



Divine Context: Contrasting Use of Violent Images in Film and Television

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God has not blessed me with children, and it's probably a good thing. That's because my attitudes about child-rearing hearken back to my own boyhood in the 1950s and '60s and aren't consistent with more contemporary approaches, particularly with regard to discipline. I opposed the recent war in Iraq, but most of my fellow liberal Democrats are appalled that I believe in (limited) corporal punishment and the benefits of its threat.

When we were very young, my sister Dana and I would occasionally earn a swat on the fanny for persistent misbehavior. Wailing would ensue, but no physical harm was suffered. Once we were school age, spanking became more ritualized and a lot less frequent. On very rare occasions, my schoolteacher mother would strip the leaves from a pencil-lead-thin azalea branch and switch the back of our legs. When my father (a pastor and seminary professor, and the man from whom I learned my liberal politics) felt forced to spank us, he used his belt. Normally, my sister and I were punished with the parental phrase, "I am very disappointed in you." Only defiance and willful or deceitful misbehavior elicited the switch or the belt. And even that stopped before we exited grade school.

An ounce of prevention worth a pound of cure, my last spanking was admin-

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Media violence is not of one piece. Film and television can sensationalize violence, celebrate it, or use it to educate an audience. Viewer discrimination will be required.

istered when I was eight. My sister may not have been that old. The only correction necessary thereafter was Mom's mere reference to stepping out the back door for a switch or Dad's wishing aloud that he not have to remove his belt. When we behaved inappropriately in public places (read church), my mother might sneak a thumb and index finger around the flesh on the back of an arm and whisper: "I'm going to pinch a plug out of you." But she never did. She never had to.

I grew up in a close and loving family. My sister and I were confident of our parents' love and loved them fiercely in return. Though I am four years older than Dana, our parents expected us to be loyal and protective of one another, and as a result, we were close as children and have remained so into middle age. Still, as siblings will, we occasionally had our squabbles. One resulted in a profoundly important lesson. Dana was an astonishingly good sport as a child. She would play all sorts of games with me, from Monopoly to chess, and because she was younger, she would normally lose. She usually took this quite well, but after one particularly dispiriting chess defeat when she was seven and I eleven, in a fury of frustration, she scattered the pieces all across the floor and under the furniture in our den. I, in turn, smacked her, a closed fist unreasonably hard against her shoulder. She went running from the room in pursuit of parental justice, and before I could even collect the king and queen under the sofa, my father had arrived to order me to his study where he had been writing a sermon.

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This summons was sobering enough since Dana and I were discouraged from entering the work space where Dad did his writing and class preparations. His closing the door after I entered was particularly ominous. "Dana says you hit her," he said in a voice so calm it was terrifying. "Is that right?" I knew better than to compound my guilt by lying, and admitted that I had. Still standing near the door, he beckoned me closer to him. And so I stepped to within an arm's length. He towered over me and I wanted to melt into the floor to escape his wrath. He was six feet tall and stood particularly straight, like the soldier he had been in World War II. Dad asked where I had hit my sister, and when I said that I had punched her arm, he sucked in a breath as if I had struck him. "In the shoulder?" he asked in a quiet voice. I nodded. "Like this?" he said. And before I could flinch he punched my shoulder. He had never hit me before with a closed hand. Dad probably didn't hit me as hard as I had Dana, but I could feel the hardness of his knuckles and the power of his weight and size. I was shocked more than hurt. I had never seen my dad raise a fist to another living soul. I retreated a step. But he followed me and punched my other shoulder. "Is this how you hit your sister?" he asked. I nodded, blinking back tears. "Do you like it when I punch you? When a bigger person picks

on someone smaller?” I allowed as how I didn’t. And Dad counseled: “Then as long as you live, never again let me hear of your punching anyone else unable fairly to defend himself.” He studied me with a softening demeanor and asked, “Will you promise me that, son?” In a quivering voice of enlightenment, I promised. And I have never forgotten the lesson.

What my father did that night might justifiably be called violent—he did hit me. But what he did might also be termed a mere depiction of violence—he didn’t hurt me. Critically, he illustrated violence as a mechanism for denouncing it. And I begin these musings about violence in the entertainment media with my father’s long-ago object lesson as a way of distinguishing among occasions when fictional violence may be defensible and when, on the other hand, it is objectionable and even reprehensible.

For the purposes of this essay, I am going to divide the utilization of fictional violence in theatrical film and television into three categories: the sensational, the celebratory, and the educational. The first of these categories is the most common and the second is the most unacceptable. In the third category, I place celluloid and broadcast storytelling that depicts violence in order to decry it. I routinely admire and applaud films and television programs in category three, even though their depictions of violence might be among the most graphic of all.

THE SENSATIONAL

The category of violent sensationalism I divide into three sub-groupings: the mindless practitioners of mayhem, the exploitative, and the excusable. Again, the first of these subcategories is the broadest and includes the widest range of entertainments.

Some years ago, *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael summarized Hollywood narrative in one of her book titles: *Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang*. Sex and violence—conservatives have worried more about the former, liberals more about the latter. As the years have passed, the depictions of both have become ever more graphic. (Actually, graphic depiction of human sexual activity peaked in motion pictures in the 1970s while it has continued to advance in television—the subject of a different essay.) Through the 1950s, suffering and death were almost entirely bloodless. But the envelope of what the public will tolerate (and perhaps craves) has expanded ever since. I grew up with movie and TV heroes who suffered “flesh wounds” to shoulders that might require putting an arm in a sling for a while but seldom required changing a shirt. Villains and heroes alike endured punches to the face that never shattered teeth or fractured a jaw. Stories climaxed with the bad guy being shot to death without his actually bleeding.

As a result, I remember vividly when a soldier in Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* got his hand chopped off in battle and when a Civil War rifleman in Andrew McLaglen’s *Shenandoah* took a bullet to the forehead and dribbled a stream of blood down his nose as he expired. The *Shenandoah* image wasn’t unprecedented.

In William Wellman's *The Public Enemy*, as long ago as 1931, James Cagney died with a running head wound. But that was three years before Joseph Breen became Hollywood's official censor. In my youth, Matt Dillon on *Gunsmoke* and Paladin on *Have Gun Will Travel* smoked many a bad guy who might stagger about somewhat before keeling over but, in my memory, never bled. Both Kubrick and McLaglen might defend their momentary departure from a tradition of bloodless violence as safe and even timid moments of realism for the purpose of providing at least a glimpse of war's true horrors. These scenes were greeted by audiences, however, more with titillated delight than with shocked revulsion, the lesson being, perhaps, that horrors that aren't horrible aren't really horrors.

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Any moviegoer alive at the time will recall the controversy that greeted Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* when it opened in 1967 with a violent finale showing the film's eponymous anti-heroes being riddled with bullets. Today that brouhaha seems an historical curiosity, the offending scene at once less upsetting and less artistically justifiable than it seemed at the time. Still, *Spartacus*, *Shenandoah*, and *Bonnie and Clyde* are examples in their day of films that challenged accepted attitudes about graphic violence. The trend that they and other movies of the 1960s started were raindrops that caused a flood, their first trickles of blood the tributaries of today's swollen rivers of gore.

Many, many movies portray violence, though, in ways that aren't to be taken seriously. When cinema was in its infancy, Charlie Chaplin bonked his head for laughs. Buster Keaton filmed a belching locomotive as it plunged off a bridge, concentrating on the visual spectacular of the crash rather than the deaths of passengers aboard. Once filmmakers understood how much movie audiences relished seeing things get trashed, smashed, and blown to smithereens, they began to cook up a visual diet of destruction that has turned into a nonnutritious century-long bacchanal. Popcorn fare, both literally and figuratively. One indication of Hollywood's determination to pander to destruction lust can be found in John Landis's promotional boasting about how many automobiles he wrecked in the making of *The Blues Brothers*. More recently, directors have wielded special-effects wizardry to show images of the unthinkable: a giant lizard swatting down Manhattan high-rises in Roland Emmerich's *Godzilla*, alien invaders blowing up the American White House in Emmerich's *Independence Day*, or the whole of our Eastern Seaboard being washed away by the tidal wave at the end of Mimi Leder's *Deep Impact*. Moviegoers love such films, but nobody takes them seriously. The mayhem they depict has no more staying power than that practiced by a child with his toy soldiers. I'm not entirely certain we can dismiss all concerns about desensitization,

but such recent movies as Jonathan Mostow's *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, whose script is simply a list of giant objects to destroy, aren't nearly real enough to be a first concern.

Though still not the primary concern, I worry more about entertainments that include graphic violence or scenes of its aftermath seemingly without larger narrative purpose. When Brian De Palma made his Odessa Steps (from *Battleship Potemkin*) homage in *The Untouchables*, he couldn't restrain himself from including footage of blood and flesh being splattered against a wall. Such gore was completely unrelated to the film's overall narrative objectives, but De Palma indignantly invoked the defense of "realism" when reviewers criticized the sequence. I don't question the realism, only its necessity in a film without larger thematic ambitions. Gratuitous violence coarsens our response to violence that is meant to stimulate and move.

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Increasingly, we see television exploiting the fragility of the human body seemingly as an end unto itself. A quality show like *Law and Order* always begins with a murder victim and frequently includes close-up shots of pooled and curdling blood and graphically rendered fatal wounds to the head or trunk. I hope these scenes don't contribute to the show's sustained ratings success, but I do know their realism is not narratively required. My attorney wife and I are such devoted fans of the show that we watch episodes in rerun almost every night of the week. But even for episodes we have seen twice and more, we can never connect the legal issues to follow with the damaged human body displayed at the beginning. Now we see other prime-time series employing similar strategies. Our household stopped watching *ER*, mostly a quality program, because it airs during our dinnertime and its predictable scenes of bloody trauma were hardly an appropriate gustatory backdrop. Comparably, we have watched few episodes of *CSI*, which has benefited from generally favorable reviews, because we were forever diverting our eyes from its omnipresent scenes of human carnage. These shows probably see themselves as "merely realistic," but I worry that too much of their appeal, even that of the resolutely intellectually challenging *Law and Order*, may stem from something prurient.

But as with *Law and Order*, I will admit that I tend, no doubt inconsistently, to be more forgiving of entertainments that rise above the artistic norm even when they employ graphic violence in a not entirely defensible way. I think that Martin Scorsese's work is repeatedly too violent. *Taxi Driver* ends in an orgy of blood. *Goodfellas* depicts incredible brutality in a way that invites a comic rather than appalled response. (Television's *The Sopranos*, also about the American Mafia, does the same thing.) And *Gangs of New York* is almost grisly at points. Yet Scorsese is a serious, searching filmmaker. He may go further than I think necessary, but the

violence he portrays is never gratuitous; it's always central to the story he's endeavoring to tell.

More complicated is Alfred Hitchcock's depiction of a young woman being stabbed to death in a motel-room shower, a signature cinematic scene that remains as shocking today as when it was first shown in 1960. *Psycho* is just a thriller. Unlike Scorsese's moral and theological musings, *Psycho* strives for no greater purpose than to provide a satisfactorily chilling entertainment. But it is so thoroughly brilliant, and the shower murder is so central to its narrative effect, that I exempt it from my condemnations. Its art trumps its blood. A lesser example can be found, for instance, in Stanley Donen's *Charade*, which includes three gruesome murders in a romantic suspense tale that will longest be remembered for its successful plotting and the abiding charm of stars Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant. The snickering shock of the murders is regrettable, but you sure wouldn't want to lose the whole of the movie. In sum, judging the overall merit of a film or television program is akin to choosing friends and embracing loved ones. As a matter of course we are required to overlook, excuse, and forgive traits we regret and that in others we might judge more harshly.

THE CELEBRATORY

The second of my main categories is the one for which I reserve my unqualified wrath. Stock action/adventure films may employ violence purely as an entertainment tool. Heroes brave dangers and slay enemies, often by the scores and even the hundreds. When Luke Skywalker and Han Solo destroy the Death Star at the end of George Lucas's *Star Wars*, the bloodless body count of Darth Vader's army and support troops presumably ranges into the thousands. Nonetheless, the film's climax promotes courage and daring, not slaughter. In contrast, the casualties are far fewer in Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs*, but the message is much more distressing. This is because the villains are personalized and because their suffering and deaths are celebrated. The film's disturbing thematic premise is that bookish hero Dustin Hoffman becomes a *man* through his willingness to kill.

The mutation of vengeance into a virtue lies at the genetic core of films in this opprobrious category. Star Charles Bronson's twenty-year series of *Death Wish* films (directed by Michael Winner and others), starting in the mid-1970s, was fairly attacked as fascistic, as these movies repeatedly pursued the same violent formula to box-office gold. An innocent is brutally, heartlessly, viciously attacked by a gang of merciless killers. And then the villains are hunted down and dispatched by the mirthless hero. Clint Eastwood flirted with the same kind of material in his series of *Dirty Harry* films of the same era, although with more subtlety and sophistication.

Generally, these films are thought to be a product of the political right. But wrong-thinking liberals have committed the same sin. Tom Laughlin's *Billy Jack* films of the 1970s played on the same base emotions as the *Death Wish* pictures,

even though *Billy Jack*'s part-American-Indian hero was a champion of the runaway, the hippie, and the otherwise dispossessed. Still, at narrative crunch time, Billy Jack delivers a thorough beating to the bad guys, and his violence is designed to stir our blood lust in ways no different from any film that offers an appetizer of undeserved suffering and an entrée of revenge. An even more dispiriting example of liberals getting it wrong can be found in Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning*, where manipulative FBI agents wield the tactics of the Gestapo but are depicted as heroes of a Civil Rights Movement that was contested, in fact, not with threat and strong arm but instead with the astonishing power of nonviolent confrontation.

Films in this category vary greatly in quality and intention. What they share is an ultimate willingness to endorse vigilantism and vengeance and to celebrate those who practice it. Whatever their purported intentions, films in this category appeal to the worst instincts in human nature and sanction the very kind of myopic worldview that makes peace in places like Kashmir, Iraq, Israel, the Basque Country, and Northern Ireland so difficult to achieve.

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THE EDUCATIONAL

In the final analysis it may seem odd, but in fact is not, that films which employ depictions of violence so graphic that the viewer wants to avert her eyes may be among the most effective ways of trying to reduce violence in the real world. I have worried for over a decade that the American media's projection of our wars in Iraq as largely bloodless has both misled our nation's citizenry about war's horrors and contributed to our spiraling decline in the eyes of the planet's many other peoples. Years ago, a university colleague of mine walked out of Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, an emotionally devastating film that depicts an Australian aborigine's taking an axe to the head of an aged and innocent white woman. The scene is unrelentingly horrific and almost unbearable to watch. I understand completely why my colleague left the theater in agitation. And yet, I admire the film immensely, and I think the excruciating scene at issue and the entire movie accomplishes exactly what it intends: it demands that we understand how racial discrimination and economic deprivation can transform otherwise peaceable human beings into cornered animals who commit atrocity, not as an act of premeditated will, but as blind reflex.

Films dealing with the Holocaust, like Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* or Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*, almost inevitably show scenes of sickening violence. In *Schindler* an obviously sociopathic Nazi officer rises each morning and shoots passing Jews in the camp he manages, for no particular reason save that he can. In

The Pianist a Nazi officer lines up a work detail of detained Jewish ghetto residents and shoots some at random. Again, because there are no restraints on his will to do so. Do such scenes make us squirm? Do they give us nightmares? Of course they do. But how else might they deal with this horror that really happened not so far outside the lifetime of anyone drawing breath today? How else might a filmmaker who wanted to deal with the Holocaust and all the other Holocausts of the past and prospective Holocausts of the future, not pogroms just against Jews, but against Armenians and Tutsis and Bosnians and Kosovars and Powhatans and Lakota Sioux and an almost endless list of others, how else might a filmmaker endeavor to change the human heart that has all too often been oblivious to the suffering of those outside its own group? The most violent footage I have ever witnessed on film or television belongs to the opening thirty minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg's reenactment of America's first-wave assault on Omaha Beach during the pivotal D-Day battle of World War II. Other war movies have provided sketches of war's realism. *Saving Private Ryan* gives us the whole thing unedited. I know of no comparable text that so compellingly establishes that in the course of complicated human relations, war should always be a highly reluctant last choice. And I know of no medium superior to that of telling stories in pictures that move for illustrating the horrors of human folly, no superior medium, that is, save perhaps that of an angry and sorrowful parent determined to correct a wayward child. ⊕

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