

## **Violence in Cinema**

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### **Introduction**

Hollywood exists today in the context of a multimedia world, a world in which television, the internet and printed media all influence opinion as much as they reflect it. Films are not judged purely on their artistic merit's or commercial success, but often on subjective tabloid evaluations of the acceptability of their subject material. Hollywood is both the master and slave of the masses; please the peons and the box office becomes a gold mine, anger or offend them and losses can be immense. Perhaps more controversial in cinema, even than sex, violence is under the constant scrutiny of a media eager for sensation. Interest in violent movies by the press, and the cyclic nature of controversy have always been used by Hollywood to sell films. The effort to get the balance right between being just offensive / controversial enough to be interesting and not enough to genuinely offend has made for some of the most interesting and structurally complex films ever produced.

### **Do violent movies make people violent ?**

When a movie is produced (usually with the justification of the artistic nature of its content) which pushes the boundrys of public and media acceptance, it stands the risk of being linked with high profile cases of real violence. Oliver Stones 'Natural Born Killers' is reputed to be responsible for a spree killing in Germany; 'Reservoir Dogs' has been blamed for attacks against the police; the hardly artistically valid 'Childs Play' was even linked to the murder of British toddler James Bulger. But do these films really cause people, even disturbed people, to become violent, to recreate scenes which so influence them that they distort their view of reality ?

While it is true that easily influenced groups, such as children or those suffering from Schizophrenia, are at risk of indoctrination by exposure, these groups can be affected by just about any external influence. Film has no special power that news reports, true-life drama, peer groups and actual violence (either witnessed or experienced) do not. When movies have been accused of making otherwise sane people irrationally violent it has often turned out that these charges are unfounded.

In the case of the murders in Germany, it was discovered on inspection by more reputable broadsheet newspapers, that the couple in question, so apparently similar to Stones crazed Bonnie and Clyde, merely owned a poster of 'Natural Born Killers'. Bulger's executioners hadn't in fact seen 'Child Play' (the tape was owned by one of their parents), and their actions were more likely the result of years of abuse (both sexual and physical) in both families.

### **Is violence necessary to cinema ?**

Can drama be sustained without resorting to violence ? Obviously it can, but only through a quality of writing not consistently available to mass entertainment. Even the greatest dramatists use calm interspersed with moments of psychological and physical violence to shock the audience into arguably the goal of all art, thought (e.g.: Pozzo's treatment of Lucky in 'Waiting for Godot'). Cinema is often more appropriate as a forum for commentary on social change, strife, and misconduct than a debating ground for the moral and intellectual issues of the day.

The most significant films of the sixties are not about the cultural or intellectual stimulation or experimentation of that time, but concern themselves with revolution; with the social connotations of a generation diametrically opposed to the values of its society (e.g.: 'Easy Rider', 'Alices Restaurant'), usually in a very violent way. Cinema is about results rather than processes, effects rather than causes, and is perhaps the art form most ideally suited to the explanation and representation of metaphorical and actual conflict.

### **Sex and violence..**

Its often stated that the combination of sex and violence in movies can be directly or indirectly associated with sex crimes. The implication being that the sanitation of physical dominance during 'The act of love', leads to a kind of blind misogyny, which can, in turn, result in violence.

Ignoring for the moment the sometimes quasi-violent nature of normal sexual relationships, lets consider the effect of the censorship of violently sexual / sexually violent movies. Since the exploitation movies of the late 1960's and 70's (e.g.: 'Shaft', 'Foxy Brown'), British censors have taken the view that films which combine sex and violence in a 'glamorous' way are absolutely forbidden. Has this resulted in a reduction in sexual crimes against men or women ? On the contrary, the growth of sex-crime in the intervening decades has been exponential. Has it reduced the visible public desire for violent sex ? Again no, during the 1980's and 90's, decades which have seen many films banned by the BBFC for their apparently exploitative and glamorous depiction of violent sexual relationships {e.g.: 'Caligula', 'Natural Born Killers', and 'True Romance' (not banned but heavily cut)}, the fastest area of growth in the British sex industry has been Sado-Masochism (S&M) !

An argument could be made that sex in the movies, and even violent sex, serves as an outlet for men, existing as they do in a modern society whose taboos and complexities involve evolutionarily unnatural behavior. That because of the continuing taboo attached to pornography, Hollywood must to some extent fulfill this need for cinema as safety valve. Serving a public good.

### **Does violence in cinema reflect, rather than influence, violence in society ?**

Violence in good (i.e.: intellectually or artistically valid) films, is often an expression, reflection, or metaphor for violence in wider society. These films can, and almost always do, criticise violence. This is least apparent (and most successful) when it is implicit rather than explicit, when the film uses symbolism, foreshadowing, and archetypal imagery to shock the viewer into a realization of the greater meaning and importance of

the characters actions and experiences. In 'Taxi Driver', DeNiro's character explores the reality of violence in contemporary society. His city is ours, his feelings of emasculation, and his rejection of the perceived decadence, immorality and corruption of modern society, echo those of a significant minority of socially displaced men in post-Vietnam America.

David Fincher's 'Fight Club' focuses on a similar violent rejection of modern values. Its characters, disgusted not by the perversion of sexuality but by consumerism, seek to violently express their lack of moral certainty.

These films cannot be said to glorify or promote violence, if anything, in bringing philosophical questions about identity and evolutionary psychology to a wider audience, in lucidly and simply expressing the largely unspoken frustrations which have led to punk, the chemical generation, rising crime, and numerous evils of the satisfied society, which grow like the urban ghettos the middle class majority fear so much; they can help us to confront and acknowledge the modern worlds punishment and repression of masculinity.