

Art and an Act of VIOLENCE

by John Zanzal

The literal depiction of violence appears in the earliest primitive art, hunting and war scenes being the earliest major themes. For the illiterate man, they were stories of brave deeds.

Of the art of the West, the European's developed a style that depended on capturing the characters at the dramatic moment just before the fatal blow was to be struck. As the lovers in Yate's "The Grecian Urn" were petrified, so were those characters eternally frozen in the last moment of terror--(the Chinese say of Western Art, that we always look as if we are ABOUT to live).

In the Renaissance, religious painting of the Passion and scenes of hell, especially in Northern Europe, exploited the involving and educational potentials of violence. They were object lessons for the faithful and carried a more psychological content in vivid distortion of the human form. The Crucifixion, by Gruenwald, and painting by Hieronimus Bosh, are well known examples.

The tendency of the North toward psychological violence was to lead to the major 20th century art form, called Expressionism. A famous school was that of the German expressionists who supposedly distorted forms to express emotion; often it was of a suppressed variety such as fear and guilt, often of a sexual nature. ("The Scream," by Edward Munch).

For the socially minded artist, violence has been the cause and effect of great events in history. Goy's "Execution, May 3, 1808," is an emotional as well as a literal report in the same way as Picasso's "Grunecice" would be of the 1930's.

Emotions have no form until the individual chooses to express them. Some people get silent and frown when angered, others shout and shake their fists. The emotion is not the action, only the cause of it. Expressionism first distorted,

then abandoned, the human form. Shapes and colors replaced the human form as the expression of emotion.

World War I, the "Great War," brought disillusionment and despair to the artists of Europe. The senseless violence of war, coupled with the frustration of defeat fed the expressionist moment.

Between wars, the Abstract Expressionist School came to New York, partially because of exile of "degenerate artists," as Hitler called them, and also said, "Anyone who sees and paints the pastures blue and the skies green, should be sterilized."

During the 1940's, William DeKooning painted violent expressionistic paintings of women shortly after his divorce. He carried the destruction of the human figure to its logical end.

The Action painters, headed by artists like Nackson, Pollock, and Franz Kline were exploring the effect of the act of painting. Dripping, spraying, throwing, paint was the act of painting. In the painting of Franz Kline, it was also an act of violence -- black paint on white canvas.

"The Act of Violence" - 1970 - Red China's missile - Cambodia - Is real - bombs!!!

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Movies and Violence

by Paul H. Stacy

Technically and aesthetically, movies MUST be violent. Depiction of violence is not a matter of directorial choice.

Admittedly some directors are pathologically addicted to violence--Godard, Kurosawa, Antonioni in his absurdly overstated conclusion to ZABRISKI POINT, Lindsay Anderson in IF. (That scene in which handsome, young professors are assassinated--could anything be more profoundly offensive?) The extreme exploitation of a medium is not to be confused with its norm; still the norm is unavoidable once a man commits himself to work in a particular medium.

The violence that constitutes the cinematic norm is what I should like to account for, without suggesting that I know the consequences of that violence on society. Whether exposure to a violent scene -- the deaths of Bonnie and Clyde, of Jane Fonda, the orgy of deaths in THE DAMNED, the operations in MASH -- whether a violent scene satiates, calms, purges, our blood-hunger or whether it instigates, arouses, sharpens our appetite, I do not know. I suspect that movies have never made a murderer -- or even a shoplifter, alcoholic, or vegetarian. (Shall we keep children from OLIVER because it will transform them into pickpockets?)

To write a poem, you adopt a mode of law and order -- call it what you will: grammar, language, rhyme, meter, form, punctuation. In short, the base of poetry, whether you abide by it or not, is tradition and conformity and orderliness. Power in poetry is related to obedience to poetic laws.

How fit he is to sway That can so well obey. (Marvell)

But to make a movie, you use a camera, no? (Yes.) A camera is a machine, a technological mechanism. And certain contamination sets in.

1. You use a close-up. A close-up is an exaggeration. An exaggeration of size, action, or involvement is not merely a clarification, it is a separation from context; it is an abnormal break from reality.

2. You use slow-motion. This gives you power over time. Power is irresistible. Look at the relationship between slow motion and power-obsession in THEY SHOOT HORSES, CITIZEN KANE, THE OLYMPIAD, BONNIE and CLYDE, THE SOLDIER, OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE. Slow motion is a neurotic relishing of an agonizing situation. Delay the exquisite pleasure. (If it sounds sexual, that's your hang-up. And down, boy.)

3. You use montage, or you simply splice. You cut from one scene to another. Automatically you have fragmented time, space, sensibility, and broken a natural law of continuity. The result is a jolt to serenity, a leap into an intensified disintegration of reassurance. You separate. How much compression and separation can the emotions bear, particularly when they fly in the face of logic and everyday stability?

4. You film an object. The camera records the exterior, the physical surface. It is impossible, in any meaningful way, to do otherwise. Whatever the metaphysical potential of literature, a camera excludes all spirit, soul, essence. The focus is exclusively physical. Surely a purely physical orientation to life is going to orient a person toward physicality, sensuality, brutality; and you don't need a religious prophet like myself telling you that this is perilous indeed.

These four points -- and even freshmen know the list is not complete -- add up to an emotional profanation of the subject matter, an inherent disposition toward brutality. And the more sensitive a director is in his comprehension of the nature of his medium, the more will he bring to his subject matter, or treatment of it, into harmony with its strengths.

And that is why the greatest movies, necessarily, are about power-mad maniacs, revolutions on battleships, rapings of virgins, burnings of saints, births of nations, ...about, in short, violence.



(Ray Fudge)