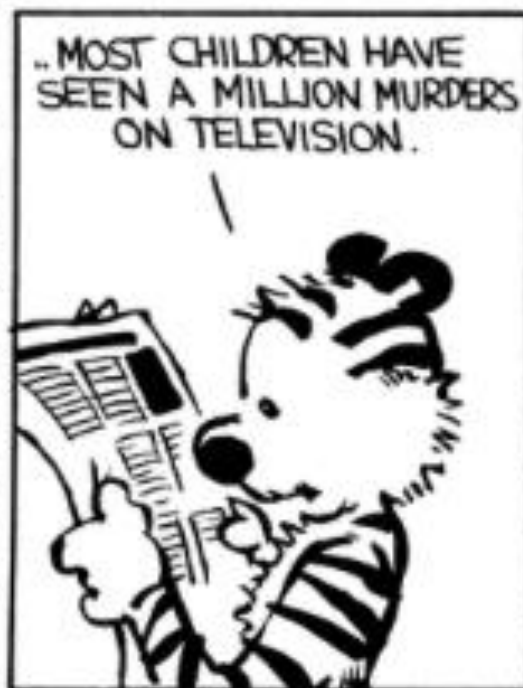# The Psychology of Violent Television: Why We Watch and How it Affects Us



PSYCHALIVE Webinar May 12, 2023

Presenters: Jonathan Bassett and Sheldon Solomon

# Calvin and Hobbes by Bill Watterson for December 30, 1985

- Cultural Indicators Project (Signorielli et al., 2018)

Analysis of prime time network programming from 1967-2015

Although there has been some slight variation over time (violence on television actually declined in the 1990's due primarily to the increase in popularity of sitcoms) violence has consistently remained a prevalent aspect of television.

The percentage of programs containing violence has hovered at **70%**

The average number of violent acts per program was **4.64**

# *The Psychology of Violent Television*

- Two broad questions:

  1. Why do we watch?

  2. How does watching affects us?

# Why we watch

- Vicarious stimulation / Sensation seeking

(Elias & Dunning, 1970;Hoffner & Levine, 2005; Zuckerman & Litle, 1986)

# Mastery / Practice for Danger

- Mastery

-- Curious self-protective theme such that people are fascinated with true crime and serial killers because they think by learning as much as they can about these topics the can keep themselves safe and avoid becoming victims (Kottler, 2011).

# Why we watch

- Excitation transfer theory / relief

(Zillmann, 1998)

# Why we watch

- Dispositional alignment / restorative justice / belief in just world (Zillmann, 1998)
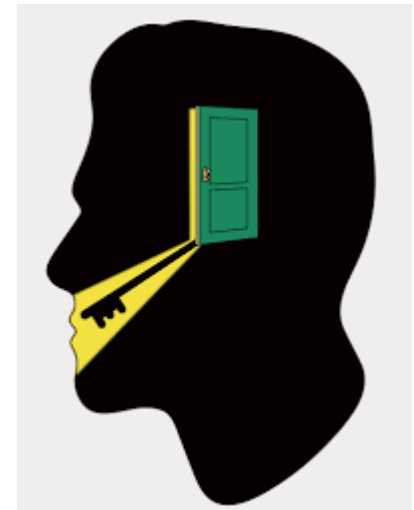
But what about the traumatizing deaths of beloved characters?

# Why we watch

The allure of the suppressed.

People are drawn to fictional depictions of culturally taboo topics because it provides them with a safe psychological space to confront the frightening and unknown.

# Death as the taboo topic of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries



Exposure to actual death and dead bodies

Fascination with media depictions of violent death and corpses

*Geoffrey Gorer*

# The Pornography of Death

*"Birth, and copulation, and death.*
*That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks;*
*Birth, and copulation, and death."*
T. S. Eliot. SWEENEY AGONISTES (1932)

PORNOGRAPHY is, no doubt, the opposite face, the shadow, of prudery, whereas obscenity is an aspect of seemliness. No society has been recorded which has not its rules of seemliness, of words or actions which arouse discomfort and embarrassment in some contexts, though they are essential in others. The people before whom one must maintain a watchful seemliness vary from society to society: all people of the opposite sex, or all juniors, or all elders, or one's parents-in-law, or one's social superiors or inferiors, or one's grandchildren have been selected in different societies as groups in whose presence the employment of certain words or the performance of certain actions would be considered offensive; and then these words or actions become charged with effect. There is a tendency for these words and actions to be related to sex and excretion, but this is neither necessary nor universal: according to Malinowski, the Tro-

laughter which seems identical the world over; however little one may know about a strange society, however little one may know about the functions of laughter in that society (and these can be very various) one can immediately tell when people are laughing at an obscene joke. The topper of the joke may be "And then he ate the whole meal in front of them!" or "She used her husband's name in the presence of his mother!" but the laughter is the same; the taboos of seemliness have been broken and the result is hilarious. Typically, such laughter is confined to one-sex groups and is more general with the young, just entering into the complexities of adult life.

Obscenity then is a universal, an aspect of man and woman living in society; everywhere and at all times there are words and actions which, when misplaced, can produce shock, social embarrassment, and laughter. Pornography on the other hand, the descrip-

Gorer, G. (1955). The pornography of death. *Encounter*, 5(4), 49-52.

Routledge

# Dead famous and dead sexy: Popular culture, forensics, and the rise of the corpse

JACQUE LYNN FOLTYN
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ABSTRACT    *This paper examines the rise of the real and simulated cadaver of scientific and forensic investigation in popular culture and the cultural meanings of that ascent. While it spotlights the celebrity corpse, it explores the obscure one too, for modern media constructions have transformed both into infotainment commodities. In societies oversaturated with images of sex, death is the new sex, the corpse the new body to be voyeuristically explored. Gorer's essay, The pornography of death (1955) is updated with a discussion of three kinds of dead body porn, including corpse porn. Other themes examined include: the continuity and discontinuity between actual corpses and their facsimiles, how images of corpses figure with other representations of the body, cultural ambivalence about the corpse, the banality of death, the search for immortality, and how the corpse as a social construction challenges Western cultural taboos and practices surrounding the dead body.*
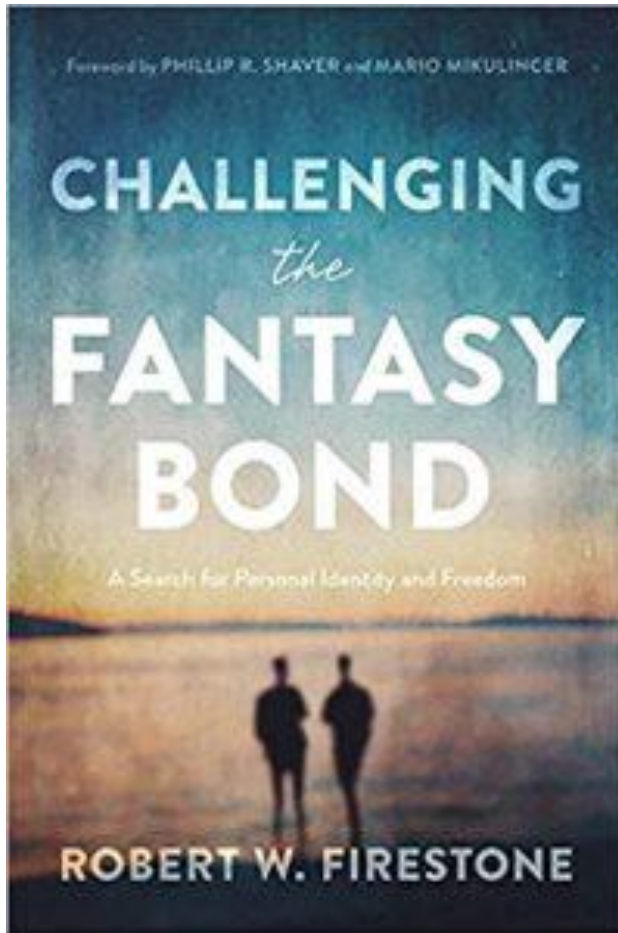
KEYWORDS:   death; corpse; cadaver; the body; forensics; DNA; pornography; sex; popular culture; celebrity; fame; immortality; simulated reality

Foltyn, J. L. (2008). Dead famous and dead sexy: Popular culture, forensics, and the rise of the corpse. *Mortality, 13*, 153-173.

# But fascination with death and violence are not new
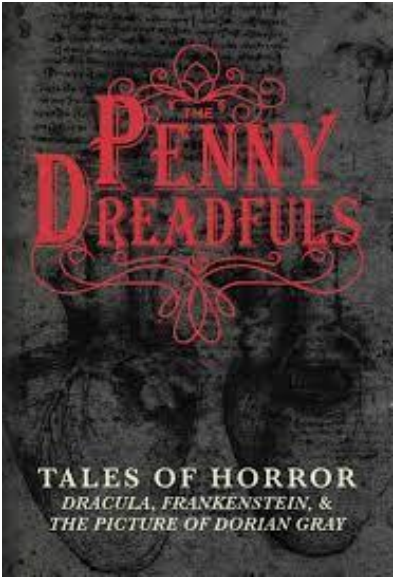
# Separation Theory



- Separation Theory explains the prominent psychological role that death anxiety can have in shaping human behavior.

<u>vanity and specialness</u> as defenses against death anxiety

- One of the common defenses people employ to manage death anxiety is adopting a sense of vanity and specialness (Firestone, 1993; Firestone & Catlett, 2009).
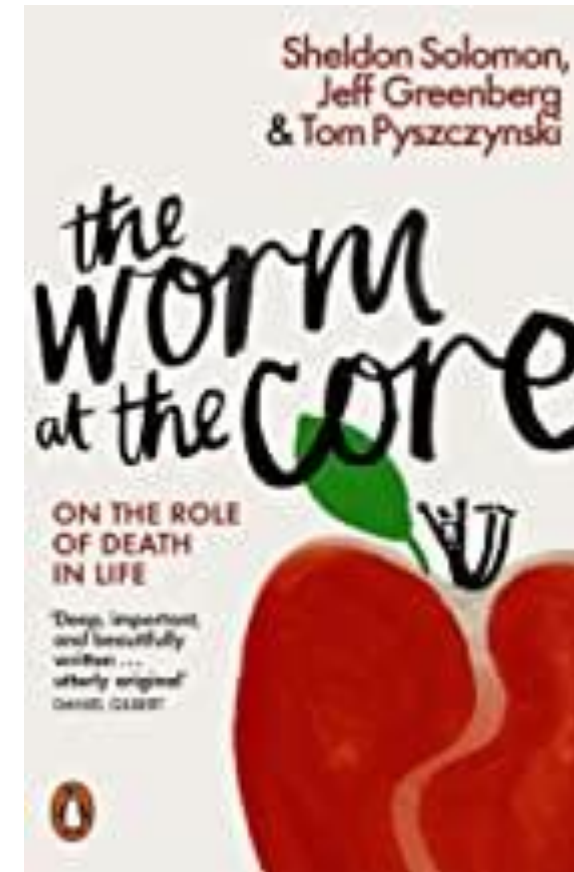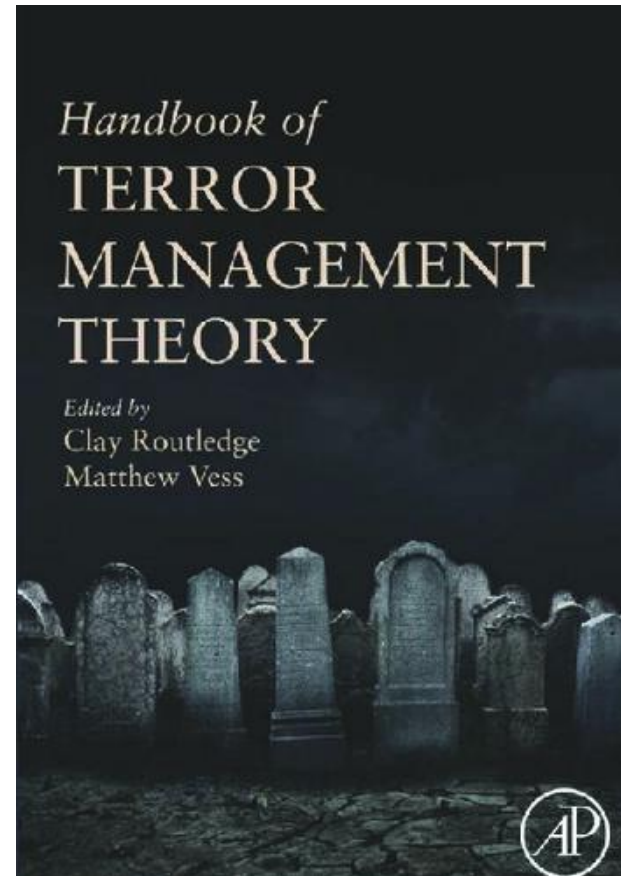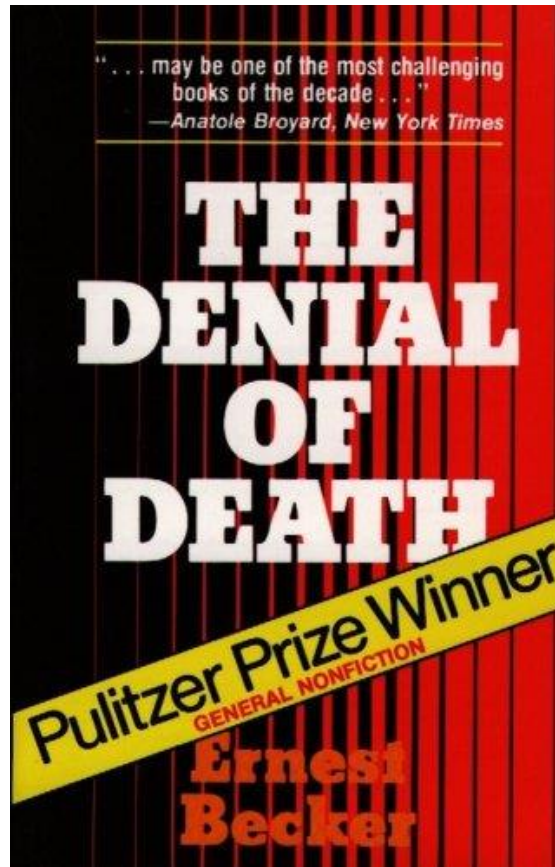
# The Fantasy Bond

- Firestone (2022) describes the fantasy bond as another pervasive strategy that people use to avoid facing the painful reality of death.

# Fear of death as a universal aspect of human psychology

# How people deal with the awareness of death
(Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015)

- Direct defenses: denial, suppression, exaggerate longevity, safe/healthy pursuit

- Symbolic defenses: strive for posthumous fame/legacy , merge identity with larger and more enduring entities

Insights from Separation Theory and Terror Management Theory illuminate how violent television can actually augment viewers' psychological defenses against death anxiety.

Ways that viewing violent television can potentially reduce fears of death through direct/ proximal defenses:

- Identification with the agents of killing as a way to avoid being its victim

identification

"the death fear of the ego is lessened by the killing, the sacrifice, of the other; through the death of the other, one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying, of being killed"

(Otto Rank, 1941, p. 130).
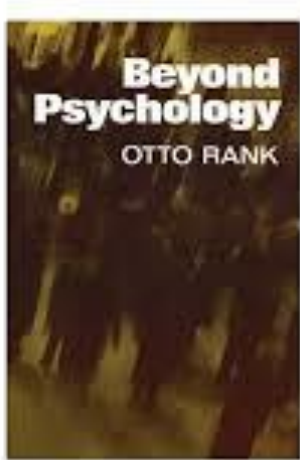
"the longer people looked at the death of someone else, the more pleasure they could have in sensing the security and good fortune of their own survival"

(Becker, 1975, p. 110).
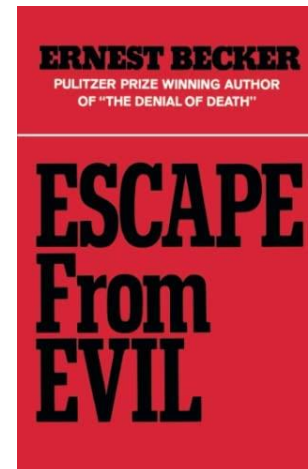
"There are two kinds of people in the world: killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don't have the disposition, the rage, whatever it takes to be a killer; but think how exciting it is in theory to kill a person. If he dies you do not. To kill him is to gain life credit. Who knows, maybe violence is a form of rebirth and maybe we can kill death."

Murray speaking to Jack in 2022 Netflix movie *White Noise* based on 1985 novel of same name by Don DeLillo
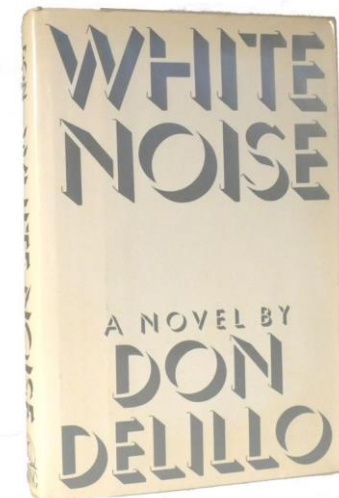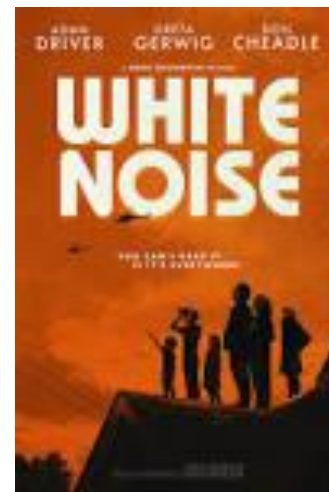
"I'm not the one that dies, kid. I'm the one that does the killing."

*Frank Castle to Amy in The Punisher* S2.Ep9: Flustercluck

Ways that viewing violent television can potentially reduce fears of death through direct/ proximal defenses:

- Focus on death of others through violent and avoidable causes

WHEN YOU PLAY
THE GAME OF THRONES,
YOU WIN OR YOU DIE.
THERE IS NO MIDDLE GROUND.

A tv episode you will not likely see:

how to kill the bad guy, save the day, get the girl, ride of into the sunset,

and ..



still die anyway.

Ways that viewing violent television can potentially reduce fears of death through direct/ proximal defenses:

- Mastery through depictions of resilient heroes

Chuck Norris doesn't cheat death.
He wins fair and square.



DEATH ONCE HAD A NEAR CHUCK NORRIS EXPERIENCE

Ways that viewing violent television can potentially reduce fears of death through **symbolic/ distal defenses**:

- Annihilation of worldview threatening OTHERS potentially validates viewers' cultural belief system, thereby reducing vulnerability to existential concerns

- Violence as a means of heroic self-esteem and symbolic immortality/ transcendent impact on the world

- Concerns about death made prominent by the violence in a show can increase the appeal of narratives about the enduring power of culture and heroism presented as justification for the violence.

# Death Thought Accessibility

COFF_ _

DE_ _

SK_ll

Terror Management defenses work like a buffer or shield to keep thoughts of death out of conscious awareness

Fighting Death with Death (Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008)
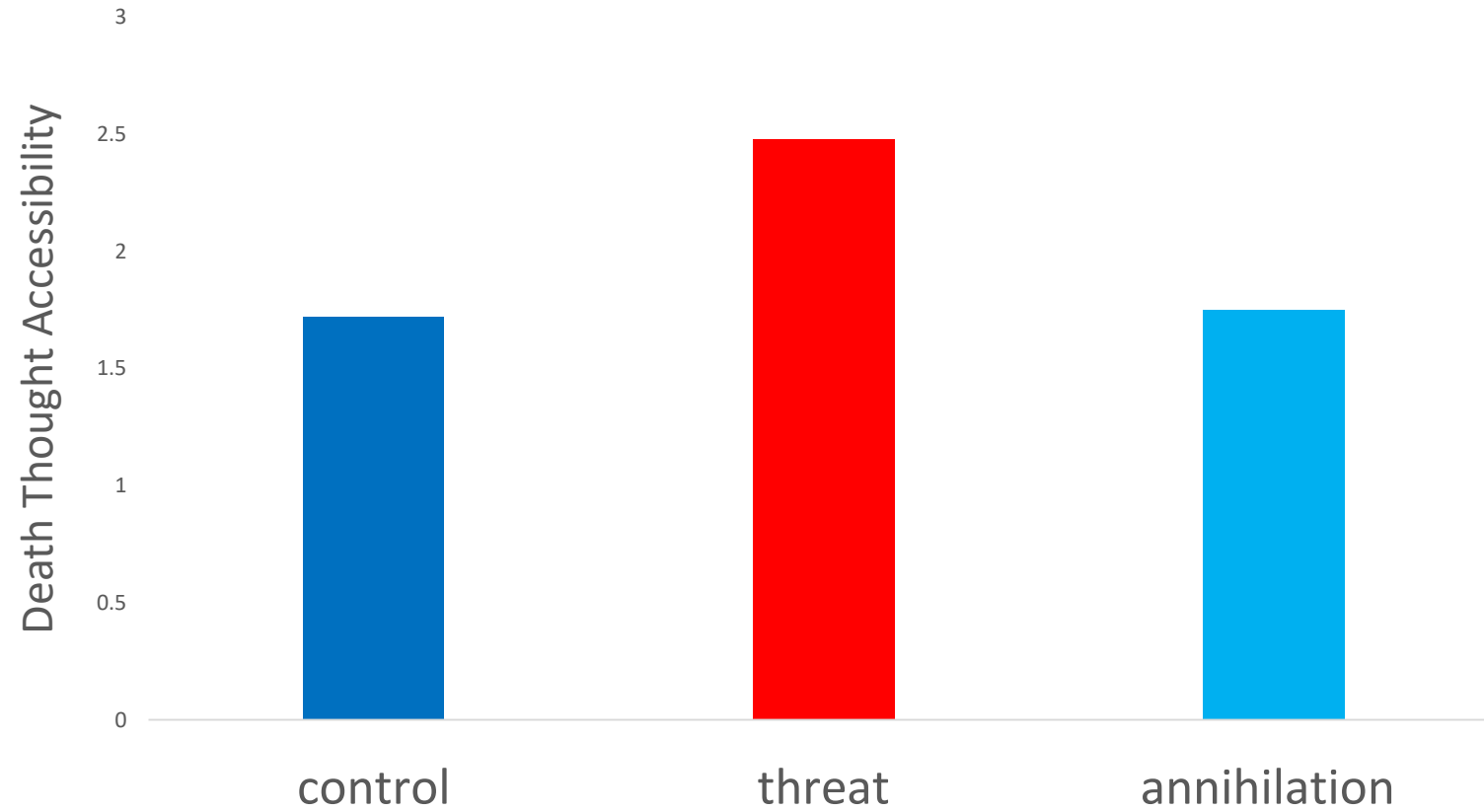
To the extent that violence is depicted as restoring justice and results in the destruction of Others who are perceived as ideologically threatening, watching such fictional violence could have the counterintuitive effect of reducing thoughts and worries about death.



Death Thoughts and Worries
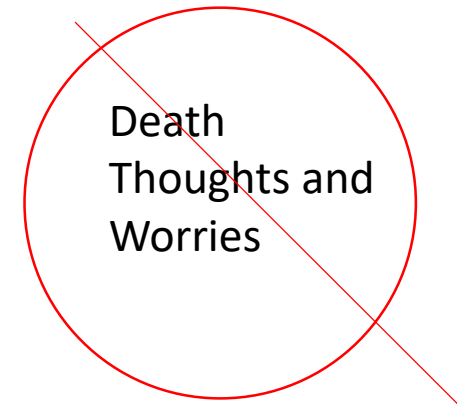
# Violence as necessary to protect the nuclear family

# Violence as a way to protect the in-group or cause

# Violence as necessary to make the world a better place / rid the world of evil

# How watching violent television affects us?

1. Direct emulation of violence

2. Increased aggressive thoughts and feelings

3. Increased perception of the world as a dangerous place

4. Decreased sensitivity to the suffering of others and decreased reservations about the use of violence especially against outgroup members

5. Greater tolerance of violence against women, and greater acceptance of patriarchal and misogynistic belief systems

# Sexual Objectification and Violence

- A meta-analysis of the effects of depictions of sexual violence and sexual objectification in media (film, print, and video games) reveals that both violent and non-violent sexualized media can have negative impacts on consumers including:

    Greater aggressive thoughts

    Increased hostile feelings

    More acceptance of rape myths

    Increased sexism and objectification of women

(Burnay et al., 2021)

# Existential Worries Exacerbate Sexism and Hostility Against Women

- Women's bodies are potentially psychologically threatening to men because they remind them of their embodied-animal-nature and therefore their mortality (Goldenberg et al., 2019).

- Men blame women as the source of their lust and respond with misogyny and hostility (Goldenberg & Roberts, 2004).

- Experimentally inducing thoughts of death and lust lead male participants to show more acceptance of violence against women (Landua et al., 2006).

- Lethal violence, sexual objectification, and sexual violence against women tend to be co-present to large degrees in shows like *Game of Thrones* and *Sons of Anarchy*.

- TMT offers insight into this comorbidity by explaining how existential threat can actual exacerbate both the sexual objectification of women and also intensify misogynist beliefs that justify violence and sexual violence against women.

# Recommendations for viewing:

- Monitor viewing habits and try to watch violence in moderation and make sure you are watching other types of non-violent shows and dramatic shows that depict more realistic portrayals of death.

- Analogy don't have to totally avoid fat in diet. Okay and even necessary to eat some fat but in moderation and healthy eating is not just avoiding fat but have to eat protein and carbs and vitamins and minerals as well.



- ■ Violent
- ■ Non-violent
- ■ Dramatic realistic death



HEALTHY EATING PLATE



Balanced diet
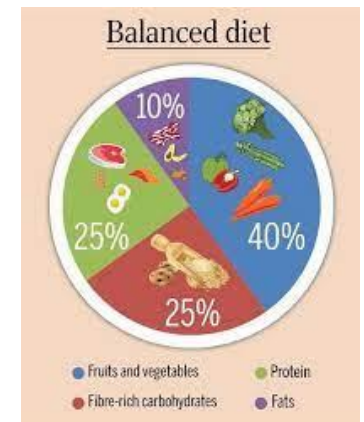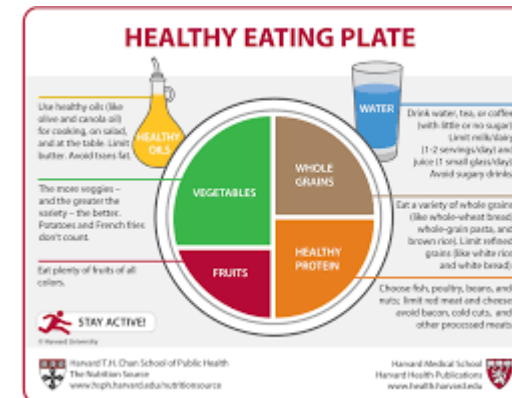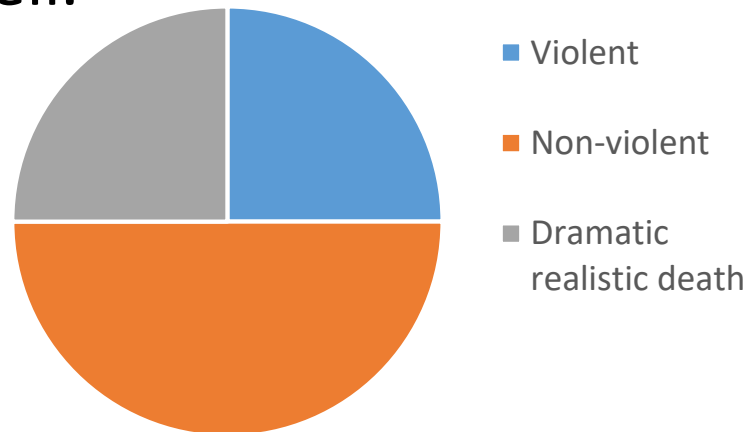
# Recommendations for viewing:

- Analyze the type of violence as antagonal/melodramatic or more complex nuanced.

- Analogy to good versus bad cholesterol. Monolithic and formulaic depictions are likely to be pacifying whereas more complex depictions can be challenging.
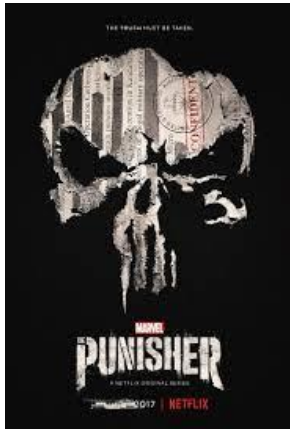
Pacifying                                              Challenging

# Different motives for viewing

- enjoyment (hedonic)



- appreciation (eudemonic)

# Recommendations for viewing:

- Be mindful of your reactions and interrogate those reactions.

- Be wary of enjoyment and celebration of violent content.

- Strive for appreciation and thoughtful post-viewing reflection on the moral, ethical, and social issues raised by the violence and how concerns about death could be impacting your reactions.

- The most important issue might not be how much violent television a culture produces but rather how people consume it.

- There seems a hopeful possibility that even if fictional violence remains prevalent its possible harmful effects can be lessened by an awareness of the ways in which the motive to manage existential anxiety underlies its appeal.

- Fostering a sense of self-awareness, the capacity to tolerate some level of anxiety, an ability to live with the awareness of mortality, and a deliberate and rational mindset can be factors that protect viewers against accepting a culture of violence.

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*Death on the Small Screen: The Psychology of Viewing Violent Television*

# The Psychology of Violent Television: Why We Watch and How it Affects Us



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# Concluding Thoughts!

# Questions