

AUG 11, '94

TV violence can make you — violent!

My TV was set at Channel 2 when I turned it on on Tuesday night and caught a rerun of the actor Richard Thomas stalking a corporate office building, an arsenal of assault weapons on his back.

I'm not unduly squeamish about screen violence. I watch it willingly in documentaries or newscasts. I love it in Shakespeare and other dramas that

draw us into unflinching moral engagement with our condition. But I do tend to flick the remote whenever music and body language tell me I'm about to see bloodshed for Nielsens.

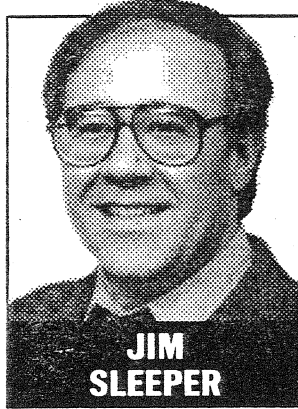
On Tuesday, though, I watched "I Can Make You Love Me: The Stalking of Laura Black" for 15 minutes with a clammy revulsion as Thomas coolly blew away a dozen people who looked like those I work with every day — people at the water cooler, on the phone. He slew them across what, for TV, is a long time, maybe five minutes. Bloody, writhing bodies everywhere. No expense spared by coproducers Ardythe Goergens and Bernadette Caulfield.

In the scenes I watched before changing channels, Brooke Shields (Laura) begs Thomas not to shoot; flies across the room, spurting blood, as he does, and crawls, weeping, to colleagues after Thomas has sauntered off to kill others. Later, seeing that she's gotten away, Thomas stalks some more. "Laura, where are you?" he calls. Director Michael Switzer has managed to prolong the mayhem.

CLEARLY, THE PSYCHOPATHIC eruption, bloodshed and suffering — based on a true story, of course — are the film's only reason for being. Variety says it combines "woman-in-jeopardy and mass-killer genres into a predictable and often gruesome concoction that has little to offer other than gratuitous violence." This isn't drama; it's the gladiator pits of a falling Rome. Since we can't seem to stop it, we have to wonder whether, as Cicero said of Rome, we are too ill to bear either our sicknesses or our cures.

I don't believe the cure is censorship or government regulation. The cure is collective withdrawal from a national addiction like the one we're undergoing over cigarettes.

For starters, we can clear our throats



and say that Ardythe Goergens, Bernadette Caulfield and Michael Switzer are monsters. And that network honchos such as CBS' Howard Stringer and the recently departed Jeffrey Sagansky should be reviled like tobacco executives wherever they go.

They should have smoke blown in their faces at cocktail parties because they're liars who spread death. Out of one side of

their mouths, they tell advertisers that the more they repeat a message, the more it will influence behavior. Out of the other side of their mouths, they piously tell congressional committees and activists that repetitive TV violence — 15 violent acts per prime-time hour on each network, says a recent study — has no discernible influence on behavior. That's like tobacco shills claiming there's no link between smoking and cancer.

Another thing they tell us is that they're only providing what the public wants. But I'm sure the public wants network execs to stand outside Black Rock and Rockefeller Center handing out hundred-dollar bills. It isn't *only* what the public wants that drives network execs. They do make *decisions*. And they've decided to offer whatever the public wants *that makes money for them and their shareholders*, even if it means titillating the worst in people, playing on insecurity and fear.

How sad. How cruel. All that fine education and corporate power, and still the difference between leadership and used-car selling is lost on the wunderkinds in these suites. Blood spurts out of their mouths. It sloshes about in their shoes. It lies like a film across their offices, newsrooms, public-service programs.

For me, Tuesday night was a watershed — or a bloodshed. Sign me up for the long march. The Center for Media Literacy, at (212) 870-2282, sends a brochure on how to see through and organize against bad media programs and priorities.

One other thing might change the climate at TV Central: A visit from a stalker. Just imagine a vice president staggering across his office, holding his guts in his hands, trying to phone his wife and kids. Blood streaming down the faces of secretaries and technicians as they stampede toward the elevators.

Hey, I'm against violence. And it's only a fantasy, right? I can't imagine what prompted it.