

Does bullfighting represent a psychological danger for young spectators ?

(Dr JP RICHIER, psychiatrist, June 2008)

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Why is it important to raise the question of youth attendance at bullfights ?

Citizens are concerned about all the problems faced by young people, and the problem of violence is at the top of the list, be it violence endured, violence witnessed or violence perpetrated.

These last few years, attention has been particularly focussed on the violence that children and teenagers can observe around them.

Much has been published on the subject. Yet it remains an open question whether or not it is legitimate to apply the conclusions to the violence of bullfighting as entertainment.

This raises two major questions:

- firstly, the question in itself of violence towards animals,
- secondly, the question of the link between violence towards animals and violence towards humans.

Pr Jean Claude Nouët, president of the French League for Animal Rights has written a paper about this last question. He called it "*Infantile roots of violence and cruelty*". This paper, based on a large bibliography, was given at Oxford's Keble College in September 2007 as part of an international conference on the "*Relationship between animal abuse and human violence*" organized by the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics.

The medical literature about the impact of violent entertainment on children and adolescents generally insists on two types of effects :

- the traumatic impact,
- incitement and habituation to violence.

Other thoughts concern the weakening of moral judgement and the unsettling of values..These are more complex to define, analyse and validate so I won't develop them here, but they are of capital importance.

So, access of young people to bullfights and their training in bullfighting is an important question from two related but independent standpoints : the protection of animals and the protection of children.

The particular nature of bullfighting violence

In the medical literature about the violence that children and teenagers can observe around them, two types of situations are usually described :

- in one, the child is a witness of actual violence outside the home or, more often, within the family ;
- in the other, the child is a spectator of imaginary violence and of course the debate here is over the effect of movies, television, and video games.

It is difficult to apply to bullfighting this distinction :

- firstly because the violence, although very real is presented as a show ;
- secondly because it involves violence not towards humans but towards animals.

The violence inflicted in bullfighting share two other fundamental characteristics :

- this violence occurs within a totally unequal relationship because perpetrated by men on animals coerced to be present ;
- this violence is of no vital use, it serves only man's pleasure.

If these different characteristics naturally remind us of the circus games in ancient times, there are few examples fulfilling these criteria in the modern world. There is however one practice today that shows a structural similarity with bullfighting. It implies the same particular kind of relationship between a designated victim, one or several aggressors, and a group of spectators.

This practice, called "*happy slapping*" since it was first remarked upon in 2005, ties in with both the question of violence towards human beings and with that of youth violence. This activity consists in filming for pleasure, generally with a cellphone, physical assault without any reason on an unwilling person by a youth or a group of youths. At the beginning, it was about administering a surprise slap to someone (hence the term "*happy slapping*"). But nowadays, the phenomenon has intensified to include beating, rape and armed assault sometimes resulting in death.

These practices, often considered as part of a sub-culture, have particularly drawn the attention of sociologists as emblematic of the confusion reigning among certain teenagers as to their moral guideposts.

Of course, since in this case the victim is a human being and not an animal, we don't know what can be extrapolated from one to the other.

Traumatic effect of bullfighting spectacles

A child's normal reaction at the sight of an animal bleeding under blows inflicted by men, is generally, at least at first, a reaction of rejection, discomfort and fear. Of course, in traditional rural societies where the relationship between man and animal is marked with a certain harshness, the child confronts it early on, and gets used to it as best he or she can.

But we know very well that the famous scene of the pig bled in the farmyard did not go down well with everyone and that more sensitive individuals have been known to dread it.

What's more, mentalities are gradually evolving as modern societies change.

How is a child likely to react when taken to a bullring?

The first feeling will be curiosity.

As long as the spectacle is watched from the stand at a distance, and since the Spanish *corrida* is infused with a hieratic dimension, this curiosity may turn into indifference, even boredom. In other children, this curiosity might turn into interest, even fascination, since here, what is forbidden elsewhere is practiced collectively.

With other children, we'll get a negative reaction, protestation, a refusal to keep watching, and sometimes tears.

With still others, this negative reaction will peak in shock, produce a traumatic effect. We speak here of psychological trauma when an experience is beyond the individual's capacities for absorbing psychological blows just as we refer to physical trauma when the shock exceeds the body's capacities for withstanding physical blows.

Wound upon wound, bloodshed, the weakening of the bull culminating in its often slow and painful death can only deeply and durably disturb these children.

This shock is all the more important as a child is known to identify more easily with animals, especially with mammals, and is able to establish strong affective bonds with them.

Children's trust in adults may be threatened. Indeed, messages of violence may have an impact not only on the child's development but also on his trust in adults. A child may well lose confidence in the adult who has let him witness scenes incomprehensible to him and, as a result, he will have great difficulty in identifying with those, older than him, whose support as models he needs to structure his personality.

Those who support access to bullfights for minors claim there is no risk of trauma since the violence they witness is part of a shared ritual that can be verbalized, unlike the scenes of violence in movies. They forget that a ritual needs meaning (the bleeding of the pig had significance as nourishment, sacrificing a sheep had a religious meaning) whereas in order to find meaning in a bullfight, its supporters must convoke the artist, the anthropologist, the philosopher and sometimes the psychoanalyst. They forget that words appease only if you understand their meaning. But the aesthetic, mythical and spiritual jargon used by the *aficionados* is not accessible to young people, and their Spanish technical terms are incomprehensible to most of us. It is also a fact that many adults accompanying children are not experts in bullfighting, the only term they usually know is : *Olé !*

What the child sees in the bullring is a spectacle of violence and what he perceives in the crowd are its expressions and manifestations of intense enjoyment at each wound inflicted upon the bull. The child is perfectly aware that the bull has been forced into the ring and that the animal is repeatedly wounded over a long period and then killed without any good reason like self-defense or protection. It has been pointed out that a child might be particularly disturbed by messages which depict violence as an inexplicable and unnecessary enterprise of submission and annihilation of another being, where the destruction of the one serves only to satisfy the other's pleasure in assuaging his destructive urge.

Many of those who prone allowing teenagers access to the arenas claim outright that is impossible for bullfighting to cause psychological trauma in youth. Far from reassuring us, such a claim only increases our concern. We psychiatrists call such an attitude "denial". The traumatic effects they deny so firmly are however attested to by many personal accounts that we shall be discussing later. Persisting in such denial not only deprives them of all credibility but also aggravates the traumatic impact. Because being able to express yourself freely is a necessary albeit insufficient condition for overcoming what we call post-traumatic stress. If a youngster has been accompanied to a bullfight by adults in denial, and has been shaken by the experience, they will most likely refuse to listen, make light of it or make fun of the child's emotions. The youngster won't be able to express what he or she felt. As a result, he won't be able to work out this excess of emotions psychologically and the traumatic effect will be exacerbated. Several adults who have told us they were particularly shocked by watching bullfights as children indicate that not being able to express their intense discomfort in a pro-*corrida* environment added greatly to their disarray.

Lastly, some people who defend access to bull-fighting for minors advance the idea of their “cathartic” effect. Such a “liberating” effect may occasionally occur, but it can’t possibly be the rule since, as we mentioned before, young people experience the reactions of the crowd not necessarily as infectious enthusiasm but as an additional aggression. In any case, the so-called “cathartic” effect advanced by some has not been proved at all and can’t be generalized.

We have been able, with the CRAC, to gather some personal accounts which unfortunately testify to the traumatic effect that bull-fighting can have on a spectator. Some twenty of them had experienced a *corrida* as minors. And another french organization, Alliance Anticorrida, gathered testimonies too. The intensity of the ordeal brought them to write and describe it even decades afterwards (up to almost eighty years afterwards for one!). These testimonies were not easy to obtain since digging up a traumatic past is very painful.

Other accounts testify to the fact that adults, too, can be deeply affected by bullfights which certainly clinches the argument that such entertainment can easily hurt a child. And for some people, adults or children, the mere watching of bull-fighting on T.V, internet or videotapes shown at school was enough to shock them profoundly.

The following points came up frequently in the analysis of these testimonies:

During the bullfight :

- surprise when violence starts and blood is spread,
- feeling the animal's suffering, through identification with the bull and a strong feeling of pity,
- an intense feeling of injustice,
- lack of comprehension of the crowd's reaction,
- feeling of anger, revolt and even rage sometimes leading to protest,
- crying or screaming,
- feeling of physical discomfort or uneasiness,
- wanting to turn away from looking, to flee, sometimes leading to early departure.

After the bullfight :

- the recollection of certain images and sounds remains engraved in memory,
- oversensitiveness to everything about bullfighting and arenas and naturally refusal to return

Less frequently noted but present in some of the spontaneous testimonies, a possible resentment against the accompanying adults, often parents, and also repeated nightmares.

And finally ,in the long range, a persisting memory of the experience connected clearly to negative feelings even after many long years.

Habituation or incitement to violence

Adults who take children to bullfights inevitably initiate them, whether they want to or not, to a particularly raw and brutal form of violence, one that is totally real and has nothing fictitious about it despite its being limited to the ring.

Numerous studies have shown the impact of violence in the media on the habituation and incitement to violence. There is a serious question here as to if these conclusions might apply to repeated exposure to bullfighting.

Witnessing violence not only stimulates violent impulses directly, it also has other effects; for one thing, it desensitizes the individual. Repeated exposure to violent scenes reduces the spectator's capacity to react. He or she gets used to violence and a sort of passivity and apathy tends to set in when such an individual is confronted again with violent acts.

During a bullfight, except where watching movies is concerned, the show a young person attends is a piece of living reality. He witnesses acts of cruelty to an animal that take place before his very eyes. The very special context of bullfighting is superimposed in the young person's mind on these

images of cruelty. These images are further reinforced by the exciting and enthusiastic atmosphere and by the massifying reactions of the adult spectators. This context may blunt the violence of the images or curry fascination but it can, just as easily, in other cases, aggravate the trauma.

What's more, becoming accustomed to violence does not necessarily preclude certain traumatic effects. Some of bullfighting's most ardent fans recall a first childhood experience marked by weeping and despair. The renewal of the violent experience can provoke trauma and, at the same time, instill violence in the individual in such a way that it serves as a defense mechanism to absorb the trauma. The more the violence is repetitive, the more it is traumatic, although a single image or scene can be enough to deeply and durably affect a person whose history and specific personality traits make particularly vulnerable. According to certain psychiatrists, the repeated occurrence of the violent image makes impregnation by violence more likely.

This habituation to violence can become an addiction. In fact, that's the very meaning of *aficion*, the passion for bullfighting. Why can't the *aficionados* do without bullfights? Why does the simple calling into question of bullfighting provoke so much emotion, so much anger, so many reactions ?...

Those who defend access to bullrings for minors claim that, for children and teenagers, the bullfighter is a hero blessed with all kinds of virtues, someone to identify with, an ideal of courage and mastery.

This is a pretty astonishing way to look at it when you consider that :

- bullfighters engage, however you call it, in serious abuse and acts of cruelty towards an animal. These are the terms (translated into English here) used in Article 521-1 of the French Penal Code which goes on to exonerate the perpetrators from criminal pursuit in the name of upholding local tradition. A fairly surprising role model, it seems to me !
- bullfighters, at least if you believe what their fans say, risk their lives in the ring. Fortunately, there have been only a handful of matadors killed in the bullring in the last half-century. But when you think what a big problem inconsiderate risk-taking represents in the pre-adolescent and adolescent population, again the role model proposed seems outrageous.

Here are two good recent examples reported in France of the unfortunate consequences of this type of identification.

- In 1991, the *Midi-Libre*, a daily newspaper published in the South of France, reported that a dog had been used as a target for shooting arrows picked up at a local fair, then thrown into a riverbed where municipal employees found it dead. The local head of the SPCA, after a careful inquiry, discovered that the culprits in this sordid affair were a bunch of kids who were trying to imitate the torero in a bullfight.
- French media have made mention recently of a game called the *jeu de torero* or "bullfighter game" where adolescents try to dodge a moving train like a *torero* dodges the bull. It was when five high school students warned they wanted to take on the TGV, the high-speed Paris-Marseille train last January in southern France, that the SNCF, the French railroad company, got worried and the subject became news.

Does culture protect from the effects of violent spectacles ?

The key word used by the defenders of free access to bullrings for minors is *culture*. Culture is a treasure house of meanings but, in this case, we're looking at a very rigid conception of it. Unsurprisingly, the word *tradition* is used interchangeably with *culture*. Yet, while culture can be defined in terms of its transmission, horizontal or intergenerational, it may be defined just as easily

by its evolving nature since it is largely thanks to the evolution of culture that societies progress and humans adapt.

Should culture be unchanging, we would still be using sharpened stones rather than computers.

Should culture be unchanging, we would still be offering up our fellow beings for sacrifice rather than promoting human rights.

What we need to transmit to our children are not values and practices fixed in time, but values and practices that transmit meaning and ideals in the present-day world.

There's little doubt that references, not only cultural but also moral, social and technical, have been so jostled in preceding decades that everyone today is in search of guideposts.

But to confuse culture with tradition is to condemn ourselves to stagnation and repetition.

There is no question that the contemporary world has experienced profound changes in its conception of violence, in the relationship of man to nature, and, last but not least, in the ethical status of animals.

Many types of violence that used to be socially acceptable are reprovved today, whether it be the violence of the State against individuals, of members of the military towards civilians and prisoners, or the violence exerted by the strong upon the weak (women, children, animals...).

There aren't many people today who would agree to torture being inflicted as a spectacle in public places, and still fewer, if any, who would want children to attend, even to set an example.

So practices that used to be condoned must be re-evaluated today in the light of changing mentalities.

To hang on to a rigid conception of culture is to risk weakening of moral judgment and unsettling of essential values in children and adolescents.

We often notice that many of the difficulties from which our society suffers have their roots in discrepancies in the system that governs the individual.

We teach our children, in schools and within the family, that violence is a bad thing and that we must not make other beings suffer. It makes no sense to teach them at the same time that gratuitous violence can be legitimate, or even a good idea. It is unwise to teach them that we are allowed to make certain beings suffer for the sake of art, tradition or culture.

The fight against violence subjected, observed or exerted by young people is a major preoccupation. It is not harmless to show them the spectacle of suffering, blood, and death, as if it bore some kind of esthetic value, or as something that can be justified by tradition or as representing a cultural identity.

Our society is deeply rethinking our relationship to animals and nature. It is not harmless to show children the spectacle of men tormenting an animal just for fun.

Are the parents who take their children to see bullfights bad parents ?

No they are not bad parents. Just like most parents in the world, they love their children and want them to have the best life possible, and don't think they are doing anything wrong by taking their children to see such spectacles since they themselves enjoy them.

But while certain questions fall within the realm of the parents' educational responsibility, others call for government intervention.

Certain fathers mete out to their children severe physical punishment thinking it is for their own good, and probably have received treatment from their own fathers. But in today's Europe, the government considers this kind of educational punishment out of order.

Even more common are certain parents who think that violent movies can have a cathartic effect or that erotic ones can have an educational virtue. Nonetheless, these movies are forbidden for children under 12, 16 or 18 years old, whether parents agree or not.

So, keeping children away from bullfights does not constitute in any way a blow to parents' educational responsibility, but is a precautionary measure that everyone must accept.

It follows the lead taken by the International Convention on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations which has been valid in France since September 6th, 1990 under the aegis of the "children's defender", which specifies in article 19, first alinea : "*The member countries take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educative measures, in order to protect children against any kind of violence, be it physical or **mental***".

Should there be a opposition between an adult's freedom and a child's protection, it is the latter that must prevail.

Learning to bullfight

The training program in bullfighting consists of :

- training outside of specific structures, on farms,
- or training in certain "bullfighting schools", which in France, welcome children starting from 10 years old or even less, on Wednesdays and/or Saturday afternoons. There are now in the south of France four of these "schools" where they teach Spanish *corrida*, which means that they teach children and adolescents to actually wound and kill bull calves using metal tools.

Certain thoughts developed above concern specifically the traumatizing effect of a spectacle and do not apply to the initiation to the practice of bullfighting.

But our remarks concerning incitement or habituation to violence are just as relevant here. As is the impact in terms of fragilisation of moral judgment and upsetting of values.

Here we have a case not of observed violence but of practised violence. Children and adolescents are taught to gratuitously inflict violence. What kind of influence do adults have on the psychological construction of children when they incite them to act upon their sadistic impulsess instead of helping them to sublimate them.

The conclusion is simple:

We must demand the abolition of bullfighting. And, as long as they continue to exist, we must forbid training and access to arenas to children under 16 years old (it is the limit that we have decided upon in France). We have launched along with clinical psychologist colleagues, a petition signed by psychiatrists and psychologists, demanding such a prohibition. Over 60 people have signed it.

Some may fear that prohibition concerning only children under 16 years old may divert from the real problem, which is cruelty towards bulls, and that, should it be applied, it might serve only to perpetuate bullfighting. But the people and organizations who know the subject, do know that this legitimate measure for children's protection would in fact, considerably fragilize the case for bullfighting, and speed up its ultimate extinction.