

Consuming Violence: Voyeurism versus Vision

BY DANIEL TRAIN

We are tempted to be voyeurs of violence, dangerously drinking it in as entertainment. Or we turn away instead to sentimentalized distractions, which promise to be safer and proclaim our moral superiority. Neither represents a cross-shaped vision of the violence in our culture.

In a memorable story about his friend Alypius, Augustine presents a portrait of both the strong appeal of viewing violence and our ineffectual struggle to resist it. Alypius, who “had been carried away by an incredible passion for gladiatorial shows,” became deeply ashamed of his fascination with the gruesome contests and vowed never to return to the “games.” Then one evening some of Alypius’s friends and fellow-pupils, employing their “friendly violence,” took him to a gladiatorial event. Nevertheless, he was determined not to pay any attention to the gory spectacle before him; he even hoped that his condemnation of it (and scorn for the debauched friends) would be strengthened by being present, but refusing to watch. Not surprisingly, the roar of the crowd proved too much for his willpower. Augustine explains,

His curiosity got the better of him, and thinking that he would be able to treat the sight with scorn – whatever the sight might be – he opened his eyes and was stricken with a deeper wound in the soul than the man whom he had opened his eyes to see got in the body.¹

Alypius’s “wound” was not a one-time laceration, but a parasitic disease that would increasingly plague and debilitate him:

Seeing the blood he drank deep of the savagery. He did not turn

away but fixed his gaze upon the sight.... He continued to gaze, shouted, grew hot, and when he departed took with him a madness by which he was to be goaded to come back again, not only with those who at first took him there, but even more than they and leading on others.²

In no time at all, Alypius had traded places with those friends whom he scorned. He was rendered absolutely powerless against his self-corroding addiction to viewing the bloodshed. Fortunately, Augustine can conclude his story with a prayer to God that brims with gratitude for the divine grace that eventually would rescue Alypius: "Yet out of all this You drew him with strong and merciful hand, teaching him to have confidence in You, not in himself. But this was long after."³

This episode is emblematic of some difficult questions Christian believers have faced through the centuries when the surrounding cultural practices and civil politics seem to perpetuate, justify, or be complicit in violence. Today it is extraordinarily easy to record, disseminate, and view gruesome cruelty; consider, for example, the widely viewed ISIS beheadings. Certain sporting events, like the Ultimate Fighting Championship, entertain their audiences with bloodshed. And these examples are only the tip of the cultural iceberg; we are constantly entertained by massive amounts of violence in movies, television shows, video games, popular music, and news reports. Why are we so drawn to viewing violence, and how are we being changed by this? Does it make any difference whether the acts of mayhem are real (in news and sporting events) or imagined (through films, video games, and literature)? There may be good uses of violence in popular culture, but when does it cross a moral line?

We can make more progress in answering these questions if we shift our focus from the *content* of the violence to its *context*. In other words, we should ask how we, as observers, are complicit in the violence we consume, as well as how we suffer the destructive consequences of our voyeuristic gazes.

This shift in focus is evident within Augustine's narrative. While he highlights the lasting damage that was inflicted upon Alypius by viewing such gratuitous, self-serving violence, he also reminds us of the role Alypius played as a spectator in perpetrating acts of violence. While he describes the bloody gladiatorial spectacle, he is more concerned with exhibiting Alypius's misplaced self-confidence. Augustine suggests that the very gaze Alypius extended towards the gladiators was as violent as the "game" itself. Indeed, even before his fateful relapse, Alypius seems to be subject to Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees: "you testify against yourselves" (Matthew 23:31).

Augustine implies that Alypius's voyeuristic fascination was of a piece with, and not counter to, the moral resolve he flaunted before his downfall. Whether as the scornful avoider or the insatiable viewer of the games, Alypius always thought he was "above" the spectacle and thus, as a voyeur, was

able to take from the games whatsoever he desired from them. Before, during, and after his fateful fall, he was the consummate consumer of violence—a voyeur for whom the games remained a means to a self-serving end.

In this article I will explore Augustine's warning against the violence caused by our own misplaced self-confidence. After reflecting briefly on the limitations of the way the debate about viewing violence is often construed, I will turn to a short story by Flannery O'Connor for a reminder about how violence can occur not only in *what* we see, but in *how* we see. As O'Connor's story suggests, admitting this possibility is the first step towards discerning the difference between a violent voyeurism and a cross-shaped vision of the world. Such a vision only comes after our own tendencies for self-deception have been unmasked, and this often requires a difficult and painful struggle.

APPROACHES TO THE VIOLENCE IN CULTURE

In my own experience, Augustine's concern that perceiving violence (both actual and feigned) can corrupt the viewer's soul was transmuted by some Christian educators into the less eloquent, though no less effective dictum: "Garbage in. Garbage out." Like Augustine, my teachers rightly understood that the soul is nourished or malnourished by its experiences—the soul is like a tree, the fruit of which directly attests to the quality of soil and water upon which the tree feeds. Almost without fail, they followed this pithy principle of moral formation by quoting Paul's exhortation that the believers in Philippi should think on "whatsoever things" are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8). Though Paul does not exactly say that his list is comprehensive, that is how my teachers presented it to me; "whatsoever" in this case was synonymous with "only."

Despite the ubiquity of this sentiment in Christian circles, its direct equation of input and outputs is too simplistic as a principle for Christian living. This simplistic garbage in-garbage out equation suggests that sorting out cultural objects is a fairly straightforward task. But we all encounter things that could be described as true but not lovely, or as lovely but not true. For example, couldn't a movie, a painting, or a novel be honest, but not virtuous?

Furthermore, this teaching fails to do justice to the sinful distortions of our knowing. Our ability to discern what is worth "thinking on" presumably depends on our having been nourished by what is true, honest, and just. But as Augustine's account shows, the tragic cost of being entertained by violence is that we may become increasingly incapable of sorting out the garbage from whatever is of "good report." At its best, then, this dictum becomes yet another instance of the Church preaching to its own choir.

Perhaps more importantly, this saying commends the wrong kind of isolationism that would have us evade cultural detritus altogether. This certainly does not match Christ's own example of "eating with sinners and

tax collectors" (Mark 2:6; cf. Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:34) in order to witness and attend to the ugliness, injustice, and dishonesty of human fallenness. So, the question is not simply whether we have the moral faculty to discern the difference between trash and truth, but whether attending to the truth might also require us to spend some time in the apparent wastelands of human culture. As the horrors of the last century so tragically demon-

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strate, our complicity as Christians in the most murderous events in human history was rarely because we were too curious, but because we found it too easy to turn our gaze away.

Perhaps in reaction to this history and to the widespread caricature of Christian moral teaching as prudish, other believers emphasize the freedom we have in Christ to participate in culture. They argue that

cultural and personal transformation occurs only when we engage the good, the bad, and the ugly this world offers, rather than avoid it and take refuge in so-called Christian alternatives. From their perspective, the rise of modern Christian "alternatives" to popular movies, visual art, music, or literary fiction is self-defeating; it only fuels the criticism that when artists try to make morally "wholesome" works of art, they show a complete disregard for the integrity of their craft, materials, and audiences that is at least equal to, if not worse than, the portrayal of violence they seek to avoid. Proponents of this approach remind us that, in so far as it evades reality and discourages taking proper action, such Christian sentimentalism can be as destructive as those forces it avoids or ignores.⁴

Sometimes the driving force behind these calls for more honest, less fear-driven encounters with the world is the very sort of unspoken spiritual hubris that Augustine observed in Alypius and so powerfully warns us to avoid. Thus, some may tell us that "mature" Christians need not worry about being corrupted themselves by the corruption they observe. "All things are lawful," this siren call repeats in our ear, while willfully ignoring the Apostle Paul's rejoinder that we therefore should seek that which edifies and benefits the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:23). And, like Eve in the garden, we soon convince ourselves that we can just taste of the fruit without suffering the deathly consequences.

Both of these approaches—the one that advocates "no garbage in" isolation and the other that promotes "all things are lawful" participation—go

awry when they focus exclusively on the *content* of the cultural object, and ignore the *context* in which we relate to it. They worry about how much violence, sex, or foul language is too much, as if this content could be known, quantified, and categorized objectively apart from our relationship to and use of it. They strive to label certain isolated depictions as permissible or impermissible, as though these could have a clear meaning and purpose apart from their context within the object itself, and in regard to our own, often self-serving, motivations. Meanwhile, what is sorely missing is an honest assessment of our own posture towards and responsibility for violence.

Both of these approaches offer rating systems that purport to assess objectively the appropriateness of the material for a given audience. The ratings in a “no garbage in” approach, of course, tend to be more restrictive than the ratings of an “all things are lawful” approach. Such ratings can be helpful. But it would more profitable to supplement such judgments with critical reflection on our practices as consumers and the possibility that real violence occurs not only in *what* we consume, but also in *how* we consume it. We would consider not just the material itself, but the many ways we might misuse or distort it, regardless of whether the content is on the surface morally objectionable.

We will discover that Christian sentimentalism (and the cultural isolationism it encourages) can be as destructive as Alypius’s over confidence (and the self-harming, prurient gaze it allowed). Both engage in the self-indulgence of the controlling voyeur: the former evades cultural violence by retreating into artificially contrived distractions that are supposed to provide security or proclaim moral superiority; the latter consumes cultural violence readily through media that permit only a one-sided exposure. Neither demonstrates a genuine regard for the victim of violence; neither accepts the personal risk and responsibility required by a sincere encounter. Instead, both encourage us to either peek or not at the world before us, while preserving the comforts of our own carefully constructed “realities.”

We seem to be stuck with a practical dilemma. If both the sentimentalist and the gladiatorial spectator are capable of perpetrating a violence equal to the violence which they ignore or relish, is it even possible to avoid the violence of the voyeur? How might we avoid falling into either trap? Can we reject the spectacle of violence without simply using that rejection to bolster our naive self-assurances that we are, morally and spiritually, above the fray?

VOYEURS AND THE FESTIVAL OF VIOLENCE

In a remarkable short story “The Partridge Festival,” Flannery O’Connor unmaskes the violence and voyeuristic tendencies of two very different approaches to civic violence. Each year the community of Partridge hosts an Azalea Festival, but this year’s installment has been marred by terrible violence. Just ten days earlier a man named Singleton had been “imprisoned” by a mock court for not purchasing a badge for the upcoming festival; when

he escaped that humiliation (he was locked in an outdoor privy), he shot and killed five of the city dignitaries in revenge. Singleton had long been an outlier in Partridge; his public humiliation was just the last straw before those awful events that led to his arrest and committal to a state mental institution. Now the entire town, whose motto is "Beauty is our Money Crop," has rallied together not only in condemnation of Singleton, but to make sure that the upcoming Azalea Festival goes on undisturbed, despite the terrible massacre that has just taken place.

The story is clearly based on a similar event that occurred in the author's hometown of Milledgeville, Georgia. O'Connor leads us into her story through the eyes of Calhoun, a college-aged young man who has heard about the events in his former hometown and has returned with the hope of gathering "material" for a novel. Unlike the people of Partridge, Calhoun believes that Singleton serves as both a scapegoat and mirror for the community's own acts of cruelty that exist despite (and now, indeed, because of) the town's pride in its perfectly manicured azalea bushes.

Calhoun (like Augustine's friend, Alypius) has a great deal of scorn for the violence and the community that engendered it; his agenda is to exonerate Singleton somehow while condemning the town. Along the way, he meets Mary Elizabeth, an aspiring academic who is also interested in writing a "study" of Singleton as the village scapegoat. Though throughout most of the story Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth are trying to outdo one another, they clearly share a self-righteous disgust for the town and its festivities, and a strong interest in making Singleton into a "Christ-figure."

In classic O'Connor fashion, the story ends with a revelation that completely undermines how Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth have made Singleton into a hero and thus into an abstraction that feeds their self-serving agendas. The story shockingly unmask the voyeuristic postures of both the academic and the artist. Neither Calhoun nor Mary Elizabeth had any direct involvement in the tragic events that prompt the story. But now, their playing the role of mere observer, superciliously assuring themselves that tragedy and violence always happens to "them" and not "me," is itself a form of violence.⁵

O'Connor's story makes no excuses for Singleton's horrific actions, nor does it absolve the town for its violent sentimentalism — namely, its efforts to cultivate an image of politeness and civility whatever the cost. But it focuses on Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, who despite their supposedly noble intentions are ultimately revealed to be as voyeuristic and eager to use Singleton for their own self-serving purposes as the rest of the townsfolk. As is so typical of O'Connor, no one in this story is exonerated, especially those who think themselves worthy to judge.

What is especially striking, however, is how O'Connor ultimately turns the critique upon herself. When Calhoun waxes eloquently about his imagined novel, O'Connor often gives him lines that are nearly direct quotations of things she had professed in her essays and interviews. Moreover, Mary

Elizabeth's biting sarcasm and disinterestedness are clearly reminiscent of the real life Mary Flannery O'Connor. So it is not hard to imagine O'Connor setting out to write a story inspired by her own experience in Milledgeville, and yet gradually realizing that the impulse to make a character either out of the real life Singleton or her own town would be to engage in the same abstracting and "othering" that fueled the violence in the first place. It is quite possible that she began writing a story intended to be about the event itself, but then realized that she could not write that story without in some way using the event for her own gain—either as an opportunity for entertainment or as a way to bolster her self-righteousness.

As I read it, then, "The Partridge Festival" is a remarkable examination of conscience by a writer who knew all too well the twin voyeuristic temptations: to leer pruriently at her community's dysfunction, or to disguise the difficult reality of her hometown behind a veneer of azaleas. Rather than seeing the tragic events in her community as an opportunity for personal profit and thereby only perpetuating the cycle of violence, she shifts the focus of the story to people's efforts to retell the story. In doing so, she includes herself and her audience among those chastened.

O'Connor's willingness to engage in the difficult, often painful task of self-examination both calls for and models the difficult work of discernment we should practice in regards to violence in our culture. Certainly there are manifestations of violence in sports, news media, television shows, movies, video games, music, and literature today that are as spiritually destructive as the gladiatorial spectacle was in Augustine's day: Christians probably ought to avoid these altogether (though, admittedly, persons will be susceptible to the appeal and danger of these particular manifestations in varying degrees). But there are other instances of entertainment that, precisely because they sugarcoat reality or demonstrate a willful avoidance of the world's injustice and suffering, can be just as dangerous for certain individuals.

CONCLUSION

Both Augustine, through the story of Alypius's fall, and Flannery O'Connor in "The Partridge Festival" have much to teach us about being voyeurs of violence in our culture. It is spiritually dangerous to drink it in, and this makes the "no garbage in" approach tempting. It is spiritually dangerous to avert our gaze from the evil and sentimentalize our culture's goodness, and this makes the "all things are lawful" attitude alluring.

A third way of approaching the violence is possible. We can cultivate practices of reception and self-examination that give us a more honest assessment of and loving appreciation for both the world and ourselves. Such a clear-eyed vision of our world is a gift of God's grace, both Augustine and O'Connor suggest. It is a gift that has been modeled for us in both the way Christ lived and the way he died. May the "strong and merciful" hand of the Holy Spirit teach us to place our confidence in Christ.

NOTES

1 Augustine recounts this episode in *Confessions*, VI.8. The translation here is from Augustine, *Confessions*, second edition, translated by F. J. Sheed and edited by Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 105.

2 *Ibid.*, 105-106.

3 *Ibid.*, 106.

4 Flannery O'Connor, for example, puts it this way: a Christian artist "feels no call to take on the duties of God or to create a new universe. He feels perfectly free to look at the one we already have and to show exactly what he sees. He feels no need to apologize for the ways of God to man or to avoid looking at the ways of man to God. For him, to 'tidy up reality' is certainly to succumb to the sin of pride" (Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, selected and edited by Sally Fitzgerald [New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1969], 178).

5 John Milbank refers to this phenomenon as "double passivity." He explains, "If we merely look upon the violent past in judgement...we get in this position of double passivity *vis-à-vis* the past, where we imagine that violence is essentially over, and so frameable by our gaze. We then do violence to the past, because we render it *too* different from our present, and fail to sympathize with its dilemmas." (John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon, Radical Orthodoxy Series* [New York: Routledge, 2003], 36).

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