Would curbing gun usage in movies help prevent mass shootings?

The sharpest opinions on the debate from around the web

By Brendan Morrow for *The Week*, June 21, 2022

As Americans once again call for an end to the seemingly constant barrage of mass shootings in the United States, should Hollywood rethink the way gun violence is depicted in movies?

Following a series of deadly mass shootings in Buffalo, New York, and Uvalde, Texas, some Hollywood producers have vowed to make a change, arguing that the entertainment industry can play a role in reducing the glorification of gun violence. Still others feel these efforts are misguided and a distraction from more meaningful solutions.

MODELING CULTURAL CHANGE

J.J. Abrams, Judd Apatow, and Shonda Rhimes are among the more than 200 writers, directors, and producers who have signed an open letter released by the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence vowing to support "positive cultural change by modeling firearm safety on screen."

Stories "have the power to effect change," they argue, and "it's time to take on gun safety" the same way movies and TV shows have helped shift "cultural attitudes toward smoking, drunk driving, seatbelts, and marriage equality."

The group stresses it's not calling for removing guns from films and TV shows. But the signees vow to "model responsible gun ownership and show consequences for reckless gun use" in their projects, including by potentially showing characters safely locking their guns and making sure they're inaccessible to children. During pre-production, the producers and writers also say they'll discuss the way guns will be portrayed and whether there are "alternatives that could be employed without sacrificing narrative integrity." Finally, they call for limiting scenes that involve children and guns.

AN 'UNBRIDLED ROMANTICIZATION' OF GUNS

Prior to the open letter, Real Time host Bill Maher criticized Hollywood's "unbridled romanticization of gun violence," arguing it could contribute to mass shootings. "We don't show movie characters smoking anymore because it might look cool and influence children, but you're telling me these cool dudes don't influence them?" Maher asked, pointing especially to action movies where the heroes seek revenge by mowing down villains with guns.

At The Ankler, Richard Rushfield similarly argued "our national fetishistic gun culture" plays a role in shootings and that Hollywood movies contribute to this culture. And at America magazine, Jim McDermott wrote "the more that guns appear on screen, the more normalized they become."

While Sonny Bunch at The Washington Post said he's skeptical of claims that on-screen gun violence leads to real violence, he suggested the most important change Hollywood could make would be to "stop sanitizing what guns do to human bodies" via bloodless action movies. At Bustle in 2017, Olivia Truffaut-Wong also proposed the Motion Picture Association of America could give films with excessive gun violence higher ratings.

FOCUSING ON THE WRONG PROBLEM?

But the Hollywood gun violence open letter faced swift pushback, including from some in the industry, with director Leigh Whannell arguing it's "focusing on everything but the real problem." Gun violence is fueled not by movies and TV shows, but "by the lack of gun control" in the United States, said director Alex Noyer, who called for gun control measures, "not censorship."

Critics further pointed to the fact that movies featuring gun violence are also released in countries that don't experience the same number of mass shootings as the U.S. "Guns are present in films the world over," noted critic Jordan Crucchiola, yet "mass shootings and constant real-life gun violence are an American problem." Writing for The Washington Post in 2018, Matthew Christopher Hulbert also pointed out that while gun violence has existed in movies for decades, "mass school shootings did not plague the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, or even most of the 1990s," suggesting one shouldn't be blamed for the other.

With this in mind, Forbes writer Scott Mendelson slammed the open letter as "counterproductive to the point of being willfully harmful," while IGN editor Amelia Emberwing argued this effort will be used to further the false "narrative that media is sparking the violence."

Robyn Thomas, then-executive director of the Giffords Law Center To Prevent Gun Violence, while speaking to Refinery29 in 2018 agreed that "movies don't create the problem." But she argued there are still small tweaks the industry could make to the way guns are depicted, such as showing "characters locking their guns up" or saying things like "I don't like my kids playing around guns," as "the right character saying the right thing could make a difference."

The open letter also stresses that the responsibility for mass shootings ultimately "lies with lax gun laws." But while "we didn't cause the problem," the Hollywood leaders say, "we want to help fix it."

Response option(s):

- After reading the article, what is one main idea that you find most remarkable (meaning, "most worthy of a remark" -- so it can be interesting, concerning, confusing, alarming, offensive, etc)? What is it that you find so remarkable? Explain.
- After reading the article, what additional questions do you have? Research these on your own and write about what you find.
- Summarize any point made in the article and respond.