VIOLENCE AND AMERICAN CINEMA

EDITED BY

J. DAVID SLOCUM

AFI FILM READERS

violence and american cinema

edited by j. david slocum

routledge
new york and london

To my parents,

who taught me to put things together—

and supported my wanting to take them apart

Published in 2001 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

Parts of "Violence in the Film Western" appeared previously in *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, by Lee Clark Mitchell. Copyright © 1996 and permission to reprint by the University of Chicago Press.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.
Typeset by Liana Fredley.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Violence and American cinema / edited by J. David Slocum.
p. cm. — (AFI film readers)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-415-92809-5 — ISBN 0-415-92810-9 (pbk.)
1. Violence in motion pictures. 2. Motion pictures—United States.
I. Slocum, J. David. II. Series
PN1995.9.V5 V56 2000
791.43'655—dc21 00-038265

violence and american cinema

Previously published in the AFI Film Readers series,
edited by Charles Wolfe and Edward Branigan

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acknowledgments

This project began with an innocent letter to Edward Branigan and Chuck Wolfe, series editors of the Routledge/AFI Readers, lamenting the dearth of cinema studies resources on violence and film, and suggesting they consider a reader on the topic. They responded immediately and affirmatively, and urged me to draft a proposal. I did, and Chuck and, especially, Edward have been model editors and colleagues since. They have my gratitude for their unstinting (and often calming) support. Bill Germano at Routledge and Liana Fredley were likewise consistently patient and helpful.

I owe each of the contributors a debt, not only for their incisive work but their good-natured willingness to engage in an uncertain and lengthy process. Several waited fully three years to see their words in print and all remained steadfast and responsive. I am also grateful to Miriam Bratu Hansen and Robert Lang, who were committed to contributing until unforeseen circumstances made that impossible.

My fascination with and research on violence and film stems from a fateful conversation, prompted at the end of my doctoral exams, with Richard Sennett and Robert Sklar. With Juan Corradi, these mentors nurtured my attempts to explore a vast area of inquiry and I remain indebted to each of them. Among the many friends and colleagues who have contributed to my thinking about film violence, Martin Roberts, Amresh Sinha, and Jonathan Veitch deserve particular gratitude for helping to shape this volume. Special thanks are due to Carol Wilder, Chair of the Communication Department at the New School for Social Research, who encouraged me to initiate this project amid my many other responsibilities there; and to Catharine R. Stimpson, Dean of the NYU Graduate School of Arts and Science, who was unsparing in her support of this reader and the everyday efforts required to complete it.

This book would not exist without Amy Grace Loyd, whose patience and love sustained me from its inception.

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introduction

violence and american cinema: notes for an investigation

j. david slocum

In the early 1990s "new violence" came into vogue as a description for the contemporary productions of Quentin Tarantino, Abel Ferrara, and Oliver Stone. The term was subsequently adopted by popular critics and cultural commentators to characterize a range of films and other media productions, including rap music and popular fiction.[1] During the 1996 presidential election campaign, both Bob Dole and Bill Clinton made extensive public comments about what they perceived as the immorality of movie violence. Other public figures, political and popular, ranging from Michael Medved and Bill Bennett to John Grisham, likewise rang in with their opinions on the topic.[2] Later in the 1990s a spate of school shootings, culminating in the shooting deaths of fifteen at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, forcibly renewed discussions about the role of violent films and other media in the development of American children and adolescents. While "quantitative" studies by social science researchers have accompanied such popular attention and concern, humanities and film

scholars have undertaken the "serious" study of film violence haltingly. Few have attempted to relate contemporary films or controversies to broader contexts or histories, or to provide more sophisticated accounts of cinematic forms of violence. This lack is all the more conspicuous because of the large body of critical work in other disciplines, like anthropology, literary criticism, and art history, devoted to complex understandings of representations of violence.[3] The current volume aims to correct this lack by bringing together a set of original essays that explore the history and theory of American film violence.

Film scholars have traditionally treated violence as a secondary concern. They regularly include violence in considerations of given periods, genres, directors, stars, or oeuvres. Perhaps most familiarly, priority is given to sexuality over violence when the two subjects are addressed. Conventional studies of the early 1930s, the late 1960s, the early 1990s, film noir, the gangster film, the Western, Sam Peckinpah, Martin Scorsese, and Quentin Tarantino—to name a few of the most obvious—thus highlight violence even as they fail to thoughtfully explicate its functions and contexts. Likewise, analysts often characterize the defining operations of the institution of cinema or the medium of film as violent without adequately interrogating the various meanings and value of the term or the history and situation of its viewing. Even more layered accounts of public controversies cite film violence as a catalyst, a provocation, or a cause, but fail to contextualize the images in question. Violence, on the whole, tends to be employed as a lazy signifier, conspicuous but typically unexamined.

Conceiving of Violence and American Film

Violence is a notoriously expansive notion. While the term indicates an action or behavior that is harmful or injurious, the least elaboration quickly demonstrates the range of phenomena for which it is potentially relevant. Individuals, groups, and states undertake harmful actions against individuals, groups, states, animals, property, and nature. Harm can be physical, psychological, or even sociological (countering the bonds of community or the state). Even more, the *threat* of harm or injury can often be as disturbing as the act itself. And the act need not have an immediate cause or responsible agent: systemic or structural violence can emerge from conditions—like racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, or xenophobia—that inscribe a given set of social or cultural relations without necessarily clarifying the reasons for or consequences of specific actions. Still more basically, aggression, sadism, or destructive behavior can be viewed as the result of the psychological or physiological tendency of human beings or social groups—that is, of human nature.

Lurking behind many efforts to define acts of violence are the complex cultural processes by which some behaviors and actions are marked as "violent" and others not. The classical sociological distinction formulated by Weber between violence and coercive force relies on a standard of legitimacy that has deep social roots. The state retains a monopoly on the legitimate use of coercive force, whereas individuals who employ violence are allowed to do so only in extraordinary circumstances (self-defense, war) or

they are judged criminals. More than simply producing straightforward categories of acceptable and unacceptable uses of force, the distinction between legitimacy and illegitimacy also suggests the power of language to name certain actions as violent while marginalizing or eliding others. A ready example is domestic violence—itself a revealing, mitigating term—which refers to violent actions that occur outside the public realm for which notions of legitimacy are most easily applied. Compared to the brutish actions of war, urban riots, or even injurious crimes, violent acts perpetrated in domestic spaces are typically viewed as lesser offenses and discussed through euphemisms like "abuse." Legitimacy as a critical category is thus crucial not only for the actions it validates as violent within a given culture but for the behaviors that it excludes from popular discourses of violence.[4]

Assessing the character of putatively violent actions across cultures and historical periods is more complicated still. The legitimacy of forceful action is very much in the eye of the beholder and subject to the shifting nature of contemporary cultural identities and allegiances. Actions motivated by attitudes toward race and ethnicity are in this way frequently open to varying and even contradictory interpretations; otherness also emerges as a guiding principle for comprehending how prevailing values are translated into cultural practices. Looking at violence across time can highlight some of what falls short in traditional views of violence. The philosopher Sergio Cotta contends that the prevailing twentieth-century approach to violence as an unavoidable structural feature of contemporary society represents a radical break from that of the nineteenth, when violence was seen as an immoral aberration that ran against the norms of culture and civilization.[5] Though in their reach they undermine more focused or concrete discussions, such sweeping theses are provocative.

The matter of representation further tangles considerations of violence. As Foucault argued, language itself communicates violence by giving a name to certain behaviors and constructing certain objects and subjects of violence.[6] The example of legitimacy given above illustrates the power of language to establish violence as a social or legal fact. Prevailing standards of representation go far in a given culture to produce and circumscribe violence. Whatever the inherent violence of language, of course, events or behaviors in the actual world retain their disturbing, often horrifying immediacy. The problem becomes reconciling—or more fundamentally, coming to terms with—the connections between representations of violence and concrete occurrences in the world. One can ask superficially whether representations cause these actual behaviors. But more thoughtful inquiry raises larger questions about whether or how understandings of violence bridge experiences of representations and actual life, about the pleasures of viewing barbarous images or committing actual incidents, and about the necessity to confront destructive tendencies in order to resist or at least comprehend them better. Especially in a modern society mediated by popular culture, these questions are complicated by spectators' losing track of the distinctions between representation and reality in everyday life.

Early cinema provided amusements whose immediate stimulations replicated the sometimes assaultive experience of modern urban society.

Leo Charney, in his essay here and elsewhere, relates the visual shock and visceral stimulation at the heart of early cinematic experience to an increasingly modernist sensibility.[7] Editing, the basis of film language, similarly relied from its beginnings on breaks between otherwise continuous images that have startling and visceral effects upon viewers. Eisenstein's notion of montage involves a collision between frames or images that, when edited in sequence, produce a distinctive and more intense response from viewers than the individual frames or images shown separately. The images themselves may or may not denote violence or produce certain effects for given audiences. Indeed, the threat of violence posed by a narrative can often be more powerful than any graphic single image in provoking viewer responses. Further, even images of blatant violence on-screen, physical or otherwise, beg for multiple and complexly determined responses from viewers: slapstick pratfalls and battlefield kills and acts of noir sadism and boxing matches and serial killings necessarily elicit different kinds of responses and call for different kinds of critical approaches. And while a special difference may exist between the less graphic displays of studio-era films and what Pauline Kael, writing about *Bonnie and Clyde*, called the cinema of "blood and holes," many of the far-reaching difficulties with defining violence adumbrated above have special resonance when discussing film violence generally. From the technical nature of the medium itself to the pleasures and anxieties it evokes in viewers, from its layered narratives to frequently graphic spectacles, cinema is thoroughly violent—even as that violence is difficult to explain simply.

The violence of mainstream Hollywood film typifies that difficulty. Narrative filmmaking practices during the classical period typically involved strictly linear narratives, centered on individual, white, psychologically well motivated male protagonists, moving through the resolution of public conflicts toward social integration and heterosexual coupling that reaffirmed prevailing ideological currents that were themselves grounded in national cultural myths. These narratives are presented through well-focused compositions, continuity editing, realistic settings, naturalistic lighting, and frequent reliance on generic story forms and recognizable star performers. Summarized initially and still most familiarly in Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, these tendencies establish the bounds of images of conformity and nonconformity alike. Breaks from these norms, including images or suggestions of violence, thus may represent nonconformity, deviance, and transgressive behavior. Such images may mark violent actions deemed illegitimate but still acceptable to present as part of a mainstream cultural production.[8]

At the same time, individual images, scenes, or acts that are compelling and often viscerally engaging in themselves—spectacles—appear in varying and complex relationships to the narratives. In fact, the oscillation between narrative and spectacle, examined by Leo Charney and Marsha Kinder in the pages that follow, is pivotal to the exposition of American film as well as its repertoire of violent representations. Whether through masculine protagonists, public conflicts and resolutions, familiar genres, or integrated fictional narratives, this popular cinema employs certain images

of violence and excludes others in the process of exploring and, for the most part, validating the prevailing ideology. That some forms of violence appear so consistently while others remain absent or implicit urges more careful study of the narrative strategies, production practices, and formal operations of Hollywood cinema.

A Century of Responses

There have, of course, been many instructive critical attempts to understand film violence. The following overlapping categories delineate some of the issues that have been central to previous attention and study—and that are crucial in this collection.

Social, Institutional, and Policy Debates

Predictably, most critical attention has taken the form of case studies and historical summaries of specific controversies concerning the regulation of film content.[9] Accounts of early cinema have emphasized the emergence of the medium amid a complex and primarily urban U.S. society increasingly populated by ethnic immigrants. "An aesthetic of astonishment" (film historian Tom Gunning's term for this conjunction of cinematic and social experience) conveys something of the disquieting power of cinema perceived by early opponents of the medium. Local lawmakers and social reformers, who typically saw in this power the potential to corrupt children or to incite uneducated (ethnic) working-class viewers, sought to limit film content and exhibition practices. Boxing films (either re-creations or actual footage of prizefights) were a continual topic of reformist debate nearly from the beginnings of cinema: in 1896 *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight* became immensely popular and therefore a target of reformist concerns about its effects on viewers ranging from the growing middle class to women and workers.[10] As narrative films increasingly predominated U.S. film production toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century and the place of cinema in urban life continued to expand, local lawmakers took a more active stance, closing theaters, arresting exhibitors, and condemning specific films as corrupting. (Prizefight films were banned in 1912.) In 1909 the People's Institute, a reformist group in New York City, founded the National Board of Censorship. With financial ties to the Motion Pictures Patent Trust, this group, which was shortly thereafter renamed the National Board of Review, reviewed and gave approval to individual productions. The board's guidelines were drawn from eight prohibitive standards: number four involved undue depictions of crime; number five prohibited the "unnecessary elaboration or prolongation of suffering, brutality, vulgarity, violence, or crime." This lack of categorical distinction between representations of crime and violence would be seen in a number of regulatory efforts in succeeding decades, including the formation of the industry's self-regulatory organization, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America, in 1922.

Guiding these attempts were the dual negotiations of social values and of the cultural role of motion pictures in a still changing urban America.

Richard Maltby's essay in this volume examines the discourse of criminality at its most contentious moment, when in the late 1920s and early 1930s a sustained scholarly and public debate about the effects of film, especially on children, took place and produced predictably contradictory conclusions. In 1929 Joseph Holmes's study stressed the overall morality of film narratives, in which the moral forces of good triumphed in the end over immoral characters and acts, and accordingly found no evidence of harmful effects. Not surprisingly, Holmes's critics focused on individual spectacles—shootings, whippings, beatings, stabbings—whose immorality could not be redeemed or contained by the moral ending. The most famous work of the era was the popular summary of a nine-volume study sponsored by the Payne Fund. Henry James Forman's *Our Movie-Made Children* (1933) viewed children as "unmarked slates" requiring protection from the scope and power of motion pictures. Writing euphemistically, Forman's concern about the dangers of "movies in a crowded section" is a holdover from earlier, progressive reformers' unease regarding predominantly ethnic workers in urban areas.[11] As Maltby suggests by contrasting the illegitimacy of violent action with the legitimacy of the government's use of force in Howard Hawks's 1931 *Scarface* and throughout the gangster genre, criminal behavior on film became a register for exploring the shifting role of violence and its impact in a turbulent age.

Much popular and scholarly attention has been paid to the formulation and enforcement of the Production Code in the early 1930s. The Code itself emphasized the responsibility of filmmakers to make entertainment, to adhere to common standards of morality and decency, and not to violate the sensibilities of the audience. Yet most of the Code addresses social concerns about sexual impropriety, nudity, and the immorality expressed through deviant behavior. Its specific prohibitions regarding violence were vague: under the applications concerning "crimes against the law," the overriding concern with depictions of "murder" and "crime" is that specific details or techniques not be presented "to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation." With the cooperation of the studios, the Code succeeded in circumscribing images of violence so that their function remained instrumental, mostly validating existing values, and never excessively subversive of mainstream assumptions. The Code and its proscriptions also helped to negotiate the cultural role of movies, especially sound movies as they emerged in the Depression-era United States. Jonathan Munby has even argued that the engagement of cultural issues springing from images of brutality, killing, or cruelty was crucial for the resituating and legitimation of sound cinema.[12]

At no time was this apparatus, or its efforts at inclusion and exclusion, more active than during the Second World War, when an alliance between Washington, Hollywood, and American audiences carefully regulated how the horrors of war were represented.[13] The Production Code provided filmmakers with the parameters through which to present images of physical force or psychic trauma that could, in years of depression and war alike, emphasize for audiences the cultural negotiations between good, sanc-

tioned actions and criminal or evil ones. The Office of War Information, the government unit charged with monitoring and collaborating with the studios in order to ensure their contribution to the war effort, was keenly aware of the dangers in presenting war in its full, intense, and graphic reality. Instead, the suggestion of brutal action and the incremental increase in depictions of violence against Americans throughout the war enabled filmmakers to contain these shocking images in familiar narratives with upbeat or at least reaffirming endings. Popular audiences nevertheless demanded increasingly direct images of violence, indeed of deaths and killings, when they concluded that sanitized images failed to reflect the experiences of their loved ones. Art historian George H. Roeder Jr. has noted that popular cinema was central to the overall "visual experience" of the war, which finally encouraged polarized ways of seeing the conflict between the Allied and Axis powers. He goes on to claim that it was precisely the consolidation of existing Hollywood storytelling practices that suited the government's political aims of maintaining morale while also underscoring the ideological differences between the United States and its German and Japanese enemies.[14]

With the end of the war and the breakup of the studio system, the Code and its underlying cultural assumptions were subjected to changes marked by increasingly graphic images of violence in films ranging from Westerns to crime and war films. Meanwhile, in the mid-1950s, the Kefauver Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency investigated the putative influence of a string of films about teens and, specifically, their delinquency. Its hearings proceeded from familiar anxieties about the corrupting influence of movies and, increasingly, television, on postwar youth. "The predominance of brutality in both movies and television is making our Nation's youth insensitive to human suffering," the committee's report read. "They are becoming so accustomed to an overwhelming amount of crimes and violence that death and pain are becoming meaningless."[15] Partly seeking to avoid governmental action, Hollywood instituted a voluntary moratorium on the making of "j.d. films" in 1956.[16]

The 1960s and early 1970s was the golden age of American film violence, a fact understood by filmmakers and critics at the time and celebrated since. Cinematic expressions of the counterculture challenged classical Hollywood genres and their underlying cultural myths, like that of the masculine hero. Through the exaggeration of formulaic images of aggression, productions increasingly mirrored cultural preoccupations with violence. They also emerged from filmmakers' efforts to expand the bounds of conventional film practice with stylistic and narrative innovations. Even more, though, filmmakers sought to join in a broader discussion about the nature of human aggression and the impact of violent images. Thus Sam Peckinpah's stated aim was to undermine viewers' conventional vantage points for watching movie violence. By doing so, he sought to convey the horrors of the era to viewers inured by media to the real violence in society. Critics at the time responded to the unprecedentedly violent images and the larger public debates variously: some celebrated the stylized renditions of gore as breakthroughs or as appropriate to the

moment, others saw them as necessary cultural documents, still others derided the films as base and indicative of a decline in both Hollywood cinema and U.S. society. At a moment of thoroughgoing change for society and cinema alike, the break between classical norms for representing aggressions with restraint and an emergent willingness to depict violence more graphically was lost on few observers.[17]

Despite the wide-ranging public and political debates on the topic, few extended scholarly tracts concerning film violence appeared at the time. Even as violence grew more and more prevalent in cinema and a society riven by civil rights disputes, generational conflicts, and Vietnam, increased efforts to make sense of it remained disjointed. During these years, policy makers increased their focus on the mass media, of which popular Hollywood cinema was only one component—and one secondary to television. Researchers sought to establish links between violent images and actual behavior, with varied but mostly undramatic results.[18] Violence in film was also subsumed for some under the broader moral threat of pornography. The eleven-volume report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence included one volume on media that devoted only six of its nearly four hundred pages to motion pictures.[19]

Throughout the later 1970s and into the 1980s, as the introduction of cable television, VCRs, and multiplexes reshaped the cultural role of cinema, the so-called Reaganite entertainment of the latter decade featured a return to mostly innocuous films with violence bolstered by special-effects technology and devoid of antiestablishment tenor. Violent film images were still regularly assailed by cultural critics and used to illustrate the depravity of a number of electronic media, including television and video games, but cinema itself was rarely analyzed on its own terms. Public discourse on the carnage in slasher films or action blockbusters thus ironically became excuses for positing "Hollywood" as a synecdoche for mass media or a culture industry that was increasingly shaped by other media. Inverting the effort of many in the late 1960s to plumb the depths of human aggression through an understanding of graphic film images, film and cultural critics of the 1980s and early 1990s generated scandals around individual productions that were alleged to represent more widespread moral turpitude and social decay. *Dressed to Kill*, *Year of the Dragon*, and *Basic Instinct* were among the movies seized upon as outrageous and then made the basis for establishing new standards of "appropriate" and "fair" representation without regard for the subsequent effects of such generalizing.[20]

The decade also saw continuing attempts by social scientists to identify the "effects" of screen violence on viewers and their behavior; while film remained in these studies a medium of concern secondary to television, the emergence of cable television and video cassettes provoked greater sensitivity among scholars and public policy makers to the meaning of violent images in specific media.[21] Still, most public debate remained narrowly cast and avoided the increasing cartoon violence of mainstream action films featuring hypermasculinized stars like Stallone and Schwarzenegger and spectacular special effects. An important subset of inquiries into media effects during the 1980s, involving attention to violent pornography,