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The Real Victims Behind the Gory Films We Love

By LAKSHMY PARAMESWARAN

On the morning of Oct. 20, I listened to a discussion on the *Live in America* radio show about the impact of violent movies on the minds of viewers, prompted by the weekend's box-office hit, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. As much as I love a good murder mystery, I am firm about not watching gory, violent thrillers such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. I go to movies sometimes to shut out the world -- something I cannot do when there are blood and bullet holes and mutilated body parts on screen. I already visualize these grotesque things when I talk to women who live in fear of getting shot or stabbed at and lying in a pool of blood as part of my work counseling women and children from abused and battered homes.

The radio show analyzed the gruesome nature of the movie and our rising tolerance for violence as evidenced by the money this film has grossed, on the heels of another successful, incredibly violent thriller, *Kill Bill*. The same evening, life projected its own horror scene for three young children. A Houston man shot his wife. As she fell to the ground, he stood over her body and shot her several more times before turning the gun on himself -- all this outside their home and in front of their children. "My daddy's killing my mama!" -- one of the youngsters is reported to have screamed.

Reportedly, the couple was estranged after a turbulent seven-year relationship, and the husband had made a previous death threat by shoving a gun to his wife's head. Only their children know the brutalities they have witnessed in their own home. Sadly, the years of brewing violence culminated in the bloody scene of their father murdering their mother -- perhaps not so unlike scenes from today's most popular movies.

I learned from listening to the call-in show that *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is based on an actual killer, although the killer did not use a chainsaw to kill -- just a shotgun. Imagination, special effects and prosthetics have further dramatized a true story already laden with violence. Some callers, claiming to be regular folks who hate violence, discussed the adrenaline rush such movies provide. They described the movie's ability to lift us to an alternate state of reality where it is OK to witness killing and the sawing of body parts with the awareness that such things are wrong. It seems the gory scenes we'd abhor in real life are meant to increase our thrill, to transport us to a new realm and, ultimately, to make the movie a conduit to enrich corporate coffers. I, however, fail to see how the adrenalin rush induced by watching brutality and violence can be equated to the thrill and excitement many of us choose to derive from being creative or daring.

Studies on violence indicate that watching violence at home can condition a young mind to use violence as a solution to life's problems. At the very least, children from violent homes can suffer irreparable psychological damages. The shock and trauma of being witness to a murder of one parent by another is incomprehensible. I am certain most of us feel horrified about the murder scene the three children watched in front of their home that evening last week. Surely, we recognize that there is no alternate reality for these children. What they saw was real; no special effects; no fake body parts. Unlike scenes in movies, this single horror scene must haunt them for a long time to come. Yet, the same scene transformed into a violent thriller and projected onto a big screen years later is justified as entertainment.

As we rush to the box office, we will seldom think of the innocent victims of the brutal mind who, in fictionalized form, we are about to pay to experience. My wish is that, while watching a thriller like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* inside a darkened movie theater, we do not let go of the reality that looms larger than life on the wide screen in front of us -- those who died in vain and those left behind, forever marred by the violent act of killing.

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