Any word from Oliver Stone?
Of course not.
I'm sure he would disclaim all responsibility. And he'd preach a bit about how important the film is as a commentary on the media's insatiable appetite for violence. If pressed, he'd probably say that there are a lot of crazies out there, and he can't be held responsible for what they might do. He's an artist and he can't be bothered with the effects of what he produces.

I can think of only two ways to curb the excessive violence of a film like Natural Born Killers. Both involve large sums of money—the only medium understood by Hollywood.

The first way would be a general boycott of similar films. If people refused to purchase tickets to watch such an orgy of violence as Natural Born Killers, then similar movies wouldn't be made. Hollywood is pious, but only to a point. It will defend its crassest movies on the grounds that they are necessary for social introspection, or that they need to test the limits of artistic expression, or that they can ignore the bounds of decency as long as these movies label themselves as satire. This all works fine if the box office is busy. But let the red ink flow and Hollywood suddenly has a keen interest in rediscovering what's mainstream.

Unfortunately, boycotts don't seem to work. The viewing public is a large, eclectic body, and there are usually enough curious filmgoers to sustain a controversial work.

So, forget boycotts.

The second and last hope of imposing some sense of responsibility on Hollywood, will come through another great American tradition, the lawsuit. Think of a movie as a product, something created and brought to market, not too dissimilar from breast implants, Honda three-wheelers, and Ford Pintos. Though the law has yet to declare movies to be products, it is only one small step away. If something goes wrong with the product, whether by design or defect, and injury ensues, then its makers are held responsible.

A case can be made that there exists a direct causal link between the movie Natural Born Killers and the death of Bill Savage. Viewed another way, the question should be: Would Ben have shot innocent people but for the movie? Nothing in his troubled past indicates violent propensities. But once he saw the movie, he fantasized about killing, and his fantasies finally drove him to their crimes.

The notion of holding filmmakers and studios legally responsible for their products has always been met with gutflaws from the industry.

But the laughing will soon stop. It will take only one large verdict against the likes of Oliver Stone, and his production company, and perhaps the screenwriter, and the studio itself, and then the party will be over. The verdict will come from the heartland, far away from Southern California, in some small courtroom with no cameras. A jury will finally say enough is enough; that the demons placed in Sarah Edmondson's mind were not solely of her making.

Once a precedent is set, the litigation will become contagious, and the money will become enormous. Hollywood will suddenly discover a desire to rein itself in.

The landscape of American jurisprudence is littered with the remains of large, powerful corporations which once thought themselves bulletproof and immune from responsibility for their actions. Sadly, Hollywood will have to be forced to shed some of its own blood before it learns to police itself.

Even sadder, the families of Bill Savage and Patsy Byers can only mourn and try to pick up the pieces, and wonder why such a wretched film was allowed to be made.

Responding to Reading
1. Grisham opens his essay by providing background, including an explanation of his relationship to murder victim Bill Savage. Is this background information necessary? In what way does it help Grisham make his point?
2. Is this essay an attack on one film, Natural Born Killers, and its director, Oliver Stone? A critique of Hollywood's values? A call to action designed to encourage readers to hold studios legally responsible for their films? What do you see as Grisham's primary purpose in writing this essay?
3. In paragraph 70, Grisham says, "A case can be made that there exists a direct causal link between the movie Natural Born Killers and the death of Bill Savage." Do you agree? Does Grisham make such a case? Explain your conclusions.

Why Blame TV?

John Leonard

John Leonard (1939– ) was born in Washington, D.C., and attended Harvard University and the University of California at Berkeley. A long-time staff writer for the New York Times and now a cultural critic for a number of different periodicals—as well as television critic for New York magazine—he has published a number of books, beginning with The Naked Martini in 1964. His most recent are The Last Innocent White Man in America (1993) and Smoke and Mirrors: Violence, Television, and Other American Cultures (1996). "Why Blame TV?" which originally appeared in 1993 in the liberal periodical The Nation, is Leonard's response in legislation proposed by Congress that year that would have severely limited the amount of violence broadcast by television networks, particularly during children's viewing hours. Leonard takes the position that television
has little if any negative effect on its audience and that, in fact, television offers a surprising amount of beneficial programming.

Like a warrior-king of Sumer, daubed with sesame oil, gorged on goat, hefting up his sword and drum, Senator Ernest Hollings looked down November 23 from a ziggurat to intone, all over the op-ed page of the New York Times: "If the TV and cable industries have no sense of shame, we must take it upon ourselves to stop licensing their violence-saturated programming." 2

Hollings, of course, is co-sponsor in the Senate, with Daniel Inouye, of a ban on any act of violence on television before, say, midnight. Never mind whether this is constitutional, or what it would do to the local news. Never mind, either, that in Los Angeles last August, in the International Ballroom of the Beverly Hilton, in front of 600 industry executives, the talking heads—a professor here, a producer there, a child psychologist and a network veep for program standards—couldn't even agree on a definition of violence. (Is it only violent if it hurts or kills?) And they disagreed on which was worse, a "happy" violence that sugarcoats aggressive behavior or a "graphic" violence that at least suggests consequences. (How, anyway, does television manage somehow simultaneously to desensitize and to incite?) Nor were they really sure what goes on in the dreamy heads of our children as they crouch in the dark to commune with the tube while their parents, if they have any, aren't around. (Road Runner? Beep-beep.) Nor does the infamous scarlet V "parent advisory" warning even apply to cartoons, afternoon soaps, or Somalians.

Never mind, because everybody agrees that watching television causes anti-social behavior, especially among the children of the poor; that there seems to be more violent programming on the air now than there ever was before; that Beavis and Butthead inspired an Ohio 5-year-old to burn down the family trailer; that in the blue druidic light of television we will have spawned generations of goons and grifters.

In fact, there is less violence on network television than there used to be; because of ratings, it's mostly sitcoms. The worst stuff is the Hollywood splattersticks: they're found on premium cable, which means the poor are less likely to be watching. Everywhere else on cable, not counting the court channel or home shopping and not even to think about blood sports and Pat Buchanan, the fare is innocent to the point of stupefaction (Disney, Discovery, Family, Nickelodeon). That Ohio trailer wasn't even wired for cable, so the littlest firebird must have got his MTV elsewhere in the dangerous neighborhood. (And kids have been playing with matches since, at least, Prometheus. I recall burning down my very own bedroom when I was 5 years old. The fire department had to tell my mother that the evidence pointed to me.) Since the '60s, according to statistics cited by Douglas Davis in The Five Myths of Television Power, more Americans than ever before are going out to eat in restaurants, see films, plays, and baseball games, visit museums, travel abroad, jog, even read. Watching television, everybody does something else at the same time. While our children are playing with their Adobe Illustrators and Dymo Virtual Reality Toolkits, the rest of us eat, knit, smoke, dream, read magazines, sign checks, feel sorry for ourselves, think about Hillary, and plot shrewd career moves or revenge.

Actually watching television, unless it's C-SPAN, is usually more interesting than the proceedings of Congress. Or what we read in hystorical books like Jerry Mander's Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television, or George Gilder's Life After Television, or Marie Winn's The Plug-In Drug, or Neil Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death, or Bill McKibben's The Age of Missing Information. Or what we'll hear at panel discussions on censorship, where right-wingers worry about sex and left-wingers worry about violence. Or just lolling around an academic deepthink-tank, trading mantras like "violence profiles" (George Gerbner), "processed culture" (Richard Hoggart), "narcoleptic joys" (Michael Sorkin), and "glass teat" (Harlan Ellison).

Of course something happens to us when we watch television; networks couldn't sell their millions of pairs of eyes to advertising agencies, nor would ad agencies buy more than $21 billion worth of commercial time each year, if speech (and sound, and motion) didn't somehow modify action. But what happens is far from clear and won't be much clarified by lab studies, however longitudinal, of habits and behaviors isolated from the larger feedback loop of a culture full of gaudy contradictions. The only country in the world that watches more television than we do is Japan, and you should see its snuff movies and pornographic comic books; but the Japanese are pikers compared with us when we compute per capita rates of rape and murder. Some critics in India tried to blame the recent rise in communal violence there on a state-run television series dramatizing the Mahabharata, 3 but not long ago they were blaming Salman Rushdie, 4 as in Bangladesh they have decided to blame the writer Taslima Nasrin. No Turk I know of attributes skinhead violence to German TV. It's foolish to pretend that all behavior is mimetic, and that our only model is Spock or Brokaw or Mork and Mindy. Why, after so many years of M*A*S*H, weekly in prime time and nightly in reruns, aren't all of us out there hugging trees and morphing dolphins? Why, with so many sitcoms, aren't all of us comedians?

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1 Books critical of the effects of television. See p. 262 for an excerpt from The Plug-in Drug. [Eds.]
2 Epic Sanskrit poem describing the exploits of ancient kings and heroes. [Eds.]
3 Indian-born novelist long in hiding because of a death sentence imposed by Islamic extremists, who deemed his novel The Satanic Verses sacrilegious. [Eds.]
4 Turkish-born immigrants in Germany have been victims of violent attacks by neo-Nazi groups. [Eds.]
But nobody normal watches television the way congressmen, academics, symposiasts, and Bill McKibbens do. We are less thrilling. For instance:

On March 3, 1993, a Wednesday midway through the nine-week run of *Homicide* on NBC, in an episode written by Tom Fontana and directed by Martin Campbell, Baltimore detectives Bayliss (Kyle Secor) and Pemberton (Andre Braugher) had 12 hours to write a confession out of "Arab" Tucker (Moss Gunn) for the strangulation and disemboweling of a 11-year-old girl. In the dirty light and appalling intimacy of a single claustrophobic room, with a whoosh of wind sound like some dread blowing in from empty Gobi spaces, among maps, library books, diaries, junk food, pornographic crime-scene photographs, and a single black overflowing ashtray, these three men seemed as nervous as the hand-held cameras—as if their black coffee were full of jumping beans, amphetamines, and spiders; as if God himself were jerking them around.

Well, you may think the culture doesn't really need another cop show. And, personally, I'd prefer a weekly series in which social problems are solved through creative nonviolence, after a Quaker meeting, by a collective of vegetarian carpenters. But in a single hour, for which Tom Fontana eventually won an Emmy, I learned more about the behavior of fearful men in small rooms than from any number of better-known movies, plays, and novels on the topic by the likes of Don DeLillo, Mary McCarthy, Alberto Moravia, Heinrich Böll, and Doris Lessing.

This, of course, was an accident, as it usually is when those of us who watch television like normal people are startled in our expectations. We leave home expecting, for a lot of money, to be exalted, and almost never are. But staying put, slumped in an agnosticism about sentence itself, suspecting that our cable box is just another bad-faith credit card enabling us to multiply our opportunities for disappointment, we are ambushed in our lethargy. And not so much by "event" television, like Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, originally a six-hour miniseries for Swedish television; or Marcel Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity*, originally conceived for French television; or Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, commissioned by German television; or *The Singing Detective*; or *The Jewel in the Crown*. On the contrary, we've stayed home on certain nights to watch television, the way on other nights we'll go out to a neighborhood restaurant, as if on Mondays we ordered in for laughs, as on Fridays we'd rather eat Italian. We go to television-message center, mission control, Big Neighbor, electronic Elmer's glue-all—to look at Oscars, Super Bowls, moon shots, Watergates, Pearlygates, ayatollahs, dead Kings, dead Kennedys; and also, perhaps, to experience some "virtual" community as a nation. But we also go because we are hungry, angry, lonely, or tired, and television is always there for us, a 24-hour user-friendly magic box grinding out narrative, novelty, and distraction, news and laughs, snippets of high culture, remedial seriousness and vulgar celebrity, an incitement and a seditive, a place to celebrate and a place to mourn, a circus and a wishing well.

And suddenly Napoleon shows up, like a popsicle, on *Northern Exposure*, while Chris on the radio is reading Proust. Or Roseanne is about lesbianism instead of bowling. Or *Picket Fences* has moved on, from serial batters and elephant abuse to euthanasia and gay bashing.

Kurt Vonnegut on Showtime! David ("Masturbation") Mamet on TNT! Norman Mailer wrote the TV screenplay for *The Executioner's Song*, and Gore Vidal gave us *Lincoln* with Mary Tyler Moore as Mary Todd. In just the past five years, if I hadn't been watching television, I'd have missed *Tanner '88*, when Robert Altman and Garry Trudeau ran Michael Murphy for president of the United States; *My Name Is Bill W.*, with James Woods as the founding father of Alcoholics Anonymous; *The Final Days*, with Theodore Bikel as Henry Kissinger; *No Place Like Home*, where there wasn't one for Christine Lahti and Jeff Daniels, as there hadn't been for Jane Fonda in *The Dollmaker* and Marc Winningham in *God Bless the Child: Eyes on the Prize*, a home movie in two parts about America's second civil war; *The Last Best Year*, with Mary Tyler Moore and Bernadette Peters learning to live with their gay sons and HIV, *Separate but Equal*, with Sidney Poitier as Thurgood Marshall; and *High Crimes and Meddlemen*: the Bill Moyers special on Iranate and the scandal of our intelligence agencies; Graham Greene, John Updike, Philip Roth, Gloria Naylor, Arthur Miller, and George Eliot, plus Paul Simon and Stephen Sondheim. Not to mention—guiltiest of all our secrets—those hoots without which any popular culture would be as tedious as a John Cage or an Anaïs Nin, like Elizabeth Taylor in *Sweet Bird of Youth* and the Redgrave sisters in a remake of Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?

What all this television has in common is narrative. Even network news—which used to be better than most newspapers before the bean counters started closing down overseas bureaus and the red camera lights went out all over Europe and Asia and Africa—is in the storytelling business. And so far no one in Congress has suggested banning narrative.

Because I watch all those despised network TV movies, I know more about racism, ecology, homelessness, gun control, child abuse, gender confusion, date rape, and AIDS than do most writers, say, Katie Roiphe, the Joyce Maynard of Generation X, or than Hollywood has ever bothered to tell me, especially about AIDS. Imagine, Jonathan...
Demme's *Philadelphia* opened in theaters around the country well after at least a dozen TV movies on AIDS that I can remember without troubling my hard disk. And I've learned something else, too:

We were a violent culture before television. From Wounded Knee to the lynching bee, and we'll be one after all our children have disappeared by video game into the pixels of cyberspace. Before television, we blamed public schools for what went wrong with the Little People back when classrooms weren't overcrowded in buildings that weren't falling down in neighborhoods that didn't resemble Beirut, and whose fault is that? *The A-Team?* We can't control guns, or drugs, and each year two million American women are assaulted by their male partners, who are usually in an alcoholic rage, and whose fault is that? *Miami Vice?* The gang wars menace our streets aren't home watching Cinemax, and neither are the sociopaths who make bonfires in our parks, from our homeless, of whom there are at least a million, a supply-side migratory tide of the deindustrialized and dispossessed, of angry beggars, refugee children, and catatonic nomads, none of them traumatized by *Twin Peaks*. So cut Medicare, kick around the Brady Bill, and animadvert *Amy Fisher* movies. But children who are loved and protected long enough to grow up to have homes and respect and lucky enough to have jobs don't riot in the streets. Ours is a tantrum culture that measures everyone by his or her ability to produce wealth, and morally condemns anybody who fails to prosper, and now blames Burbank for its angry incoherence. Why not recessive genes, angry gods, lousy weather? The mafia, the zodiac, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion?* Probability theory, demonic possession, Original Sin? *George Steinbrenner?* Sunspots?

**Responding to Reading**

1. Leonard claims that “there is less violence on network television than there used to be” and that, other than on premium cable, “the fare is innocent to the point of stupefaction” (4). Do your observations support or challenge his conclusions?

2. Leonard says, “We were a violent culture before television. From Wounded Knee to the lynching bee” (15). Does this fact justify the inclusion of so much violence on TV? Could you argue that the acts of group violence Leonard mentions are different from the many individual acts of violence we see today? Do you believe television is in any way responsible for individual acts of violence? Explain.

3. In defending television, Leonard says that “children who are loved and protected long enough to grow up to have homes and respect and lucky enough to have jobs don’t riot in the streets” (15). What point is he making? Is his argument a logical one? How would John Grisham (p. 343) reply to Leonard?

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**MEDIA AND THE ADOLESCENT**

**Madeline Levine**

Child psychologist Madeline Levine (1947– ) has taught graduate courses at the University of California Medical Center in San Francisco and serves as a consultant to a number of schools in the Bay Area. A private practitioner who has focused on parenting issues since 1980, Levine is also a frequent lecturer on media violence and childhood and adolescent development. In the following section from her book *Viewing Violence: How Media Violence Affects Your Child’s and Adolescent’s Development* (1996), Levine argues that while “no one movie or television program, no matter how violent, is likely to be damaging to reasonably healthy adolescents,” the fact that “violence is the rule rather than the exception” in many popular movies and on television does have a negative effect—especially on adolescent boys, who can come to see “intimidation and abuse of power as ways to navigate the world.”

“I wouldn’t mind thinking I was somebody.”

—Mike in *Breaking Away*

This simple statement, spoken by an adolescent who feels his future options are limited, illustrates the longing and hopefulness of all teenagers. If, at the end of adolescence, teenagers feel like they are “somebody,” then the developmental tasks of adolescence have been successfully resolved. These young people will carry into adulthood an enduring sense of self. Those adolescents who enter adulthood feeling like “nobody,” however, are at risk for leading lives that are nonproductive, unsatisfying, and frequently antisocial.

While this is not [an essay] about the sociology of adolescence, it is impossible to write about teenagers while ignoring the crisis that American youth are experiencing. The role of media and their effects on adolescents can be understood only if we realize that our teenagers are confronting unprecedented social problems. While the reasons for these problems are complex and not likely to be easily solved, the media’s contribution to the problems of teenage violence, pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and hopelessness are well documented and substantial.

It would be preposterous to claim that all these social ills are caused by the media. But to ignore the role of the media in contributing to these dreadful statistics is to ignore one of the most potent influences in the lives of teenagers. Children who watch *Sesame Street* can increase their cognitive skills; those who watch *Mister Rogers* have been shown to exhibit more compassionate behavior. Adults have learned to buckle up, quit smoking, and begin exercising, largely from massive public health campaigns presented through the media. Advertisers