

The New York Times

February 11, 2013

The 'Die Hard' Quandary

By JOE NOCERA

Later this week, the fifth installment of the “Die Hard” movies is scheduled to open in theaters across the country. “A Good Day to Die Hard” stars, once again, Bruce Willis as John McClane, a too-stubborn-for-his-own-good cop who has to stop a highly trained army of bad guys out to wreak destruction and death. It will undoubtedly be a giant hit for Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, the owner of the “Die Hard” franchise.

In promoting the new movie, both the Regal and AMC movie chains are holding “Die Hard” marathons on Wednesday. Starting at noon, an AMC theatergoer can spend 12 straight hours watching all five “Die Hard” movies.

That’s a lot of “Die Hard.” Among the guns used — [and used, and used, and used](#) — in just the first “Die Hard” are a Steyr AUG assault rifle, a Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun, and a Walther PPK pistol with silencer. McClane himself relies on a Beretta 92 semiautomatic pistol in the first three movies, and a Sig Sauer P220 in the more recent films. (He also favors the bald look in the last two movies.)

Of course, it is cartoonish violence, in the sense that rarely — in all the innumerable killings — is blood seen pouring out of the victims, or does anyone cry out in anguish and pain. Incredibly, [the Motion Picture Association of America judges](#) foul language to be more problematic for children than this kind of bloodless violence, which perhaps explains why the 2007 installment, “Live Free or Die Hard,” was rated PG-13: the normally foul-mouthed McClane barely swears in it. ([The new one has reclaimed](#) its traditional R.)

What got me thinking about “Die Hard” — and guns in the movies more generally — is, of course, the furious gun debate since the killings in Newtown, Conn. On one side are those who believe we can cut down on gun violence by, among other things, banning the assault weapons that always seem to be used in mass shootings.

On the other side are the Second Amendment absolutists, who argue that the real problem is the culture, soaked in so much violent imagery that it is virtually impossible to avoid. They add that a ban on assault weapons would be [the beginning of a slippery slope](#) that would ultimately lead to a ban on weapons of every kind.

It's not that I don't want to see a ban on assault weapons. I sincerely do. But after poking around the world of gun-crazed movies and other media, I have to say, the Second Amendment absolutists have a point. For instance, when you ask a spokesman for the M.P.A.A. about the real-world effect of gun imagery in the movies, he actually pushes back by claiming that "there is a predominance of findings that show there is no consistent or convincing evidence that exposure causes people to be more violent."

This is, quite simply, untrue. "There is tons of research on this," says Joanne Cantor, professor emerita of communications at the University of Wisconsin, and an expert on the effect of violent movies and video games. "Watching violence makes kids feel they can use violence to solve a problem. It brings increased feelings of hostility. It increases desensitization." Every parent understands this instinctively, of course, but those instincts are backed by decades of solid research.

There is a second reason many people — indeed, many of the same people who would like to ban assault weapons — shrink from demanding changes in the culture's tolerance for violent images. To do anything about it legislatively would likely violate the First Amendment. Just as an assault weapon ban is the slippery slope for Second Amendment advocates, efforts to restrict violent images — or pornography, for that matter — is the slippery slope for First Amendment absolutists.

Craig Anderson, a psychologist at Iowa State University, told me that children who watch even something as seemingly benign as Woody Woodpecker cartoons — in which Woody often pecks on someone's head — can become temporarily more aggressive. "If you are going to start to ban media violence, where do you stop?" he asked.

Violent video games and movies, he went on to say, are certainly not the only factor that can lead someone to commit an act of gun violence. "If someone has no other risk factors, he can play Grand Theft Auto all day and never commit a violent act. But if he has a number of the other risk factors. ..." Anderson let the thought hang.

On Monday, I called an AMC spokesman to ask if his company was worried about its customers watching nonstop shootings for 12 straight hours.

"We are very excited about the 'Die Hard' marathon," he replied. "It will be a great time for our guests." He added, however, that the company had its "security measures in place."

Just, you know, in case.

