THE UNBEARABLE BURDEN OF BANALITY

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The first written evidence

and, even before this, primitive drawings on rocks clearly show that violence has been a continuous expression of human behaviour. Violence has been depicted, adored and mythologized in polytheistic societies.

The first pages of the Bible relay fratricide. In the Old Testament and, even more definitely, in the New Testament, violence is defined as negative. Christian religion teaches humility and renounces violence for more than two thousand years... General human logic as expressed in civilization's development assumes that violence would have diminished during the human evolutionary process. Obviously, this is not so even with highly economically and politically developed societies. And if the genetic stereotype, which a priori encodes individual behaviour, could not be (thank God) manipulated yet, then social attitudes towards violence must be crystal clear. It is a fact that the Church, science, history, all deny this form of human behaviour. Unfortunately, whether willingly or otherwise, art frequently mythologizes heroes having such

types of behaviour... I do not even wish to look for empirical evidence – go to the cinema, switch on TV, read newspapers or paperbacks – and you will see for yourself. Exploiting violence is a sad but self-evident fact. Unfortunately, it almost never gets a negative assessment at the end of the so-called 'creation'.

We can find motives for aggressive behaviour back in the primitive relationship period within the herd, group, horde. The major question of Nature – "Who will kill whom?" – finds a simple and clear answer in the expression of rough force. The more adaptable individual would survive, the physically stronger, the more aggressive one. Someone of this type would lead the group and would impose primeval forms of order and subordination. No doubt – to his advantage. Any pretender would oppose this order, which guarantees obedience to rules, or shall we say – to an embryo institution, the latter guaranteeing the power of the leader. We know that those in power, notwithstanding the stage of historical development, would become indolent, their sense of risk would deteriorate because of luxury and a sense of superiority.

And then – a moment of incautiousness – there comes a new leader, chief, khan, king, emperor, fuehrer, etc. Realizing this permanent danger, those in power try to establish rules and institutions to implement them with the main goal to guarantee their power. Dissatisfaction is an intrinsic characteristic of human character as well, and it is often expressed by treachery, conspiracies, assassinations, coups-d'etat, revolutions, conter-revolutions and other such radical changes of the status quo. It is also a fact that over the centuries, the developing individual has acquired resistance to institutions, which in his mind represent the status quo and he attempts to re-arrange existing regulations on social relations, often without picking out the means. We could say that even nowadays and in most developed countries, re-

negotiation of the relationship between state and society and/or between the institutions and power is a slow and painful process.

Division of power resolves some problems but poses others. The main ones are (non) effectiveness of institutions, (non) fairness of decisions, (non) equality of citizens and institutions. Globally the economic difference is tremendous between third-world countries and the world powers that credit all the rest. This is also a prerequisite of conflict. Because in this context the problem of added value and its distribution is not resolved sufficiently; moreover, it is completely unresolved, I am afraid we are soon going to witness an escalation of violence. By the way, we already are... I need these, at first sight, boring thoughts to reach the idea that there always is some sick mind, mad head, national hero, local "defender of the downtrodden", who eventually decides to take matters into his own hands. During national liberation struggles, the borderline between the terrorist and the future national hero is thin and delicate and could not easily be defined without profound research on the subject. Historians do a lot of profound research... It is a fact that the need to create and sustain national spirit gives way to the need to manipulate certain facts, to dislocate the relationship between them, to choose a convenient point of view – and the next "official" national history is ready. But our topic relates to the genesis of violence and its depiction by TV movies.

The model is clear. Conservatism of state and public institutions conflicts with the radicalism of certain individuals who, in response, create sub-structures and dispute the legitimacy and the decisions of the former.

And mass media relate the conflicts and put on labels – good or evil. In the last twenty years labels are being put on

extremely lightly, without any effort to show criteria, analysis and facts, thus making it difficult to find who is the bad guy and who is the good guy (not to mention the "ugly" guy from the old classic Western). The words of a media magnate, that "the newspaper should entertain rather than inform or preach", have found immediate practical application. And, as a renowned Hollywood producer said, "you only have to open the criminal pages of the yellow newspapers in order to find at least ten topics for a film script". This is the picture…

Escalation of violence in the movies shown on TV started at the beginning of 70-ies with the introduction of cliché drama stereotypes. A good guy is drawn into a heavy, unbearable collision and he decides to take revenge. This type of drama has samples. The difference between mass production and sample is small and simple. In masterpieces, the authors do not aesthetize or admire violence in order to suggest how fearful the revenge should be and make the audience look forward to it. In masterpieces, such as *The Seven Samurai*, the justification for the violence is the salvation of a small defenceless community. The dilemma is the life of common, good, hard-working, defenceless people against the greed of a handful of villains. The choice is, would there be protectors to defend their rights gratuitously and selflessly? Mass production does not look for reasons, rather for occasions of Old Testament anger leading to rivers of blood. With the former, we have convincing and realistic characters, with the latter – dramatical clichés. With the former, the movie hero goes along a difficult path to reach the end decisions and not without disputes and doubts; with mass production action comes before the thinking… If the man in the mask can think at all… What is all this about? In classic movies, interpretation of conflicts relies on convincing exhaustion of all forms of persuasion to change the status quo by reason and argument. Positive heroes are tragic because they realize what they are doing and it is hard for them to forget. The violence itself becomes the reason for renouncing, denying violence. Good overcomes evil though at a high price. We can see a message, conclusions and moral in these movies. In the new aesthetics (if the elementary marketing approach could be so defined), things are different. The violence is the reason to sell some merchandise. *Everything is a product, which must be sold. At once!"* – they say. Conflict between good and evil does not undergo dramatical development but passes through a set of market-approved clichés, which guarantee entertainment but exclude thinking. The bad thing is that this has turned into a norm, a style to be aped by a significant audience for nearly two decades.

Bulgaria is a small post-totalitarian country in transition. Local gangsters became characteristic for the period, with fast and easy money from drug and petrol smuggling, trade with women and car thefts. Mass media have covered their "exploits" with inebriation. TVs broadcast funeral services of so-called "wrestlers". Every time the same thing – black limousines, men in black suits with sun glasses. All look like a grotesque copy of the *Godfather* movie, but without distancing. Only the closest relatives are bereaved, the rest play unsuitable roles recalled from video films. It is tragic and hilarious at the same time when a "brother in arms" places a mobile phone in the coffin and it starts to ring in the middle of the memorial service.

Most of these local bandits come from uneducated families and were brought up with shortages and with no systematic education. They had found refuge in sport, the latter specially tolerated by the former regime. Their end goal is luxury achieved by easy money. Lacking upbringing, education, culture and values, they absorb cheap, mostly American, video productions and this is their window to the world. They readily identify themselves with the heroes of those cheap movies.

**They do not have,
could not have and do not wish to have
any other identity.**

Media coverage turns out to be their main accomplishment. Paradoxical, but true. Their behaviour apes third-rate movie heroes and they demonstrate this to the mass media, thus compensating for the lack of a personal identity.

Personages in mass video and TV movies are gangsters, prostitutes, fashion models, smugglers and drug dealers. They all are important in their world, therefore they have value, though negative. In reality, they are inferior-feeling and intoxicated people – walkers-on in a performance directed by someone else. In their fiction, they do not want the future and past to identify them and tie them to a certain system of values. They compensate this deprivation with the present, which resembles a bad action movie. Day in, day out. Until they get killed. Unfortunately, TV and video productions must take enormous blame for that. Mass movie producers build their films on aesthetic laws of cartoons, i.e. on the impossible. The heroes endure over-loads, they survive in situations that are impossible from a physical or medical point of view, and at the end they come out as if from a dance hall. As if heroes were made of rubber and steel. They sustain horrific blows and react as rubber toys. They fall, they stand up and they are OK. They kill someone in the distance, smiling foolishly or surprised. *Commonplace audiences regards these as a hundred percent true. And they consider themselves part of these movies.* There are no real-life circumstances – blood, pain, suffering, worries, bills, mothers, crying kids. The widow is dressed like a porno star. It is as if we are attending the funeral of a fly and not of a man. There is no dialogue. The heroes use some twenty words, sharp movements, fearful faces. Naturally, they do not read books at all. Books are not even present in the set-up. Everything is fighting, killing, striptease, drugs, rape, pursuit of other gangs under the nose of the police, as if in an asphalt jungle. The opponent is usually a bad, insidious traitor, without honour or dignity. He obviously must die. No debate there. For the scriptwriter's convenience and for market demands. *Whoever has the nerve to watch sees evil turned into good.* Actually, these movies contain something like a thesis and antithesis. These are our (good) guys and the other – the bad bandits. Our guys represent certain behavioural norm in the underground world, certain Old-Testament justice. *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.* Everything has a price, even murder is included in the price list. Actually, the word murder is not present. The victims must be cancelled, rubbed out or some other euphemism is used instead of the clear but shocking word – murdered. Thus we are speaking about a professional rather than a murderer. This is something different… The definition of crime is blurred, the unconscious suggestion is that people with such professions are normal. There is a demand for them… These movies are horrible because, without any claims for quality, by their very quantity they are brainwashing every day, they are obscuring the border between good and evil, between society and anti-society. They replace values, classic moral rules, even the Ten Commandments. They care for no authority, power, institutions, public opinion, decency, sin or crime.

These movies are made by the law of profit, they do not look for either aesthetic or ethical values. There is only the price and this with a guaranteed, fast profit included. Exactly the same as with drug dealing – enormous and fast profit. Exactly the same as the imaginary world of those heroes with which they relate and mythologize. And this is presented every day to kids and adolescents. What is the difference then between drug dealing and showing these movies? The difference is that the bad influence of these movies and its

relationship with crime increase is being discussed though to no avail. TV denies this relationship. But it cannot deny one thing.

In these movies, problems are being resolved only by violence. There is no other possibility. The good guy shoots faster than the bad guy. This is his major asset. If you have a problem, shoot immediately – quickly and accurately. Do not even think for a second. It is clear to everybody what you should do. This is the message. And when this message is being relayed persistently, and every day for years on end, we should not be surprised by the crime and its forms. The crime has already been devised somewhere, shot by camera and shown many times. The problem has a second level as well. And this is more horrible than the first one because it erodes the morality of many people.

This is the banality of violence. Movie audiences becomes accustomed to that. Gradually, violence becomes part of everyday life and no longer evokes disgust and disagreement.
Attention is distracted; senses become dull. And rough behaviour around us is escalating by the day. Aggressive persons with savage dogs frighten mothers with small kids, old or helpless people. In their movies, such people die at the end because they are not fit for anything. They even do not stay at home. They go outside and get in the way. And these are everyday reactions. But they are seen in the movies... Or vice versa – it does not really matter...

Along with expensive cars, designer suits and sunglasses, dangerous dog breeds are another requisite of the criminal. These persons do not have wives, children, families. The have a bloodthirsty, evil dog, trained in their image. For them, the dog represents another sign of superiority over the masses rather than represents a need for a companion. As is the case with movie heroes. In their eyes, society is a cloud of boring flies, institutions are a collection of corrupted drivellers, politicians are mostly homosexuals, scientists are idiots, and the family is old-time prejudice... They are the only machos. The only exclusion is some fatal prostitute.... Action is going on in the dark – bars, heroin warehouses, docks, cars. Everything happens in the night. The day is for the drivellers to work for added value, which they will steal in the night. Protagonists of utmost nihilism – these heroes do not ask, do not argue, do not doubt, do not talk, but it is they who suggest to the viewer the anti-social behavioural model. The suggestion is the most terrifying that they are the chosen caste to rule the world, they do not fear anything, they could buy or kill everything, and all the rest is garbage. Is this life? *This is fun* – claim their creators. Why not study the reaction of a young boy from a poor neighbourhood, with meagre chances in life, who is looking to avenge his low social status and is not disposed to training or work. He dreams to have everything today, in this moment, and to retaliate for life's injustices. This type of movies take 100 000 – 120 000 hours of TV broadcast time per year. And no one is impressed any more. Until the violence storms into the real life of the individual. And then this individual sees the callousness of passers-by resulting from those movies. Because gradually, imperceptibly, one gets accustomed to evil, as one gets accustomed to a quarrelsome neighbour- evil shown on TV as everyday banality. Some landscape detail...

Another movie type shown on TV are horror and fantastic films. After a series of vampires sucking blood, zombies entering foreign bodies, copulations of demons and innocent maidens, noisy monsters and aliens have conquered the screen. The major dilemma of the story is "Shall we eat or be eaten?". Then two hours of exciting activities follow, mainly

involving destruction, blasting, evaporation of everything encountered by the monsters, the aliens and humanity defenders.

For the authors' convenience, this happens after the initial line announcing that all humankind has perished, but a small group of the most qualitative, tough, physically fit, accurate shooters and computer geniuses fortunately has survived and will fight back. The group consists of 5-6 men and 1-2 women. You only have to look at them to understand that fighting is on the way. The small group wins amongst waterfalls of red paint and cannonades of most phantasmagoric weapons. Humankind again has a chance – ascertains the final line. We too – at least until the next action. The important thing is to fight, to scare the viewer, to serve him up a helping of emotions and to create a habit in him to watch and look out for that kind of entertainment.

The battles between robots and cops are another "masterpiece". Here again, our good guys shoot better and faster. A small curtsy to Homo sapiens and humanity as a whole… Only, in order to survive in such situations you will need qualifications, for which marines, police and CIA are being trained. So these are the authorities?! No debate here, either, or another way to success except for the shooting. And how could it be otherwise? Against the criminal robot (devised by a cranky scientist offended by lack of acknowledgment) stand the sleeping army, the lazy police but also, fortunately, the next Rambo, who acts. Cars are broken like straws, helicopters are blown apart, buildings are demolished… Terrible world – sighs the tormented viewer and his everyday problems seem insignificant, and he himself – offensively smaller as compared to the TV hero.

The third-dimension enemies are Islamic fundamentalists – terrorists and ex-KGB agents providing services to criminal groups. They want to destroy the USA. And, of course, they storm around on the screen for hours whilst bureaucrats, for example, torment our Schwartzenneger hero. Later, however, he is included and bursts in through *Mariott* Hotel windows on board a special fighter; shoots in rooms with his machine gun, literally crushes scores of Islamic terrorists, and so on and so forth. Sick mind fantasies never end, representing violence as entertainment. I wonder if they ever learned anything from 11 September, because then the real situation was similar to the one in the movie, but with a reversed end. Without the need for generalization, it could be assumed that the movies, created by profit – greedy sick minds, would be watched by other sick minds thirsty for revenge… Psychopaths are evenly distributed around the world…

Video spots have a serious contribution to the banality of violence, turning violence into a modus vivendi. The formula is as follows: while the singer sings, houses and yachts are blown apart in the background; hot pursuits are under way… Apocalypses now… At best, it becomes clear at the end (associatively) that the hero has been dreaming or fantasizing most naturally, and nothing has been destroyed actually.

The spot has turned into a powerful industry and is readily accepted by young people. Entire studies could be dedicated to rap singer spots and the texts of their songs. And again, we reach the banal conclusion. Music spot suggestions are mostly a triumph of destructiveness, aggressiveness, and unjustified denial.

Turned into a cliché, a mass production with spectacular computer effects, they create a way of thinking. No scientist or psychologist would be able to define to what extent the violence is perceived as a game, and to what extent – as a model of thinking, behaviour and attitude to surrounding reality.

We find continuation of this line of entertainment through violence in computer games. I do not mean

adventure, sport, and other such normal and useful games for any adolescent. I mean destruction games. One of the most popular games until recently was the aircraft simulator. It provided accurate, detailed training on how to destroy the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Why? Another "enjoyable" game was "Destroy the Pentagon". Let's have fun, say the authors. By learning how to destroy... And why not? – probably would have said some primitive person who wanted to take revenge on entire mankind for his own fictions, fanatical ideas, failures, and misfortunes. There is a very large gap between poor and rich countries and peoples. The impossibility to catch up, to be involved creates despair, hence uncontrollable aggression. If you cannot be involved in this reality, then you can deny and destroy it. Add a dose of fanaticism, a dose of heroin, sick ambitions for power, and the problem is here. Unfortunately, a mass consumption industry is also here, producing insolvent, self-boasting creations. These provoke even an educated audience, not to mention a more primitive one.

And again we reach 11 September 2001; this sad day is the beginning of a new dark stage of violence escalation. I shall not look for a direct relationship between imbecile – infantile mass production advertising violence as a means for quick profit and the real crime escalation.

I just ask: Why were these games banned after 11 September and no one protested that their freedom of speech had been violated? Where was the real prototype of the Schwartzenneger hero on 11 September, who on the screen alone defeated 100 well-trained Islamic terrorists? The *Spiderman* premiere was postponed for six months in order to cut out the silly scenes where he climbs the World Trade Center and saves it from terrorists. Probably because, after 11 September, this would have appeared awkward and ridiculous. And it would not have been only fun. Yet they say there is no connection... Why were various songs about New York banned, and this audio-visual tornado could not be in some way restricted, not only showing violence but also making it look banal?

I am aware of the point of view of three psychologist groups in respect of the relationship between virtual violence and real crime.

The first claim that, through those films and games, people are released from their imminent aggression in the home environment.

The second claim that there is indirect relationship, but no one is listening.

The third balanced position is that everything depends on the individual. It is probably so. I do not intend to investigate this relationship. I want to say loud and clear, without any subtle meaning, that a multiplication of movies, musical spots, and video games, all exploiting violence (and often admiring violence) creates the wrong habits. The act of violence becomes banal. One gets used to it and this in turn leads to displacement of values. In time, this will cause unforeseeable consequences that will find expression in individual relationships.

The first signs can already be seen.

An entire generation is already communicating by means of computers, mediators. It is learning the short, target virtual language and transfers it to everyday life – at school, in the family. For teenagers, this is fun. But this language was created for quick logical contacts in restricted electronic space;

it lacks emotions and associations. "Yes, No, Cancel". Short, clear and commanding. Is it the same with everyday communication? Doesn't incomprehension indirectly lead to aggression?

The problem is that no one is concerned about putting forward accurate questions, looking for true answers and acting as a corrective force to self-destructive consumption. "Let's enjoy ourselves to death" – read the headline of an American essay.

Well, we are apparently trying... ■