

### Patriotic Gore

#### *OVER THE EDGE*

*How the Pursuit of Youth by Marketers and the Media Has Changed American Culture*  
By Leo Bogart

#### *SAVAGE PASTIMES*

*A Cultural History of Violent Entertainment*  
By Harold Schechter

- 1 It's almost an annual ritual. A media incident crosses a new line – wardrobe malfunction, real-life copycat incident, desperate housewife. Parents, pundits and psychologists protest. The Chairman of the Motion Pictures Association of America gets hauled before Congress for an ostentatious dog-and-pony show pitting the forces of morality against those of civil liberties. Sometimes a “voluntary industry code” gets put in place. It almost always has the effect of creating more sex, violence and obscenity. Even without the code, the trend is to more of the same.
- 2 Two new books address these issues from opposite points of view. Harold Schechter's *Savage Pastimes* defends violent entertainment from the perspective of a literary scholar; Leo Bogart's *Over the Edge* takes the culture industry to task.
- 3 Bogart, a longtime market researcher and media analyst, argues that advertisers are driving the degradation of media content because they believe that young people are the most lucrative consumers to target. They are most amenable to new brand choices, and their loyalty lasts a lifetime. Young people crave sex and violence. Therefore, advertisers feel that the media should push the edge with increasingly violent, sexual and offensive content.
- 4 Bogart believes the first premise is wrong. He interviews media and advertising executives but finds few who actually believe that youths hold a special key to brand success. He argues that older consumers have the money and deserve more attention. But if he's right, it's a strange situation – slavish adherence to a flawed assumption, which produces an outcome that pleases only a segment of the audience and alienates many. Are we missing something here?
- 5 Bogart makes a stronger case in the second half of the book when he takes on the voluntary rating systems that the industry has adopted to avoid government regulation. With each of the major media – film, television, video games, music and the Internet – he shows how the rating systems led to more, not less, “offensive” content, as lower-rated categories quickly came to be seen as uninteresting. In film, R and later PG-13 became coveted statuses, leading the studios to add sex, violence and obscenity to gain those restrictive ratings. Young people, whom the system was ostensibly designed to protect, prefer the forbidden fruit and manage to get it. Bogart doesn't provide a way out of this dilemma but does a good job of describing how dysfunctional the system has become.
- 6 *Savage Pastimes*, on the other hand, is almost a paean to the very violence Bogart abhors – a chronicle of gory and gruesome Western entertainments from German fairy tales and Shakespeare to the penny dreadfuls and Gothic horrors of Victorian England and the United States, to the dime novels, comic strips and radio gore of the early 20th century. Schechter reveals his own passions with an account of the Davy Crockett craze

of 1954-55, created by a Disney series he describes as stunning in its “sheer brutality” and its “shootings, stabbings, scalplings, stranglings”. It was regarded as “wholesome family entertainment” back in the day.

7 Schechter extensively describes animal torture through the ages, from Roman “venations” (such as letting loose a pack of lions on a lone deer) to “bear-baiting” (an English tradition so popular that in some villages it was illegal for butchers to kill a bear without first putting on a public baiting) to sadistic American contests between rats and dogs. The reader is left with little doubt that blood and guts have always been popular. The book also makes larger arguments about why this type of entertainment is so popular (human nature and our dark side) and claims that watching it is a substitute for engaging in actual violence. Schechter tags the critics of media violence as a group of “hysterical” know-nothings with an “almost willful blindness”. This is where his book falls short.

8 If it is true that literature and media allow us to work out subconscious desires and fears, Schechter’s discussion doesn’t add much to our understanding. That’s partly because he relies on secondary historical sources, combing them for examples but failing to reproduce their rich contextual analysis. What conditions led certain kinds of genres to become popular? How does the taste for violence ebb and flow? His claim that the volume of violence in cultural products has been declining for decades is questionable, at best. Are specific places, periods or types of people more or less attracted to guts and gore? Why? How does the historical record square with recent scholarly analyses of violence as “addictive”?

9 27 He continually invokes the critics of violent media as if they were a creepy phantasm of the Gothic novels he describes, but never cites them or systematically addresses their arguments. (The most recent moralists he actually discusses are from the 1950s.) When he finally gets around to the voluminous work on media and violence, he relies on an interpretation of the research methodology from a comic-book writer, and he fails to cite any actual studies. Did Schechter really read any of the literature he’s impugning? I wonder.

10 Near the end of the book, Schechter reports that there is “only one conclusion” to be drawn from the history he has retold: Fictional violence keeps us from actually being violent by allowing us to “vent” our dark, primal urges. In fact, there’s another interpretation: that violent societies produce violent media, and the two go hand in hand. While we may not be medieval England, we remain a country in which violence is pervasive, learned early and institutionally sponsored. Schechter pooh-poohs the critics by noting that the Davy Crockett devotees of the 1950s turned into the generation of peace and flower power – conveniently forgetting that some of those boys perpetrated the massacre at My Lai, or that as he was writing his book, Americans were engaging in vicious torture at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Understanding the relationship between imagined violence and real acts of terror is profoundly important and deserves a far more serious inquiry than this book provides.

Juliet B. Schor in *The Washington Post*