

TV: 'Guns of Autumn' Draws a Bead on Hunting

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

Commenting on "The Guns of Autumn," Bill Leonard, CBS News senior vice president, said, "this is purely and simply a broadcast about hunting. . . . It is not for the faint-hearted, but neither is hunting." Irv Drasnin, the writer, producer and director, noted: "Millions of people regard hunting as recreation. Yet most people don't realize what is really taking place, or why, or even what the rules are. We've tried to find out."

CBS News does find out, and the 90-minute documentary, which will be shown tonight at 9:30, carries the advisory that "this program contains scenes of the death of animals that may be disturbing to some viewers." Unsparingly graphic, "The Guns of Autumn" has already

triggered objections from hunting interests that haven't even seen the program and, in an unusual but not unprecedented move, CBS News will deal with reactions to the documentary on "Echoes of the Guns of Autumn," to be broadcast Sept. 28.

The narration, read by Dan Rather, is kept to a lean minimum of setting scenes and providing statistics and facts. More than 20 million Americans are hunters. About 700,000 use bows and arrows. There are more hunters in Pennsylvania than anywhere else in America. And, of course, hunting—laden with weapons, permits, special gear and dress—is big business.

For the most part, the documentary attempts to pursue its subject through the comments of hunters themselves. Cameras and tape recorders follow the runs bears use in Michigan, waterfowl in a Pennsylvania game management area, buffalo in an Arizona reservation and, in the most bizarre and repulsive scenes of all, a variety of animals in a shooting preserve outside Detroit.

In many instances, the kills are recorded in horrifying close-up. Several of the animals are then skinned and cut up for purposes of convenience in transportation or trophy preparation. The result is extremely powerful television, making use of the medium in ways impossible to duplicate in any other medium. The combined impact of script, pictures and sounds is extraordinary.

But to say that "this is purely and simply a broadcast about hunting" borders, however unintentionally, on ingenuousness. In fact, although the documentary may have been conceived on the most objective of premises,

"The Guns of Autumn" is extremely antihunting, or at least against certain aspects of the activity as it is practiced today.

Hunters are indeed given an opportunity to explain why they participate in the sport, but perhaps inevitably, their reasons are vague and generally vulnerable. The pictures of all those dead animals are far more convincing for the other side. As one hunting spokesman recently complained to Mr. Drasnin, "Simply being 'objective' will kill us."

The questions raised by "The Guns of Autumn" are incredibly complex. Born and reared in the city, I have never hunted, and probably never will. Yet the documentary's gory close-ups reminded me of the first time, on a visit to the "country," I saw a chicken being killed for dinner. I couldn't look at chicken again for months. If a TV documentary graphically recorded the operations of a Chicago slaughterhouse, would we become a nation of vegetarians? I doubt it. I eventually did get back to eating, and enjoying, chicken.

The documentary does refer to the role of the hunt, and its concomitant rituals, in the history of man. Man, in most societies, no longer has to hunt, but perhaps the bloody residue of the past cannot be washed from his psyche. Perhaps it shouldn't, serving instead as some sort of release valve. Certainly, the hunters included in this documentary appear to be, in every other respect, normal upstanding citizens.

On the other side, though, the documentary scores several impressive points, particularly in stressing how, with technology, the rules of the game and the odds of the

contest have been radically changed—invariably in favor of the hunter. The final scenes on the shooting preserve, which stocks animals for personal "selection" by the so-called hunter, are especially shocking. In an incredibly botched kill, a white fallow deer has to be shot, at close range, at least seven times before the customer gets to have his picture taken with his trophy. Left to the ways of nature, the program stresses, the best of the animals would survive. Confronted with the hunter, the best are destroyed.

Striking out in a new direction, allowing Mr. Drasnin an unusual degree of "point of view," "The Guns of Autumn" is exceptional television journalism. The production, with Greg Cooke and William Wagner as cameramen, James Camery and Richard Wiggins as soundmen and Maurice Murad as editor, is technically superb. The result will undoubtedly generate impassioned argument, but that is what TV can be all about.