

Violence and Film in the US

Complexities

- “Violence” is not a single thing. It is more difficult to define than pornography.
- Is only physical violence violence, or are emotional and psychological violence to be considered?
- How violence is defined and the steps taken to regulate it are *political actions*.
- to call an act “violent” is to describe it; to call it “violence” is to automatically object to it.

Complexities

- Elements to be considered in analysis:
 - the act
 - the actor (the agent and the actor playing the agent)
 - the victim (and the actor playing the victim)
 - the motivation of the act
 - the representation of the act (film style)
 - the context in which the act occurs (narrative; genre)
 - the tone or mood of the film

Violence as Communication

- The purpose for which the act is presented
 - Experiential
 - Generic
 - Technological
- Strategies of spectator attachment
 - Recognition
 - Alignment strategies
 - Temporal alignment
 - Spatial alignment
 - Subjective alignment
 - Sympathy
 - Empathy

The Aesthetics of Violence



Problematic examples



Problematic examples



Problematic examples



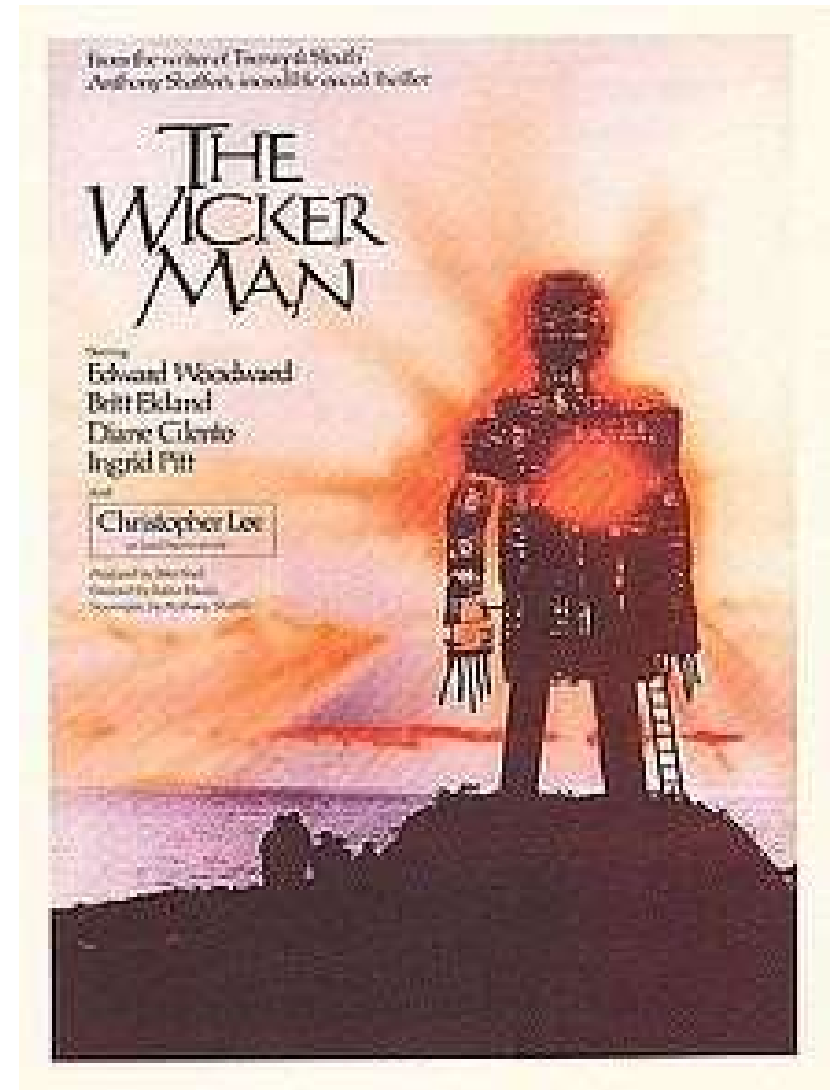
Problematic examples



How Violence Is Made Palatable

- violence and genre
 - constructive versus destructive violence
 - violence and the restoration of social order
 - secure endings
 - displacement in time and/or space
 - stylized violence, cartoony excess

Violence as Ritual



Violence and Iconic Stars



Violence and Iconic Stars



Iconic Weapons



Iconic Weapons



Examples of Stylized Violence



Examples of Stylized Violence



Tarantino and the 1990s



Representation

- ancient Greek practice of violence offstage and aftermath on stage versus today's practices
- paradoxical effect of realism → increased graphicness
- key years: 1930–1935, 1940s, 1970s
- Landmark films: *Scarface* (1932), *Psycho* (1960), *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Dirty Harry* (1971), *The Exorcist* (1973)

Ratings

- Key year is 1967: “the year of violence”
- PCA ends in 1965, CARA ratings (the Classification and Rating Administration) starts 1968 → self-censorship gap
- younger auteurs (Penn, Peckinpah, Altman, Coppola, Scorsese, Friedkin) push envelope
- new youth niche audience
- *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973)

Criticism of the MPAA Ratings

- “Ratings creep” only evident for violent films
- most apparent in PG-13 and R categories
- filmmakers push for PG-13 ratings for commercial reasons
- nonviability of NC-17 → R ratings for extreme content

Why We Watch

- Social identity/peer group
- Emotional intensity
- Fantasy experience
- Violence as justice
- Negative views of victims
- Belief that the world is dangerous

Beliefs about Mediated Violence

- Violence as personal catharsis; a way to cope with fears
- Viewers attach to/identify with perpetrators of violence
- Watching violence is a social safety valve for aggression

- *There is no evidence to support any of these beliefs.*

Studies of Film Violence

- 1930s–1950s: social-science effects research
- efforts step up once social violence appeared in late 1950s and early 1960s (riots and protests)
- attention shifts away from social conditions to the media in search for causes
- violence bracketed to criminality; if it's legal it can't be violence.

Studies of Film Violence

- Alloway (1971): first study to look at film violence as a function of social conditions
- Fraser (1974): complicates view of violence as polysemous, ideas of possible positive effects
- 1980s: studies on the de-eroticization of the male body and the buddy film
- 1990s: “ironic violence” (Tarantino, Verhoeven, Stone, T. Scott, Woo) → academic studies on violence’s attraction

UCLA Study, 1994 (Browne et al.)

- content analysis (cinematic style, narrative, language, diegetic role of violence)
- character index (attitude toward society, toward acts of violence, toward self-image)
- 14 films → 658 acts of violence
- hero's motives: protection or survival

UCLA Study (Browne et al.)

- Key conclusions
 - violence is fictionalized
 - few legal or physical consequences, particularly for the protagonist
 - graphic violence not experienced as real by viewers