

KEY TERMS

Aggression 160
Hostile aggression 160

Instrumental aggression 160

Typologies 160

11.2 The Great Train Robbery: Violence as Entertainment

First viewed in 1903, *The Great Train Robbery* (created by Edwin Porter and Thomas Edison; available on YouTube) was the very first moving picture to tell a story. Only 10 minutes long, the silent film begins when a stationmaster is beaten unconscious and then tied up by a gang who secretly board the train. Gang members exchange five shots with a guard before killing him, exploding a safe, and taking the loot. (The actor playing the dead guard wiggles around until he gets his arm in a more comfortable position, but he is *supposed* to be dead.)

Next, the gang takes over the steam engine by beating another man and throwing him off the train. They force the engineer to stop the train, rob the passengers, and shoot one man in the back as he foolishly tries to flee. That's one explosion, two beatings, two robberies, and three murders before history's first story film reached the 3-minute mark. The gang exits by shooting two more times into the air.

Cut to the unconscious, tied-up stationmaster's daughter, delivering his lunch. She discovers her father, prays that he is alive, cuts him loose with a large knife she happened to bring with her, and prays again. Finally, she throws water in his face. (She misses and actually throws the water over his shoulder, but he revives anyway.)

Cut again to a square dance of ordinary, happy citizens—who periodically shoot their guns to keep the dancing lively (three more gunshots). The stationmaster bursts in with news of the robbery and they form a posse. A chase scene produces 10 more gunshots and one more anonymous person killed. Cut once more to a forest scene in which the posse surprises the gang as they are splitting up their loot: about 25 gunshots and two more deaths.

But in the last 6 seconds, we come to the most famous scene in this historically important film. A rough-looking outlaw looks directly into the camera, slowly pulls out his gun, and fires directly at the camera! Twice! The first audience to see the film famously ducked in their seats and started to leave the theater—until they remembered that it was only a film. Then they demanded three more showings—and still didn't want to leave. Was the audience thrilled into increasing

their own levels of violence, sparked by an **escalation of aggression**? Was there a **weapons effect** in which all the guns, knives, and violence primed the audience toward aggression? Or did watching fictional violence on film provide a cathartic experience that made them more peaceful and cooperative?

The 10-minute total is as follows:

- One explosion
- One man thrown off a train (fate uncertain, probably dead)
- Two beatings
- Two competing gangs of armed civilians
- Two robberies
- Five deaths
- About 50 gunshots

That averages to approximately one act of violence every 60 seconds and one gunshot for every 12 seconds during history's first storytelling film—plus one young woman who knows how to handle a large knife.

An article on CNN's website in 2013 stated that gun violence in movies has increased steadily since 1950, that gun violence in PG-13 movies is even worse than that seen in R-rated movies, and that "Americans love movies that depict violence" (Wilson & Hudson, 2013). The article cites several statistics from a study published in the journal *Pediatrics* that reviewed violence in PG-13 movies from 1950 to 2012 (see Bushman, Jamieson, Weitz, & Romer, 2013). But gun violence in movies started with *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Aggression and gun violence have been part of film entertainment from the very beginning.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain whether you believe that the modern film industry would have evolved into something with fewer violent storylines if they had started with a dramatic story of a mother rescuing her children from a house fire, a documentary of a sailboats, pictures of kittens playing, or some other nonviolent theme.
2. How might you devise an experiment (using random assignment to groups) that would test whether viewing this particular film encouraged viewers to act, think, or feel more aggressively. Would your procedures change from 1903 (when the film was released) to now—why or why not?

3. Identify and discuss how two different social psychological theories of aggression predict increased or decreased levels of aggression after viewing this film.
4. Propose a film plot that would be likely to decrease aggression among viewers.

KEY TERMS

Escalation of aggression effect 165

Weapons effect 165

11.3 “I Could Just Kill Them!” Fantasies About Murder

I could just kill them.

Almost everyone has said or at least thought something like this in a moment of anger. Fantasizing about getting revenge on someone who has wronged us can be a guilty pleasure—but most people don't actually go through with their wistfully wicked plans. Fantasizing about murder became the dissertation topic of Josh Duntley (2006), who worked with evolutionary psychologist David Buss. Buss had, just the year before, published a book called *The Murderer Next Door: Why the Mind Is Designed to Kill* (Buss, 2005).

When Duntley (2006) asked people about whether they had ever fantasized about murdering someone, the numbers of people who said “yes” were much higher than he expected: 91% of men and 76% of women reported having had one or more specific homicidal thoughts. Would you have said yes? Consider the following three examples of cases from his research. Once a participant admitted to having a murder fantasy, he asked them questions such as, Who did you think about killing? How would you do it? What could have pushed you over the edge to actually do it?

- CASE #273, *Male, Age 24*: [Who?] My ex-girlfriend's current boyfriend, who is 28 years old. [How?] Choked him, pummeled his face till he became unconscious, and then kicked his head in. I didn't see him for a few months. [What would have pushed you over the edge to kill him?] If I had seen him, and if I was drunk and he had provoked me. (p. 49)