

## ON THRILLS AND KILLS

Sadomasochism in the Movies

**M**ovies have become machines for the sadomasochistic imagination. *Die Hard 2* is said to depict 264 killings. But so-called serious cinema has also been skidding down a slippery slope, aiming to meet schlock halfway. Since *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *The Godfather* (1972), scarcely a would-be serious American film is complete without hitherto unphotographed representations of the untimely release of blood from the human body—witness Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas*, with its ice pick in the back of the head, its bathroom floor flowing with blood. And make no mistake: media violence thrives on the demand as well as the supply side. Teenagers, the major audience for American movies, lap—and camp—it up. Four films produced by one man (*Die Hard 1 and 2*, *Lethal Weapon 1 and 2*) are said to have grossed about \$1 billion. And movies are not alone in their delectation of ingenious ways to blow people apart. Heavy metal and rap sound vicious notes. Newspapers, local television news and syndicated crime shows, music videos, popular fiction—all fill with gore. The chain saw that was a mark of kitsch in the splatter movies of the seventies has become a staple of genre fiction, culminating in the grotesque depictions of the ripping and rending of flesh reported in Bret Easton Ellis's instantly notorious *American Psycho*. For what cause does all the blood flow? Where does it flow from, where does it flow to? What does the spillage say about, and to, our culture?

No single explanation will do, since the blood is spilling from so many quarters and in so many spirits—in so many different veins, one wants to say. The explanation has to be

multiple, has to take some account of history. For we are not the first moderns to be variously thrilled, enthralled, disquieted, obsessed, and disgusted by violence in the media. Since before the time of Jack the Ripper in 1888, the tabloid press—and sometimes its rich relations—has batted on crime waves, the gorier the better; and for at least that long, right-thinking middle-class uplifters have censured the image-mongers for befouling or inciting working-class youth. In a study of the Ripper phenomenon, the cultural historian Christopher Fraying tells us that the murders had the unique effect of making headlines in both the *Times* and the penny comic weekly *Illustrated Police News*. While most London papers at the time restrained themselves from publishing all the gory details of stab wounds and mutilations, the *Police News* regaled its readers with elaborate accounts, complete with artists' renditions—compiling a total of 184 cover pictures during the four years after the last murder. Lurid pictures, along with illustrations from penny-dreadful novels, were commonly plastered on billboards all over town. The high-minded were quick to link the Ripper crimes to the excesses of popular culture. *Punch* asked:

Is it not within the bounds of probability that to the highly-coloured pictorial advertisements to be seen on almost all the hoardings [billboards] in London, vividly representing sensational scenes of murder exhibited as “the great attractions” of certain dramas, the public may be to a certain extent indebted for the horrible crimes [Jack the Ripper's] in Whitechapel? We say it most seriously—imagine the effect of gigantic pictures of violence and assassination by knife and pistol

on the morbid imagination of an unbalanced mind.

So neither the phenomenon nor the alarm is exactly new—which is not to say that the alarm of the high-minded is automatically unwarranted, that the garish splitting of skulls or slashing of flesh in the movies is good for the soul, or that the new technologies for the rendition of violence are of no moment. Rather, the ample historical precedents for today's splatter chic suggest that we are in the midst of a deep cultural presence, a hollow in the heart of modernity. The question is, Why?

Begin with the true commonplace that American culture as a whole—the culture lived on the street as well as the products of movies, television, comics, popular fiction, music, and so on—cultivates a taste for violence, an accommodation to it, an obsession with it, a series of ironic comments upon it, even (in the light of the flesh-and-blood violence of the off-screen world) a refuge from it. The nerve endings twitch from the violence of everyday life; the streets and the media serve as its conduits. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, following Baudelaire, the abrupt tactile movements that move us through traffic, carry us through crowds, call us to telephones, along with the optical switches that flicker on and off, nervously diverting attention from one sign or advertisement or information blip to another—all the definitive fits and starts of modern life produce the experience of one shock after another. We live by interruption. The paradox is that the steady shocks of living acclimate the nervous system to disruption—and produce a need for stimulus. Stimulus is relief but compounds the problem; the junkie of shock finds himself or herself (but mostly himself, as I shall argue below) in need of higher doses, faster relief.

**I**f this is the normal experience of modern life, then we could extend Walter Benjamin to say that America's modernity embodies shock to a still higher power. Even in more prosperous times, everyday experience is full of that contradiction in terms, routine shock—in the street, people suddenly rear up out of the corner of your eye; strangers cross your path

more often in a day than in many a preindustrial lifetime; sirens and screaming headlines add to the experience of everyday violation. Add to this the fact that urban life in America has become steadily more shocking as poverty spreads and atolls of urban calm have been flooded. If we do not directly experience crime on the streets or in the subways, we know someone who has, or we see and hear reports in the news. Most Americans, in the course of a day, see homeless people—evidence that life is disruptable to a degree that our pieties belie. The violence that runs rife through popular culture represents not only the rupture of life and limb but shock made routine.

But the sheer everyday shock and real-world violence that riddle our time cannot, all by themselves, account for the violence of popular culture today, for modernity is always with us but violent images are not—at least not in such vividness and profusion. *Today's movies are far more violent than the streets.* If violence in popular culture were nothing more than a mirror for the violence of the world, it would have peaked during World War II. Flesh-and-blood violence happens all over the world, but popular culture is not a carbon copy of real rat-a-tat-tat. No, there have to be more specific causes. I propose these: Set in a bad time, the industry is also in the grip of inner forces—call them, in sum, a cynicism so deep as to defy parody. The movies are driven by economic and technological incentives to revel in the means to inflict pain, to maim, disfigure, shatter the human image. And they are also beset by a zeitgeist that slashes and burns, that wants to hurt—in every sense: to reach out to cut someone; to cause pain; to fight back; to suffer; and also to be anesthetized, to feel no pain. Wounded masculinity is screaming, and what it screams ends up in grotesque pictures and Dolby sound.

Since the 1950s, when the movie audience hemorrhaged and grown-ups started to stay home, Hollywood has been hard-pressed to offer audiences something that television cannot. Teenagers became the choice big-screen audience. Box office results convinced distributors that audiences attuned to hundreds or thousands of hours of cop shows and action

adventures by the time they get to movie-going age want to see something that simultaneously is television, with its reductions and violence, and isn't, because television is toned down for home consumption. One easy resort is to the ingenious representation of maimed and disfigured body parts, which play unforgettably on the big screen. In turn, as movie violence grows more graphic, so do even the edited-for-television versions, as well as network series, both competing with videocassettes and unedited cable replays, all adding to the pressure on the next round of movies to establish that they can offer something network television cannot—by raising their gore quotients. The unprecedented violence wrought in Arthur Penn's 1967 *Bonnie and Clyde* punctured numbness; it did, as Pauline Kael wrote at the time, "put the sting back in death." But over the years of chain saws, sharks, abdomen-ripping aliens, and the like, movie violence has come to require, and train, numbness. Anesthesia becomes necessary equipment for steering through the thousands of limb tearings and arterial spurts that the movies have made more common than dependent clauses. To be hip is to be inured, and more—to require a steadily increasing boost in the size of the dose required.

Steve Mills, a CBS executive in charge of the network's television movies, once told me that a particular movie was praiseworthy because it "has great jeopardy," meaning two elements: mechanically contrived suspense and the promise of bodily harm. The plot becomes a hammock slung from menace to menace. Action movies and real-life cartoons like the Rambo, *Star Wars*, and Indiana Jones serials account for a disproportionate share of movie profits by taking bankable stars and plunking them down in "great jeopardy." Of course, television did not invent cliffhangers; movie serials thrived on them decades ago. But commercial television made them routine; dramatic structure was bent to keep the audience hooked through the commercial breaks. Steven Spielberg, who started out as a director of television episodes, has built his career precisely on setting up "great jeopardy," but he is simply the most successful of the movie directors whose sensibility has been

formed by, and aims to exploit, the expectations aroused by television. Like the clockwork violence of present-day children's television cartoons, the cliffhanger moment substitutes for character. Writers learn to sprinkle "great jeopardy" into the action to paper over vast holes in the narrative. Mangled flesh rescues a mangled plot. The severed limb compensates for a severed continuity. Witness the amazing careers of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, actors whose personae are possessed of as much talent as chain saws, and whose on-screen functions are similar.

The predilections of financiers, directors, writers, makeup artists, and audiences come together to ratchet the frequency and magnitude of violence upward. Directors draw craft pride from their ability to surpass the previous round of abominations. Financiers see no reason to temper the cycle and every reason not to; studio bosses, bankers, and distributors conclude that, but for a few romances and exercises in the supernatural, nothing is more riveting than the furies of jeopardy, frights, wounds, machine-gun bursts and fireballs, exploding helicopters, car chases, and crashes—and no motivation more alluring than revenge, power-lust, or all-around viciousness. Encouraged by the industry, young screenwriters learn to write this way—using violence as an easy and formulaic expression of the unexpected, even as punctuation. (Raymond Chandler once advised mystery writers, probably tongue-in-cheek, that when stuck they should every so often have a man come through a door with a gun; but today's ritual murders are not what he meant.) The truncated sense of what constitutes a commercial movie is coarsened further by all the garish "advances" in makeup and stunts, the better to assault the imagination with picturesquely wounded or bared flesh that (at this writing) the networks will not permit on their airwaves—all the dirty words, shark gouges, axe gashes, dentists' drills, and machine-gun spatters that end up dotted throughout even the most modest thriller. And then, not least, it remains true that, thanks heavily to television, the movie audience remains disproportionately young, and flocks to these movies. Much of the planet does likewise—exports deliver a hefty proportion of

total box office receipts—making Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Charles Bronson & Co. global heroes.

**T**he movie industry's dynamics, economic and technological forces—all are real pressures, all define the channels along which the slashes and gouges move into the collective imagery. But if we stop here, we are missing the heartless heart of the matter. What is this murderous stuff that flows down the channels, where does it derive its energy, what is its power? Writers write and directors direct to order in the culture industry, yes, but how do we take the measure of the immense, even self-caricatured rage they deliver? From where does this ferocious energy come, this positive relish for soul murder? Why does not only Hollywood but the creative writing workshops fill with aspiring writer-slashers?

Or specifically, writer-slashers who are men? But to ask the question this way begins the answer. The rage and nihilism that well up on the screen record the rage and nihilism of their makers. The imagination of slashing is a man's gambit. Screen murders are disproportionately murders by men. I don't know how many victims of these imagined men are women (and I don't intend to find out the painful way), but from what I read the ratio must be high. What is spilling all over the screen is the fury of men who hate and fear women, hate and fear homosexuals, and don't know just what kind of masculine performance is required of them. They want to strike back, to carve their initials into the world, and so they spawn cartoon killers—body-building men who resent the feminine and dependent in themselves and aspire to the independence of machines; demented men, whose tools for cutting the indestructible cord or denying their own castration are the knife and the chain saw; insulted and injured men, denied by women on whom they depend and who seem to demand everything of them yet don't understand what they need or won't deliver it; inarticulate men, in the line of Rambo, who know themselves through their enemies; vengeful men, in the

line of Al Pacino's Michael Corleone, who discover that ruthless violence is the dark elixir that jolts boys into manhood. These men lash out and kill—it is, finally, their form of speech, it is all they know how to do. They murder vulnerability because it unmans them. They say to the weak: You'll pay, sucker. The multi-murderous film must be, in part, the underside of the continuing backlash against uppity women and weak ("feminine") men—the unconscious or semiconscious or, who knows, at times fully conscious slashing out for a way to make a place in the world, a way to be or become or remain a man.

To some unknowable degree these films must collect, contain, focus, channel, reflect back the free-floating anxieties of their spectators. Note: I am not saying that the men and boys in the audience take movie violence at face value. Many spectators shrug it off or camp it up, recognizing that movie violence is a sort of exclamation point. Teenagers gather in the dark to whoop it up, proving that they don't take the ritual murders seriously—and proving in the process that they are man enough not to have to take them seriously. Recognizing the formula, the knowing spectator settles down in the dark with his shield up. Cynicism becomes the wise response, as in, "It's only a movie." The wise guy substitutes for the wise man. The more practiced the cynicism, the more gore it takes to get a rise—or even a laugh—out of the jaded spectators. The culture piles up with victims.

The secret of the box-office success of these films is that they evoke a forbidden pleasure in the victim's pain. There is a delirium of delight in the perpetrator's ability to get away with murder. The sheer volume and magnitude of mayhem is utterly severed from the conceivably rational objectives of criminals. The viewer who doesn't close his eyes is not drawn to identify with the victims—they are barely on the screen long enough to warrant second thoughts. The visitor from another planet, screening all the splatters and slashes, would have to conclude that in the United States of America today, life is cheap. □