombie ("walker") attacks, amputation, blood and guts, and mercy killings. In the first episode, "Days Gone Bye," our introduction to the protagonist Rick Grimes is during a police chase of a criminal suspect. This leads to an ensuing gunfight in which Rick is riddled with bullets and left bleeding on the pavement. The following acts of violence within the first episode are: the display of hundreds of dead bodies covered in white tarps outside an abandoned hospital, a zombie bisected at the waist with her internal organs falling out, several instances of headshots of zombies, the remnants of a shotgun suicide in a farmhouse, and a mass horde of zombies ripping apart a horse. For example, after Rick has reached the police station and armed himself with two other survivors, he goes off on his own in search of sanctuary in Atlanta. On the way, he encounters a little girl, who is revealed to be zombified as she turns to face Rick. As she walks towards him, covered in bloody pajamas, missing a shoe, and holding a teddy bear, Rick backs up a bit before shooting her in the head.

The subsequent kill shot is rendered in slow motion, as blood sprays from the exit wound and the zombie slowly falls.

Another example of gory violence is when Rick encounters a farm on the outskirts of Atlanta. Searching for gas, he approaches the house and looks through a window. We then see the gruesome suicide of a family, the words “GOD FORGIVE US” written in blood above a man sitting in chair, shotgun nearby, and his head exhibiting the effects of a self-inflicted shotgun blast. The camera lingers on the scene for a few moments, in which it becomes clear how much damage the shotgun has done and for how long the body has been decaying as flies swarm around both corpses inside the house. The third example is when Rick takes a horse from the farm and heads into Atlanta, encountering a desolate city empty of people and filled with



Figure 5: Rick escapes from the horde while they attack his horse. – *The Walking Dead*, “Days Gone Bye”

abandoned cars. Upon turning onto a street, he unfortunately encounters a mob of zombies, filling the entire avenue. As he tries to escape, he is surrounded by other zombies alerted to his actions, falls off his horse, and crawls underneath a tank (See Figure 5). The camera then focuses on the horse, which is being eaten

alive by the zombie mob. The blood and guts are shown in graphic detail, as the zombies pick apart the horse, and lift the organs towards their mouths. Instead of showing the zombies eating the organs, audiences are left to infer from the camera’s cuts and the actions of the zombies lifting the organs. All of this occurs along with a disgusting sound of raw meat being chewed and squished, much like when a slab of raw chicken is slapped on a counter. From then on, the rest of the season’s gore heightens as a character is forced to saw his hand off (his cut-off hand is

shown), a man is bitten on the neck by a zombie (blood squirts out), and a zombie corpse is cut open for its internal organs to be used as camouflage. While the level of graphic violence on *The Walking Dead* may have been seen before on other cable and network television shows, it rarely had the same frequency as *The Walking Dead*.

The level of violence on *The Walking Dead* pushes the envelope for what has been considered acceptable for American cable television. Operating on an apocalyptic theme, *The Walking Dead*'s level of violence is remarkably similar to HBO's in the late 1990s/early 2000s and Netflix's original series of the 2010s. The nature of outcry against the depiction of violence is more convoluted in this sense, as cable television provides an escape clause through its subscription service and advertising revenues.⁵³ In addition, with ratings as high as *The Walking Dead*'s, the show faces the situation in which the showrunners must please advertisers, audiences, and the regulatory boards of the FCC as well as AMC's board of directors and various executive staff. Recent decline in audience numbers since the seventh season's premiere also provides an indication that the show may have had its first significant backlash against its presentation of gratuitous violence.⁵⁴

Violence for a Point or Violence for the Sake of Violence

What makes *The Walking Dead* shine out with its penchant for gory violence is the transformation of physical violence, both as an expansion of horror violence from its source material and as a method of storytelling. Quite simply, it is hard to craft a zombie apocalypse story without the violence that comes standard with the genre. From George Romero's *Night of*

⁵³ Cable television revenues come from both subscriptions and advertising. Both parties, along with regulatory agencies such as the FCC, must be addressed.

⁵⁴ The disturbing images of Negan beating two members (Abraham and Glenn) of Rick's group to death with a barbed wire baseball bat in a prolonged sequence with blood and guts were immediate topics of discussion in the entertainment news media.

the Living Dead to more recent takes on the genre in the *Resident Evil* and *Dead Rising* video games,⁵⁵ the zombie apocalypse genre has always contained and utilized graphic violence to tell its story. In no way is *The Walking Dead* any different in this regard (aside from their avoidance of the word zombie),⁵⁶ utilizing brutal efficiency in its special and practical effects to create a more cinematic take on the zombie genre. Zombies are dispatched in a variety of ways, from the classic headshot and setting them on fire, to more unique methods such as traps that cut off their heads, lures them in a spike filled pit, or have them fall off buildings with bait. This is generally considered standard within the zombie genre as violence and gore are guaranteed. Added alongside is a healthy dose of high-budget special effects, combining more practical and traditional effects like blood squibs and fake blood when people are shot or bitten, prosthetics for the actors portraying zombies and humans who die in particularly gruesome ways, and sound effects, which capture even the most minute sounds that one can imagine, such as a smashed head of a zombie being paired with smashing watermelons.⁵⁷

Where *The Walking Dead* starts to deviate from the norm is its storyline and the treatment of both zombies and human survivors. Over the course of several seasons, it has become clear how the initial seasons of the show focused heavily on the violence perpetrated on zombies, with a slow trend of graphic violence rising to portray the horror of the post-

⁵⁵ Romero's 1968 film is widely considered to have popularized the zombie film in the realm of reanimated cannibal corpses. Previously, the term zombie applied more to voodoo and mind control. Capcom's *Resident Evil* (Biohazard in Japan) came out in 1996 and featured the parallel of genetic bioweapons in the form of the T-virus, which created zombies out of the infected. Capcom's *Dead Rising* (2006), seems to be the most related to *The Walking Dead*, in which journalist Frank West is dispatched to Willamette, and covers the horrors of the zombies and the human survivors while trapped in a mall.

⁵⁶ In *The Walking Dead*, the reanimated corpses are always referred to as walkers.

⁵⁷ Newer and safer versions of blood squibs feature electronic signals and compressed gas, but essentially serve the same purpose of simulating a gunshot. Prosthetics are typically used for scenes that require serious body harm that cannot be imitated by makeup. Computer and model recreations can be used for effects that require absolute destruction, such as in "Self-Help" where a fire truck water cannon is used to rip apart zombies. The sound effects themselves are constructed through combinations of various sounds that match the intended image.

apocalyptic world, particularly in the vein of human survivors fighting each other. The clearest dynamic between the two is the blood color of each target. Zombies, when killed on the show, are typically aged weeks, months, or years. This is further supported by their appearance: the zombies wear ratted clothing, are missing arms and legs, are rotten to a dull grey/green fusion, and reek of decay from flies, missing chunks of flesh, and the decomposition of their bodies. Even when the humans are not killing the zombies, the zombies may injure themselves in their attacks or movements. In these cases, the zombies' flesh is always shown to be remarkably weak, as simple injuries can often rip their bodies apart.⁵⁸ Only relatively new zombies (those newly turned), still contain the epidermal strength of their bodies and the characteristic red blood.

As for the characters' emotions during the killing of zombies, they are often mundane. Either the human survivors are horrified mainly due to the zombie's appearance or stench, shocked due to the surprise of zombies nearby, or disgusted and annoyed by their appearance. The prison story arc best exemplifies this. In seasons three and four, the main group of survivors under Rick Grimes establishes a home in an abandoned prison, complete with towers, walls, fences, and plenty of open space. However, because of the number of survivors and noise that comes with a settlement, zombies are attracted to the prison in droves, usually getting caught in the chain-link fence that surrounds the compound. Thus, *The Walking Dead* reaches a pivotal point regarding the killing of zombies. Every day, the survivors must go out with pikes, swords, spears, and other weapons and clear out the zombies that have gathered by the fences. The zombies are not as dangerous as they were before. It becomes a daily chore to the survivors; killing the zombies and disposing of their bodies are a daily ritual akin to laundry and tending to

⁵⁸ There are several scenes that show this. One such scene has a zombie that has been in a well for weeks, and when the human survivors attempt to pull it out to dispatch of it, its body rips in half and spills its organs everywhere ("Cherokee Rose").

the crops. The zombies themselves are rarely thought to be former humans, but rather nuisances in the new world order. Only those recently reanimated are remembered for who they once were. Even then, dead characters such as Dale, Shane, Merle, Andrea, Beth, and Herschel are rarely mentioned again after their death. They seem to fade in importance as the survivors adjust to the everchanging reality around them.

The human survivors, however, present more of a pressing problem as the series continued. Initially, human survivors are generally presented within the light of everyone trying to survive the post-apocalyptic world.⁵⁹ Survival of the fittest merges with attempts to help fellow humans in need, despite initial skepticism and paranoia. As the show progresses, this paradigm of human morality and ethics shifts, as the group increasingly face villains who seek to profit off their idealism and weariness. The Governor (David Morrissey) played the seminal role in changing the equation, with his ruthlessness in combating his enemies and cementing his power in the settlement of Woodbury. Waging war with Rick's group of survivors, the Governor introduced audiences to a man who killed other human survivors with the same ruthlessness he treated zombies with. In "Walk with Me," he orders his men to eliminate a group of army survivors. His lieutenant approaches them and tells them of their friendly intent, only to open fire with the rest of the Governor's men, killing all the soldiers in a brutal execution. The Governor then seizes their trucks, weapons, and tanks for himself, and uses a bogus story to justify to the people under his control that his leadership is the only reason they have survived. Throughout the rest of the Governor's story arc, we are treated to a barrage of brutal and graphic violence enacted upon humans, ranging from snipers, grenades, and all sorts of military weaponry, to

⁵⁹ Initial survivor groups that Rick encounters are all struggling to survive, and while wary of each other, don't generally antagonize other groups. Such is the case with "Vatos" in which Rick encounters a group whose initial hostile actions are in defense of dozens of abandoned senior citizens.

torture, sexual assault, and beheading. All the while, *The Walking Dead* generally approaches these scenes with realistic special and practical effects, imitating the same sense of gore inflicted on the zombies. Now, the corpses bleed red.

In addition, the Governor's arc also marks a point in which the human survivors are treated to the violence reserved for zombies with the same disregard towards their lives. For example, the citizens of Woodbury fight back during the raid by Rick's group, and are dispatched by Rick's group of survivors in the same manner to zombies. They become nameless, killed by gunfire, akin to the legions of enemy soldiers thrown at action heroes in the 1980s. The people, however are not zombies, and represent a tonal shift for the show. Shane Walsh's (Jon Bernthal) prediction of a new, more violent world becomes cemented in the battles between Rick's group and the Governor. Perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back is when upon returning from the Governor's failed raid on Rick's prison, an argument amongst the militia of Woodbury breaks out. These members of the Governor's town refuse to fight for the Governor's revenge any longer; the Governor responds by gunning down the dissidents with his assault rifle. The indiscriminate fire mirrors the nature of the violence; anyone can now be a target. The image that remains of a pile of human bodies on the road certifies the show's shift in tone; violence now equally applies to both zombies and humans.

The Walking Dead is built upon the strength of the show's characters and plotlines, which are equally built upon the violent world they now inhabit. In this sense, violence becomes a central tenet of the show; without the violence, the show would be considered more of a melodrama. The promise of the show and its genre is the violent gore of a zombie apocalypse, in which humans battle zombies for survival. Thus, the violence of the show is driven through the story's premise. What isn't accounted for is the graphic nature of the violence, which has

reached new heights for television. Blood and gore, death and murder: these are not new things for television, cable, network, or premium. But what differentiates *The Walking Dead* is how much the graphic violence drives the show's producers and the audience. As the highest rated show of the 18-45 demographic of all time (on cable, network, and premium),⁶⁰ *The Walking Dead*'s popularity is proportionally due to the story as much as it is due to the violence. This is furthered cemented by general disregard portrayed to the show's increasingly varied method of dispatching zombies. For each kill, the ante needs to be raised to sustain audience interest. This is particularly evident in *The Walking Dead*'s spin-off *Talking Dead*, in which host Chris Hardwick interviews famous fans, actors and actresses from the show's cast, and various figures in the show's production for each episode. Several segments highlight the attraction to violence, specifically the "Kill of the Week," which highlighted a kill from the episode in slow motion, and "In Memoriam," which highlighted the deaths in each episode, also in slow motion.

But aside from the shock value offered by *The Walking Dead*'s usage of violence, what other purpose could there be for such horrific deaths? The main course of violent content on contemporary television has generally been used for narrative purpose or the treatment of specific characters in addition to shock and spectacle. While bystanders are merely part of the background and violence directed towards them is often shown quickly or off-screen,⁶¹ main protagonists and antagonists receive more focus in this regard. For *The Walking Dead*, graphic portrayals of violence occur frequently with the deaths of moral characters and immoral villains, defining a limit to the ideology of the show's universe. In season one, Andrea's sister Amy represents youth, innocence, and a brighter future. A college student that returned to Atlanta

⁶⁰ Note that the coveted demographic for advertisers is 18-45, who represent the majority of consumers with disposable income.

⁶¹ Similar to the infamous *Star Trek* Red Shirts, innocent bystanders in superhero shows, civilians in *24*, etc.

prior to the outbreak, she becomes emblematic of hope for a new world. Her death is one of the least gruesome, being bitten by a zombie on the neck and dying in Andrea's arms. However, she is one of the only former survivors to reanimate early on, and Andrea is compelled to kill her as she turns.

In season two, Dale is the voice of moral compassion and wisdom, and a relic of the old world. As the main group under Rick's leadership struggles with how to survive in the new world, Dale offers an honorable and moral alternative. Community, family, and compassion are popular themes of his advice. In particular, during "Judge, Jury, and Executioner," Dale acts as the lone voice of reason that refuses to execute the outsider Randall and fails to convince the rest of the group against their decision. "Dale points to the power of violence to erode the group's collective humanity when he subsequently asserts, 'The world is gone, but keeping our humanity... that's a choice.' When the group does, indeed, vote to execute Randall, Dale concludes, 'This world is ugly, harsh. It's survival of the fittest.' The series reflexively underscores this point about the unmitigated use of violence in the quest for survival" (Wright 152). His fate is darker than Amy's, in that he is surprised by a zombie that disembowels him. Dying of his horrific injuries, the group performs a mercy killing with gunshot to the head, and thus "Dale's passing may spell the death of morality" (Tenga and Bassett, 1293). In what is arguably the most important death in the series, Dale represents the complete tonal shift in viewing the world that the show takes. The first season's search for the cure and sanctuary is punctuated primarily with the noble reminders of civilization amongst the ruins. With the destruction of the Center for Disease Control in the first season's finale, the show shifted the second season towards a debate on how to survive in a world that no longer had the hope of a civilization restoration. This debate ranged back and forth between all the characters throughout

the second season, until only Dale remained as the upholder of morality and ethics. With the condemnation of Randall, Dale subsequently realized that his views were no longer considered noble or necessary, but rather, they had become useless and antiquated in the type of Darwinian world that now existed. It is with his death that *The Walking Dead* begins to fully explore the range of ideologies that govern survival in the post-apocalyptic U.S., and Dale marks the final hammer in the coffin for the old world.

Shane presents another conundrum. He is principally viewed as a morally grey character, willing to sacrifice others, steal, and execute those who threaten the safety of his friends and loved ones. However, this dangerous behavior, which foregrounds a philosophical debate between the survivors on how to survive in the new world, is exacerbated by Shane's increasingly hostile actions, which eventually lead to his death at the hands of Rick and Carl. As George Hagman puts it: "In these encounters, between Shane and Rick, one sees the ongoing struggle of the individual characters and the groups to reconcile traditional social norms and guidelines with the survival demands of the [post-apocalyptic] world. Unfortunately, this struggle often seems resolvable only through violence" (Hagman, 50). Shane then represents a foil to Dale, advocating a new lifestyle and methodology to surviving the hell-ridden landscape, one where the strong take control and the weak perish. Shane's death marks the birth of a synthesis of ideals, born from the ashes of Shane's survival instinct and Dale's moral attitude, that presents a path forward only taken by those who could balance the two extremes. The death of these characters act as foreshadowing, illuminating how violence would achieve a greater purpose in *The Walking Dead's* future storytelling.

In seasons three, four, and five, more morally inclined characters are eliminated in brutal fashion. Andrea's attempts at redemption and sabotaging the Governor's efforts lead to a suicide

after she is bitten by a zombie. The two reformed prisoners, Axel and Oscar, are subsequently eliminated after having proven their worth to the group. Oscar dies from being shot in the back during a rescue attempt. Axel is killed with a headshot at the beginning of the Governor's raid on the prison and his body is riddled with bullets afterward. Hershel represents compassion and empathy, and works tirelessly as the group's medic and voice of salvation and wisdom after Dale's death. Always striving towards ideals of coexistence and peace, he is sliced at the neck by the Governor prior to the raid on the prison, in full view of Rick's group of survivors. Beth, who stands as a resolute symbol of caretaking, hope, and individuality, is killed by a reflex gunshot during a negotiated handoff of prisoners at Grady Memorial Hospital. Her death is the one of the most perceptive, as it appears unexpected and occurs in slow motion, forcing viewers to watch the methodical elimination of yet another moral foothold. Perhaps the most controversial and insidious death of this period is that in season four's 14th episode "The Grove". Modeled after a short-form version of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the episode deals with the culmination of the character Lizzie, a young girl who has shown sympathy for zombies. A slow build-up over the course of the season has slowly revealed the disturbing nature of Lizzie's approach to the world, and in "The Grove," she finally reaches a breaking point, killing her younger sister Mika and threatening baby Judith, hoping to bring them back to life as zombies. Lizzie, is interrupted by survivors Carol (the group's primary caretaker of children) and Tyrese, who decide that Lizzie holds a mindset too dangerous for this world. Lizzie is executed by Carol, who tells the crying child to look at the beauty of the flowers, before a gunshot ends her life. In Lizzie, we see that the cursed world the characters inhabit may breed many different views of the world. In Lizzie's case, her perspective was particularly poisoned by the violation of morality rules altered in the apocalypse, where "we approach the contamination of death/the human corpse, and the

perception that killing a blood relation is a particularly abhorrent crime. In this context, Lizzie's conduct can be considered impure or even unnatural," and must be eliminated from the social order (Tenga and Bassett, 1295).

In seasons six and seven, *The Walking Dead* only seems to deepen its resolve, as the facets of humanity grow ever more blurred and indistinguishable from the zombie enemy, and become more dangerous, evil, and a force to be reckoned with. Rebellion, coup d'état, assassination, and torture become more prevalent, as the zombies have largely become a background terror, with war and barbarism becoming front and center for the show. Most notably, the violence portrayed in the season seven premiere "The Day Will Come When You Won't Be" reached a zenith for the show's audience. It featured the graphic depiction of the deaths of Abraham and Glenn via a brutal barbed wire-baseball bat, complete with copious amounts of blood splatter, brain gore, and the added effect of an eye popping out, all punctuated by extreme close ups on the characters' horrified reactions to their friends' deaths and the messy remains of each victim's head, reinforced by the villain Negan's constant beatings of the corpses and the occasional blood spurt into the sky. The episode received critical pushback from audiences and critics, who were shocked by the level of violence portrayed. The result seemed to be a reduction in audience numbers, as the first half of the seventh season featured the lowest ratings the show had received in years and acknowledgment from the show's producers that they were toning down the graphic violence (Goldberg, 1). The contrast, however is the sheer traumatic effect of the show's violent opening, which bore the progression that *The Walking Dead* had been ever so slightly tiptoeing towards. The violence was perhaps more effective because it had combined both the graphic element of shock that comes with violent acts and paired it with the evolving narrative function of violence, as the character's brutal deaths came to

become a primary plot point for the show's course and the development of certain characters like Carol and Daryl. Thus, the graphic element may have been complementary in this regard towards the narrative function of violence, driving the story into a region that both drew in and drove away audiences.

Ultimately, the narrative function of *The Walking Dead* shows a repeated pattern of brutal killings of characters who are moral inspirations. They represent an ideology out of place in the post-apocalyptic world, and provide a counter to the survival of the fittest argument, which directly clashes against nobler ambitions to retain human compassion and a sense of community and camaraderie. In this case, the zombie apocalypse destroys the world of civilization and returns mankind to a dehumanized, horrific version of anarchy, tribal warfare, and the state of nature. Essentially, the audience is thrust into a debate where "violence is an artistic tool that not only reveals character but also poses questions about mortality, meaning, and power(lessness) that viewers, in turn, use as a means of personal exploration" (Tenga and Bassett, 1280). The ideology of the world, as presented to both the characters and the audience, is a similar battle of wills, in which two ideologies battle for control. In this case, *The Walking Dead* seems to consistently point towards a middle ground, of which violence's function within the story alludes to an avoidance of extreme barbarism and winner take all strategies versus altruistic and civil-minded responsibilities. Instead, as evidence by those who have survived the new world order, the way forward is illuminated by moderation, a mixture of selfishness and selflessness; those who aren't representative of this ideal are killed, sooner or later. However, the secondary narrative function of violence within the show may be likened to a chemical reaction catalyst. The act of violence, especially upon major characters or in specific events, can become the trigger for the story to propel itself forward. In this regard, the narrative function of *The Walking*

Dead's violence is a matter of story progression; certain characters must be killed to keep the story going, just like how *Bonanza's* kept the story from ending by preventing the infliction of major harm on the main characters.

It can then be inferred that *The Walking Dead* can be viewed as a series where violence serves multiple functions. The first, and most obvious, is shock value, which serves to realistically create the world the characters inhabit. This means that death, pain, and injury become part of the universe of the show, and must be portrayed in such a manner to craft the world for audiences to believe and lose themselves within. This, then propels the other functions of violence within the show. The shock value of violence is thus supported by the narrative development aspect of violence, which uses acts of violence to ground the story's foundations, and craft major plotlines, as well as feature specific character development. Rick Grimes's descent from honest and trustworthy deputy is transformed by the violence inflicted upon him and the violence he perpetrates into an authoritarian survivor, who views the world in a survival of the fittest manner, no longer beholden completely to the morals of civilization. This is also shown through many other characters, such as the Governor's descent into madness, the hardening of Hershel Greene's fortitude, and the disillusionment of Andrea, all of which propagate the notion that violence has a tremendous effect on a mindset. The third, and perhaps most intriguing usage of violence within *The Walking Dead* has to be the crafting of the world, using violence as a hammer to forge the post-apocalyptic East Coast of the United States. Here, it is the combined use of violence and its graphic portrayal that serves the purpose sketching a narrative understanding of *The Walking Dead's* universe and characteristics, eliminating characters who are deemed too soft or naïve for the new world order, as well as condemning characters who have let the power go to their head, those who have committed evil sins, and

those who simply are the residuals of bad luck and timing. This is where moral characters like Beth, Herschel, and Dale go to die, and where evil characters like the Governor and the leaders of Terminus are brutally executed. In the middle of it all is the zombie, who presents an equal playing field for both sides to target, viewed initially as the main problem, but increasingly resigned to become a nuisance, a habitual pest, and a common irritation. Ironically, it seems that the violence inflicted upon them is a combination of all three forms of violence, and further erases the fact that they were people once, but remain human no longer. Thus, *The Walking Dead* uses violence in these forms to completely craft the universe it lives within, and to ultimately do the same as all other TV shows: tell a story. Entertainment in this form seeks both interest in the genre's capabilities, as well as interest in maintaining the debate about moral boundaries of violence. This story just happens to revolve around a messy, morally grey, and dysfunctional world where people's lives are like insects, ignored or crushed. The question for the audience, induced by the violence onscreen, is who would become the insect, and who would become the boot.

Where then, does *The Walking Dead* fall into line with the evolution of TV violence? While *Bonanza* was clearly a step up from former passions about portraying violence on the small screen, openly available to youth and adults, there was an insistence that the violence within TV westerns be quantified by moral justice and proportionality. This steady evolved as society became much more accustomed to reality of American myths within the western genre, as well as larger problems within America itself. The Korean War and the effects of war on soldiers became solidified in *M*A*S*H*, while the troublesome decade of the 1960s revealed a societal rift in race, politics, and crime pushed a new notion forth. Thus, as the mythical western frontier in western TV and films started to die out, escapist entertainment started to enter the

scene. Violence, still following rules of morality, were now added to Hollywood spectacle, social equality, and a rebirth of idealism in the U.S. that kindled shows like *Charlie's Angels* and *The A-Team*. However, this was directly countered with *The Day After*, which worked to acknowledge a troubling truth about the Cold War, and the possible ramifications of the usage and normalization of violence on such a grand scale. If nuclear weapons were not understood as last resort deterrents, then their usage might become normalized, even acceptable if the rewards yielded were greater than the costs. *The Day After* sought to show, in direct contrast, that violence only begets more violence, and when used on such a large scale, may identify a world that wasn't worth living in. Here's where *The Walking Dead* comes into play. *The Walking Dead* and other shows like it have presented the next evolutionary step in American television: violence, under the rules of justification, attraction, and shock value, may be employed to not only push a narrative forward, but to also take audiences through a journey of reflection and analysis. If the zombies in *The Walking Dead* can easily be destroyed because they are no longer human, but rather monsters, what does this mean for the humans who have survived, but given up their morality and sense of civilization to survive?

Thus, *The Walking Dead* becomes representative of the current "Golden Age of Television," and particularly represents the status update of both graphic and narrative violence. Graphic violence has only become much more pronounced, as influence from HBO and graphically violent shows like *24*, *The Sopranos*, and *CSI* paved the way for *The Walking Dead* and its audience acceptance of its high-fidelity graphic gore. While advancements have surely been made in the field of practical and special effects, there has also been a rise in popular characters within American television that aren't the high-minded individual idealists. The anti-heroes, the criminals, and the losers have become as popular, if not more so, than the heroes the

oppose. Combined with the violent nature of the post-apocalyptic and zombie genres, *The Walking Dead* was the natural progression in the gore and graphic violence one could portray on the small screen. Each episode and subsequent season pushed the boundaries, unhindered by calls for curbing the show's violent content until season seven rolled around. As for narrative violence, the show's propensity to kill off characters might be likened to the shock value of entertainment. Digging deeper suggests that in addition to the sheer attraction of violence within the program, *The Walking Dead's* usage of narrative violence has evolved further from that of *The Day After*. Morality and justification within *Bonanza* is largely relegated to acts of revenge or vengeance, and more moral or civilization-inclined survivors are killed off. In particular, Dale is the most important character in this regard, and his death at the end of the second season heralded the show's turn towards a complete societal shift, away from cities and society towards anarchy and tribalism. Other characters who exhibited similar perspectives were also subsequently killed, removed, or transformed. But what *The Walking Dead* excels at over *The Day After* is the sheer emphasis employed on the new world order. *The Day After's* nuclear apocalypse envisioned the world profoundly affected by a specific violent event; so too does *The Walking Dead*. The major difference, and this can largely be seen in other shows around this time like *Breaking Bad* or *Game of Thrones*, is the deployment of moral ambiguity in a larger sense. Heroes, anti-heroes, bystanders, and shades of evil exist within the entirety of the cast, and certain characters, such as Rick, Carl, and Carol, represent multi-faceted presentations of dealing with a particularly traumatic overhaul of world order. Better yet, *The Walking Dead* goes further by insisting on storylines that trace both the heroes and villains of the story, and brings to life the motivations and explorations of its characters and their actions, best represented in The Governor's return. *The Day After* asked similar questions, but only to the bystanders and

survivors of the violent incident; *The Walking Dead* asks these questions towards the main players, the men and women who drive conflict and storylines within the show's plot.

Television violence has now entered a stage, much more advanced than its predecessors in both graphic content as well as storytelling ability. Violence, has now become a tool to tell a more important story, one where characters, plot, consequences, and thematic symbols becomes the central focus. Violence, while still being a main attraction for some, also acts as a supplement for bringing audiences into a story experience, and asking them to analyze TV as more than just entertainment, but also as a measure of where society stands.

Looking Ahead: Viewer Discretion is Advised

As the television landscape fragments further and the TV industry faces a crossroads with regards to streaming services, network television, and cable cord-cutting, violence remains as topical an element as ever. Now accompanied by audience interaction via social media, critical analysis, and the Parental TV Guidelines, violence no longer faces the major problem of its mass presentation to children and audiences who don't want to view it. The V-Chip, TV ratings from TV-Y to TV-MA, and the general influence of the Internet has allowed audiences to decide exactly when and where they view violence in fictional TV narratives. However, the effects of TV violence still linger in the principal relationship between TV production studios and networks, their audiences, and their advertisers. Too much violence, and advertisers may pull out, audiences may leave in droves and complain loudly in social media, and studios may rethink producing such concepts again. TV violence, thus provides the same pull of shock value and morbid attraction, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of what their audiences will accept and utilizing violence in a greater narrative context.

Throughout the timespan of American television, violence has portrayed an evolving function alongside its evolving presentation, playing a narrative function in developing characters and plot alongside its practical and computer generated realistic blood and guts. Originally seen as an effect, violence entertained the role of attraction through spectacle in early American television, particularly in *Bonanza*, playing a central role in the genre's expectations and appealing to audiences through color, spectacle, and its moral implications. The western genre beckoned graphic violence as a side-effect and utilized violence in legitimate forms to put forward its values. Narrative violence within the genre largely remained focused on legitimizing defensive violence and providing support to the narrative of violence as a last resort. After all,

the Cartwright family needed to be seen in the western mythos, heroic and chivalrous, and their justified violence allowed their return episode after episode.

As television moved out of the restraints of the 1950s and 1960s, it entered an era complete with the excessive usage of violence to further enhance the spectacle element, as well as the emerging rumblings of considering violence's effect on the characters and the storyline, serving as the primary catalyst of *The Day After*'s story about human survivability with the detonation of thermonuclear weapons over Kansas. In this respect, the TV movie presented to a larger audience the question of how violence can directly affect those in the text and how graphic portrayals of violence can directly propel plot development. *The Day After*'s legacy and impact will stand as a testament to the power of television, and its graphic depiction of the nuclear explosion remains an image that conjures up fear, terror, and cynicism. This message powered the narrative violence within the story and asked audiences if they preferred the hell-ridden landscape of irradiated Kansas brought about by the current status quo, or dared to ask why such weapons existed and if they should ever be used again. *The Day After* thus became a turning point to consider how violence could motivate and drive a story, and ask audiences to engage with the images on the screen.

As computer technologies and production budgets rose in the years since the 1980s, graphic violence has only become all too real and presented multiple meanings for its effects on characters and stories. With *The Walking Dead*, TV violence has reached a peak where the story implications of violence have become as important as the graphic nature of its portrayal. Violence inflicted upon the characters within the show profoundly affects the way they think and react to the new world order in a post-apocalyptic United States, and further drudges up questions of legitimacy, morality, and the bending of ethics in the application of violence for

survival. The zombies are as much a threat as the other survivors, and the usage on violence on either constitutes a debate over which is the bigger threat. Both the survivors in the show and the audiences watching the show must then discuss what decisions are righteous and which are insidious. More importantly, does violence's motive in a post-apocalyptic tribal landscape even matter? Through the close analysis of these case studies and the larger analysis of the changing television industry, it has become abundantly clear that violence on the television medium today is not the same as it was in the 1950s. Violence, now composes of both the graphic element and the narrative function, both of which are vital for the development of a show's story, characters, and larger themes and discussions for its audiences. The change in both represents a changing America, in terms of culture and society, technological prowess, and its ability to craft mass media as a representation of its stories, its ideas, and its challenges.

As television reaches another milestone 80 years since its inception, TV programming has evolved in accordance with the changing technology available for TV production, the changing standards allowed for broadcast, and the changing tastes of the audiences they target. Advertisers may still be wary of advertising on hyperviolent shows, but this part of television has largely avoided the advertiser problem with premium cable and streaming services. Thus, audiences remain the primary focus of violence on television, and their approval comes through ratings, merchandise sales, and the continued support of their favorite shows. In this regard, it is possible to posit the idea that television has been transforming alongside American society. This explains how we went from *The Lone Ranger* to *Game of Thrones*, and how the older television gets, the tamer and more boring it may appear to modern audiences. The reciprocal relationship of television can thus be postulated: television violence gets progressively more violent, not because of its tendency to push the boundaries of audiences' tastes, but rather because audiences

are more accepting of the portrayals of violent acts on television. American society has become more open to the portrayal of violence on mass media as they become accustomed to the medium, and as they understand the nature of how the medium is influenced by them and how it influences them. Television violence is just another manner of expression within a story, used to tell the consequences of one's actions, the motivations behind a character's actions, and the large implications of how a society can react to the usage of force. As the television industry continues to change, it may be prudent to continue analyzing how graphic violence and narrative violence changes alongside it, and expand past American borders to truly understand just how violence is inherent within our media.

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