The Palgrave Handbook of Violence in Film and Media

Edited by
Steve Choe

palgrave
macmillan

The Palgrave Handbook of Violence in Film and Media

Steve Choe
Editor

The Palgrave Handbook of Violence in Film and Media

Editor
Steve Choe
School of Cinema
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA, USA

Cover credit: @Boris Zhitkov

CONTENTS

Notes on Contributors

Bacon Henry is a professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Helsinki (2004–). Previously he worked as a research fellow at the Finnish Film Archive (1999–2004), where he also acted as a project manager in charge of designing a national radio and television archive. His major research interests are transnational aspects of cinema, how audiovisual experience relates to our perception and understanding of the natural and the social world, audiovisual narratology, as well as film's relation to other arts. He has also written extensively on the history of opera.

Brown Patrick (Ph.D., Film Studies, University of Iowa) is a guest lecturer in American Studies at the Technische Universität-Dortmund. His research focuses on the relationship between play and media in both contemporary and historical contexts. Recently, his work has ranged between and often threaded together topics in the study of Weimar cinema, modernity studies, game studies, media philosophy, and periodical studies.

Chareyron Romain is Assistant Professor of French at the University of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon, Canada). He is a contemporary French and Francophone cinema specialist, with interests that also branch into Francophone culture and contemporary French society. His research primarily focuses on gender and sexuality, the representation of disability, and film genres in contemporary French cinema. He co-edited *Screening Youth: Contemporary French and Francophone Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019). His current project is investigating the representation of disability in French cinema.

Choe Steve is Associate Professor of Critical Studies in the School of Cinema at San Francisco State University. His areas of research include film and media theory.

Flood Maria is Lecturer in World Cinemas at the University of Liverpool. She is a specialist of world cinema and political violence and has published on French and North African postcolonial film, the aesthetics of cinematic violence, gender and conflict, and terrorism and affect studies. She is the author of *France, Algeria and the Moving Image: Screening Histories of Violence* (Legenda: Oxford, 2018). Her most recent monograph is titled *Moonlight: Screening Black Queer Youth* and was released by Routledge in 2021.

Grønstad Asbjørn is a professor of Visual Culture in the Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen. The author/editor of twelve books, his most recent monographs are *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture: The Poetics of Opacity* (Palgrave, 2020) and *Ways of Seeing in the Neoliberal State* (Palgrave, 2021). Grønstad is the founding director of Nomadikon: The Bergen Center of Visual Culture.

Hantke Steffen has edited *Horror*, a special topic issue of *Paradoxa* (2002), *Horror: Creating and Marketing Fear* (2004), *Caligari's Heirs: The German Cinema of Fear after 1945* (2007), *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium* (2010), and, with Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet, *War Gothic in Literature and Culture* (2016). He is also the author of *Conspiracy and Paranoia in Contemporary American Literature* (1994) and *Monsters in the Machine: Science Fiction Film and the Militarization of America after World War II* (2016).

Hodge Amber P. is an English teacher at Choate Rosemary Hall. She holds a Ph.D. in English with a graduate minor in gender studies from the University of Mississippi and a master's degree in American studies from the College of William and Mary. Her most recent publications include "As She Lay Dying: Locating the Gothic in Kaui Hart Hemming's *The Descendants*" (2021), which appeared in *American Literature*, and their dissertation, *The Meat of the Gothic: Animality and Social Justice in United States Fiction and Film of the Twenty-First Century*.

Jancovic Marek is Assistant Professor of Media Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His current research is centered around the materialities of the moving image, film preservation practices, sustainable media, and format studies. Together with Axel Volmar and Alexandra Schneider, he is the co-editor of *Format Matters: Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures* (Meson Press, 2020). He obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Mainz (Germany) with the doctoral project *Misinscriptions: A Media Epigraphy of Video Compression*, an interdisciplinary archaeology of video compression techniques exploring the historical interrelationships between mathematics, medicine, and media.

Kalmár György is a reader at the Department of British Studies of the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen (DE), Hungary. He graduated from DE in 1997, his majors were Hungarian and English. He

worked as a post-graduate researcher and visiting scholar at the University of Oxford in Great Britain and at the University of Indiana in Bloomington, USA. He gained Ph.D. in philosophy (2003) and English (2007) from DE. His main teaching and research areas include literary and cultural theory, contemporary European cinema, gender studies, and British literature. He is the author of over fifty articles and five books, including *Formations of Masculinity in Postcommunist Hungarian Cinema* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017) and *Post-Crisis European Cinema: White Men in Off-Modern Landscapes* (Palgrave-Macmillan 2020).

Kendrick James is Professor of Film & Digital Media at Baylor University, where he studies contemporary cinema. He is the author or editor of *A Companion to the Action Film* (2019), *Darkness in the Bliss-Out: A Reconsideration of the Films of Steven Spielberg* (2014), *Hollywood Bloodshed: Screen Violence and 1980s American Cinema* (2009), and *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre* (2009). He has published two dozen book chapters and journal articles, and he is also the film critic for the website QNetwork.com.

Kenny Oliver is Lecturer in Film and Media in Lille, France. He completed his Ph.D. at Queen Mary University of London. His first monograph, *Extremity and Ethics in Film: Theorising Transgressive Images of Sex and Violence* is forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press.

Kerner Aaron is the Director of the School of Cinema at San Francisco State University. He has published, among other things, *Extreme Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016) and *Theorizing Stupid Media* (Palgrave/MacMillan, 2019). He is currently working on *Abject Pleasures* (EUP), focusing on cinematic material that despite its abject content has the capacity to elicit pleasurable affects—beautiful, sexual arousal, and laughter.

Kim Se Young is an assistant professor in the Cinema Studies Program at Colby College. He is currently working on a manuscript titled "Asian Violence: The Neoliberal Cinema of South Korea and Japan," which tracks the proliferation of graphic brutality in East Asian cinema from 1998 to 2008. Pushing against Orientalist accounts of essential barbarism, the project argues that violence in South Korean and Japanese cinema can be understood in its deep entanglement with the socioeconomic crisis in the region.

Lamont Bethany Rose completed her Ph.D. thesis on digital cultural engagements with child sexual abuse in 2019 at the University of the Arts London. Her work has been previously published in *First Monday*, *Blind Field Journal*, *Galactica Journal*, *The Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, and the Palgrave Macmillan volume "Discourses of Anxiety Over Childhood and Youth Across Cultures." She is the editor-in-chief and founder of the art and literature journal on trauma and mental health, *Doll Hospital*, and lives in Bristol, UK.

Leung Man-tat Terence received his Ph. D. degree in Humanities and Creative Writing in 2014 and taught at the College of Professional and

Continuing Education at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Several of his manuscripts on film and comparative literature were published in peer-reviewed journals (e.g. Partial Answers and Cinéma & Cie) and edited volumes (e.g. Palgrave Macmillan and Wayne State University Press). He is currently working on his first monograph tentatively entitled, "The Dialectics of Two Refusals: Cinema, China, the Radical Politics of May '68" (contracted with Rowman & Littlefield International).

Lyons Siobhan is a scholar in media and cultural studies, based in Sydney, Australia, where she received her Ph.D. in 2017. Her books include *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay and Death and the Machine: Intersections of Mortality and Robotics*. Her work has also appeared in *Westworld and Philosophy, Understanding Nietzsche, Understanding Modernism, and Philosophical Approaches to the Devil*. She was awarded a New Philosopher Writers' Award in 2017.

Marshall Kingsley is Head of Film & Television and a member of the Sound/Image Cinema Lab at Falmouth University, UK, and a producer at Myskatonic Films. As a practitioner, Kingsley served as an executive producer on the feature films *Wilderness* (Justin John Doherty, 2017), *The Tape* (Martha Tilston, 2021), *Long Way Back* (Brett Harvey, 2022), and *Enys Men* (Mark Jenkin, 2022), produced *Backwoods* (Ryan Mackfall, 2019) and *The Birdwatcher* (2022), and composed the scores for *Hard, Cracked the Wind* (Mark Jenkin, 2019), and *Dean Quarry* (Rachael Jones, 2021). His academic research is focused on cultures of film and television production and the representation of history.

Mendes Ana Cristina is Associate Professor in English Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon. She uses cultural and postcolonial studies to examine literary and screen texts (in particular, intermedia adaptations) as venues for resistant knowledge formations to expand upon theories of epistemic injustice. Her research interests are visual culture, postcolonial theory, adaptation studies, and Victorian afterlives. Her latest publications include the co-edited volumes *New Directions in Diaspora Studies and Transnational Cinema at the Borders*, and articles in *Studies in the Novel, the European Journal of English Studies*, and *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*.

Morton Paul received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, with a concentration in Cinema Studies, from the University of Washington, for which he wrote a dissertation on the Zagreb School of Animation. He also received an MA in Film Studies from the University of Iowa and a BA in English from Columbia University. He is currently working on a manuscript, *American Berserk: The Sick, Sick, Sick World of Jules Feiffer*.

Previtali Giuseppe in Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Bergamo, where he teaches Film Studies and Visual Culture. His main research

interests are the extreme forms of contemporary visuality and the problem of visual literacy. He published extensively on these topics and is the author of the books *Pikadon. Sopravvivenze di Hiroshima nella cultura visuale giapponese* (Aracne 2017), *L'ultimo tabù. Filmare la morte fra spettacolarizzazione e politica dello sguardo* (Meltemi 2020) and *Educazione visuale* (McGraw-Hill 2021).

Dr. Raj Sony Jalarajan is Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Canada. Dr. Raj is a professional journalist turned academic who has worked in different demanding positions as a reporter, special correspondent, and producer in several news media channels like BBC, NDTV, Doordarshan, AIR, and Asianet News.

Renner Karen J. is an associate professor of English at Northern Arizona University, where she teaches and writes about American literature and popular culture, with a particular focus on horror. Her book *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* was published in 2016, and she is currently working on a follow-up volume titled *Killer Kids: Youth Violence in US Popular Culture*. She has also published articles on Edgar Allan Poe's influence on the serial killer narrative, masculinity in ghost-hunting shows, and the appeal of the apocalypse.

Scalissi Nicole F. is Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art History at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, where she is a faculty affiliate of the Afro-Latin American/Latinx Studies Project. Her current book project focuses on contemporary performances and interventions by American artists that trace the relationships between identity, violence, and media in the contemporary United States and at its borders. She earned her Ph.D. in the History of Art and Architecture from the University of Pittsburgh (2019) and carries an MA in Art History from The Pennsylvania State University (2013).

Mr. Suresh Adith K. is currently associating as a research assistant at the Department of Communication, MacEwan University. Adith holds a Master's Degree in English Language and Literature from Mahatma Gandhi University. His research interest includes Film Studies, Literary Criticism, and South Asian Cultural Studies.

Toymentsev Sergey is Assistant Professor of Russian at Saint Louis University. He is the editor of *ReFocus: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky* (2021). His articles and reviews appeared in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, Comparative Literature Studies, Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry, Film Criticism, French Studies, Studies in Russian & Soviet Cinema, Film International, and Kinokultura*.

Yu Chang-Min is Assistant Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University. He received his Ph.D. in Film Studies from the University of Iowa. His articles have appeared in *Film Criticism, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, NECSUS: European Journal of*

Media Studies, and *The Cine-Files*. His current research interests lie in corporeal cinema, contemporary digital cinema, and Sinophone film historiography. Before coming back to his alma mater, he previously taught at Washington University in St. Louis.

LIST OF FIGURES

List of Tables

Introduction: The Ambivalences of Violence

Steve Choe

Representations of violence in film and media are ubiquitous, but their serious consideration has too often been curtailed by scholars and critics. As with pornography and other contemptible images, it is often presumed that one simply knows when a representation may be judged explicitly aggressive or its underlying intentions deemed unacceptably unethical. The definition of what is exactly objectionable and even of the word "violence" itself typically remain vague in these claims, moreover, and are quickly rendered redundant as a consequence. For reasons having to do with morality or taste, scholars will dismiss violence on screen as a worthy topic of critical analysis. And for many, the shock of violence, particularly when it appears in genre cinema, may be considered excessive, "cheap," and attention-grabbing, rather than intrinsic to what the cinema can do and connected to the experience of profound convulsion it has the potential to produce. In her seminal essay on the horror film, Carol Clover coined the term, "body genres," a concept that has been more fully elaborated by Linda Williams, to designate popular genres that aim to induce a sensational effect on the spectator (Williams 1991). In contrast to the "legitimate" film genres that elevate the cinema as an art by maintaining a semblance of sublimated civility, pornography and horror (and particularly the slasher film) find themselves "by and large beyond the purview of the respectable (middle-aged, middle-class) audience" as well as of "respectable criticism" (Clover 1987, 187).

S. Choe (✉)
School of Cinema, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, USA
e-mail: stevec3@sfsu.edu

Something similar could be said of representations of violence in film and media. The shock of these representations seems to momentarily tear the respectable viewer away from the flow of narrative and history. A disturbing image may leave one briefly stunned. But the experience of disruption also compels the quest for assurances in the next moment, that violence will mean something after all, and that through rationalization a moral message may be gleaned from it. For when considering images of racial brutalization, the aesthetics of representations of warfare in the twenty-first century, school shooter narratives, the politics of trigger warnings, jihadist terrorism, and the phenomenology of video game violence, their shocking effect compels viewers to engage with the ethical issues that surround them. Thinking seriously about violent imagery obliges us to enter the discursive territory "beyond the purview" described by Clover, necessitating the consideration of the visually deplorable, the sonically disturbing, and upsetting narratives involving brutality and unjustifiable cruelty. Analyzing representations of violence raises questions about the scholarly worthiness of reprehensible materials and, presumably by co-extension, about the inclinations of those who analyze them. And yet, as respectable audiences continue to disavow these questions it could be argued that confronting the contemptable in film and media will be necessary for addressing the persistent presence of violence in our age more generally. Clover notes that the slasher film, "not despite but exactly because of its crudity," provides clues about the sexual attitudes that are contemporaneous to the films she analyzes in her essay. The twenty-five chapters in this handbook pursue a similar task: by addressing the history, aesthetics, and politics of representations of violence in film and media directly, they provide clues about the nature and ethics of representation more broadly.

Rousing feelings of horror, outrage, and disgust, representations of violence compel spectators to make moral judgments and engage in a politics of blame. Following the experience of disruptive violence in media, the pursuit of its meaning within a large narrative ensues, one that will link it to past events and anticipated future ones. An originating cause is sought and identified, a value is inscribed to the act of violence in light of the intentions that underpin it, and then a judgment may occur as to whether the exercise of violence may be justified in the end. Images showing victims suffering physical or emotional injury, who are subject to discrimination, have had their legal liberties refused, their moral entitlements or their capacity to flourish hindered, solicit viewers to connect these violations with a victimizer who is acting in some moral capacity. Representations of bodies in pain implore viewers to "feel for" these representations, while providing an opportunity to ponder the mystery of how sympathy with others is possible at all. When acts of viciousness are deemed unjust, the who or what that originated them are cast as unsympathetic and judged to harbor evil by the observer who registers the suffering of the victim. The offending party may be embodied by an individual, but also by a dominant ideology, authoritarian government, an imperial colonizer, and even history itself within this politics of blame. On the other

hand, the representation of violence may be deemed morally valid, and here we begin to perceive its ambivalences, when it responds to a previous act of cruelty. The one who was previously victimized gains in sympathy as their own acts of retaliatory aggression may be understood as gestures of empowerment for the aggrieved. This is the logic that justifies the counter-violence of the colonized for Franz Fanon as a kind of "cleansing force" that restores the dignity of the oppressed and "frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction" (Fanon 1963, 94). For some violence may be considered just when the pain that it produces, as a form of moral currency, serves as recompense for that pain that was received, when one cruel act is measured in proportion to another. The victim holds the victimizer account-able; the latter must "pay" for their original transgression. Emboldened by its sense of moral righteousness, retaliatory violence may be convinced of its own entitlement to act with impunity and transgress legal and moral norms.

Violent ends are typically deemed loathsome, but violent means, directed toward virtuous ends, may be perceived to be righteous and just. These are the ambiguous forms of violence and revenge that Nietzsche describes in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, where he explains how morality is projected onto doers after they have performed their deeds. "There is no 'being' behind' the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; 'the doer' is invented as an afterthought,— the doing is everything" (Nietzsche 2006, 26). Actions materialized in the world lead the one who witnesses these actions back to the "character" of victims and victimizers, propped up by the concept of a private individual responsible for putting those actions into motion. Nietzsche proposes that the concepts of character, motive, the psychological self, a moral soul, that point to an invisible interiority are concocted by the aggrieved as afterthoughts. The categories of the "victim" and "victimizer" are projections that arise as a consequence of violence and the chaos that it produced in the world of the victimized. Yet it is this reactive claim to victimization that legitimates their political identity, one that lays claim to their universality. In her reading of Nietzsche, Wendy Brown explains that the wounded subject "reinscribes incapacity, powerlessness, and rejection" with the culmination of *ressentiment* (Brown 1995, 69). Violence in film and media encourages this quest toward the perception of deeds as meaningful by connecting them to doers and their underlying motives, while harnessing their disruptive power for the purposes of narrative drama. The radical potential of violence enters into the realm of politics, in other words, of the moral give and take that takes place between individuals and of stories told about friends and enemies.

Even as we critique these trajectories of means and ends, violent imagery retains its sensational, disturbing force on viewers. The notion that the experience of violence in the cinema inspires a kind of perverse fascination or compels aggressive behavior in life outside the film theater still seems entrenched in the popular understanding. Stephen Prince's writings on Sam Peckinpah and his anthology on "screening violence" work with the notion, articulated by some commentators of New Hollywood cinema, that film

violence provides the spectator with the experience of Aristotelian catharsis and enables him or her to channel feelings of hostility into the aesthetic experience. Films like *The Wild Bunch*, *Taxi Driver*, and *A Clockwork Orange* feature spectacular scenes of graphic violence that ostensibly allow viewers the opportunity to purge their conscious or unconscious violent tendencies. While acknowledging that Peckinpah, Scorsese, and Kubrick produced these ultraviolent films to reveal the harrowing futility of cruelty, Prince remains highly skeptical of this thesis. "Filmmakers who wish to use graphic violence," he writes, "to offer a counterviolence message—that, to use violence in a way that undercuts its potential for arousing excitatory responses in viewers—may be working in the wrong medium" (Prince 2000, 29). The sensationalizing experience of the film medium, which for Prince places it beyond the scope of Aristotle's classical aesthetic theory, runs the risk of inciting unintended and morally problematic spectatorial responses. His statements remind us of the need to continue research into the discursive workings of affect and emotion, not only in relation to the content of media but also to its form and mode of address. Instead of inspiring self-examination, violence on screen runs the danger of inducing sadistic laughter and fetishization, dangers that he apparently would rather avoid altogether.

Prince cites empirical and cognitive research to build his argument on the physiological response of viewers to representations of violence. Current research, however, both in the sciences and humanities, has taken up new models and approaches as well as new mediums and objects. These novel approaches will be deployed in a good number of essays in this volume. Through them, we can glean that current film and media studies research has enabled us to rethink the very relationship between the sciences and humanities. But more crucially, this research reconsiders the relationship between representation and reality as well as the linkages between the experience of violent media and violent behavior. In an age in which electronically reproduced sounds and images have become increasingly ubiquitous in our everyday lives, when the very notion of the media itself has expanded to include the ways in which bodies and images interface with their environments, the idea of focusing only on representations of violence in film only seems limiting and perhaps even a bit antiquated in its analytical scope. The global pandemic of 2020 underscored the importance of screens in our everyday lives as we were forced to quarantine indoors while physical contact with strangers in public was curtailed. And while social media and the Zoom platform allowed us to communicate with colleagues and friends, they were also implicated with the demands of corporate capital and the logic of algorithms. This situation has already strained the classical boundaries between representation and reality and of what counts as "real" in this highly mediated context. With the proliferation of electronic media as constituting the reality of our living environments, we may also sense the extent to which past film theorizing has implicated somewhat impoverished conceptions of how fantasy relates to agency in the world. Spectators are not simply sutured into the cinematic apparatus but are

engaged with the cinema in ways that are always multiple, already embodied and sensory, and never only ideological and fetishizing. Our phones, smartwatches, tablets, portable gaming consoles, and home theaters now constitute our contemporary *Umwelt*, each having their potentialities and means of interacting with users' bodies, while networks and platforms organize how we navigate the data that our devices access.

If the notion of media can be thought of as a kind of ecology, itself constitutive of contemporary human life, then it has quickly become clear that the problems raised by representations of violence in our world have become all the more urgent. As the possibility of encountering violent imagery online rises, so does the possibility of the politics surrounding it and the projection of a world constituted by victims and victimizers. In this context, the necessity for coping with their distressing effects rises as well, as violence is repeatedly brought into the proximity of our private lives. These images and sounds do not simply represent violence "out there" or merely model for impressionable viewers how crimes could be carried out in real life. Representations of violence remind us of the need to critically think the message and the ethics of the medium itself.

Thus the problem of real violence returns. The claim that violent imagery is merely representational and thus has little to do with historical reality and ethics has become increasingly specious as we have become more aware of their triggering effects. Visual and auditory representations not only refer to violence in the world but the medium itself may be thought as violent, instilling new traumatic memories. Once more, the medium assaults the viewer, despite all attempts by apologists to isolate the ontology or "appreciate" the aesthetics of brutality. Once more, one is forced to confront the brute indexicality of the image and its reference to a violent reality existing in the world. If, as Elaine Scarry reminds us, violence "unmakes" the discursive world of the victim, the devastating force of torture and warfare radically unmakes the capacity to narrate this trauma in representational language (Scarry 1985). The agitation perpetuated by the audiovisual medium on the sensorium of the viewer could perhaps be thought as a corollary to the unmaking of language. This is particularly acute when considering representations of violence that affect the viewer disproportionately, that may be called "excessive" or "gratuitous," in relation to the needs of the plot.

The gap between the sensational impact induced by representations of violence and their analysis within the kingdom of means and ends is decisive, as it carries ramifications for the politics, ontology, and aesthetics of violence more generally. In their reading of Assyrian palace reliefs, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit capture this undecidability between what we might call the ontological and moralistic approaches toward the forms of violence in art. On the one hand, there is the act of narrativization of violent spectacle, performed by the one who claims a position of mastery and in so doing domesticates and immobilizes its transformative potential. This position may be compared to that of the fetishist who seeks mastery over the object of desire and emerges

as the consequence of an unconscious, sadomasochistic impulse. On the other hand, Bersani and Dutoit show how the representation of violence in Assyrian art in fact insists upon the drive toward narrativization while recuperating the radically subversive in art. They write that "We might say that the assumption of this art is that we cannot help but be interested by narratives of violence, but that we are also already ready to follow marginal interests which disrupt narrative and which prevent the reading of violence from becoming a fascinated identification with acts of violence" (Bersani and Dutoit 1985, 56). For Bersani and Dutoit, Assyrian reliefs resist analytical mastery and provide an aesthetic model for thinking the notion of transgression through their treatment of violent spectacle and without the hermeneutic crutch of thinking it as one moment within an overarching narrative. Through its resistance to narrativization, this analytic of violence also resists easy politicization and rebuffs the politics of blame that demands that a violent deed be linked to a doer responsible for it. In this, Bersani and Dutoit seem to have found representations of violence that cannot be reduced to the logics of fetishism and narrative causality. We might liken this critical phenomenology of violence to what Giorgio Agamben calls a "means without end," whereby violent means are put to apolitical or even purposeless ends (Agamben 2000). In his critique of violence, Walter Benjamin developed this phenomenology from his understanding of the seemingly anarchic ends that animate the general strike, calling it "divine violence" (Benjamin 1999).

For our part, we can note the extent to which violence in various representational mediums, including digital and social media, seems to repeatedly implicate a chain of causation that links violence and their depictions with political life in modernity. Violent representations are incessantly folded back into politics, to preconceived narratives of patriotism, ideologies of social justice, and the metaphysics of the moral self in modernity. Violent videos published by political bodies such as the U.S. government, the Islamic state, or the Russian army are quickly understood within pre-existing narratives of aggressor and aggrieved, as well as Manichean conflicts between good and evil. Images and sounds depicting police brutality, school shootings, suffering laborers, or the devastation of climate change that appear on social media feeds are already political to the extent that disturbing images have been explained and fetishized, their power to disturb contingent on the premise that discursive positions have already been established and sides taken. Video games interpellate the player through their on-screen avatar, implicating him or her in fantasies of control and, in the case of most campaign-based games, engaging them with choices that are inextricably linked to issues of morality and the carrying out of violence. In these and other instances, images of those who unjustly suffer gain in affective power through their capacity to solicit the sympathies of the viewer, to inspire pity for and even identification with the misfortune of others. Sympathy in turn fuels the passion for political change, ignited by the outrage in witnessing moral wrongdoings and the suffering of victims of violence. Then again, as Susan Sontag reminds us, sympathy is not

enough—the emotional link suggested by the image of those who suffer far away from the viewer remains spurious at best. "So far as we feel sympathy," she writes, "we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering" (Sontag 2003, 102).

This Handbook will address the politics of violence in film and media as well as the critical means by which it may be understood. These theoretical issues are inseparable from the historical and cultural contexts in which violent media is produced, distributed, and consumed. Infrastructures and networks make streams of brutal images available to connected computers and cell phones. Nevertheless, despite the diversity of our current media contexts, the history of film in the US remains illuminating for understanding how the politics of violence reflects historical and social change. Perhaps the most consequential is the series of proscriptions on representation in film dictated by the Production Code from 1930 to about 1968. The Code prohibited the depiction of brutal murder and cruelty to animals during this key period of Hollywood history with the ultimate goal of ensuring "moral uplift" for film audiences. Revenge was not to be justified while the depiction of robbery, theft, safe-cracking, and other crimes were not to be shown in detail to safeguard against audience imitation. When the Code was dismantled and the ratings system implemented on November 1, 1968, legal interdictions against violent images gave way to moral ones while battles around propriety and taste continued in the culture wars to come. Filmmakers quickly began to produce more explicit depictions of sex and violence while moral virtue was itself placed under critical scrutiny. The early work of William Friedkin is exemplary in this regard. *The French Connection* (1971) gave us images of unkempt, morally compromised policemen while blasphemous depictions of defiled innocence and virtue abounded in *The Exorcist* (1973). Both films feature ambiguous endings that lead one to question whether good has in fact triumphed over evil (as stipulated in the Production Code) and to wonder whether moral certainty can be reestablished in the world. Friedkin's work, as well as that of the New Hollywood cinema, responded to social transformations spurred by the counterculture but also the politics of the ongoing war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal that unfolded in the news media from 1972 to 1974. The cinema seemed to articulate and amplify questions about the moral legitimacy of state authority during this time as well as America's right to exercise violence abroad in the name of Cold War moral righteousness.

September 11, 2011 marks another key moment in the representation of violence in film and media, again raising issues around morality and the politics of violence. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the world seemed to rally around America and sympathize with its victimization by hostile foreign forces. As good and evil were defined all too clearly along the lines of friend and enemy, binarized positions that were both mutually opposed and ontologically irreducible to each other, the notion of pursuing and killing "our enemies" became legitimized as an act of moral justice. We may be reminded of the phrase, "axis of evil," formulated only months after

9/11 and which clearly delineated, in the spirit of Nietzschean *ressentiment*, the rhetoric of us-versus-them that would dominate the "war on terror." In a world surrounded by enemies, the moral right to violent war was emboldened as a sovereign right. These rights were sustained through the continued demonization of the enemy and the need for violence to eradicate them, even while circumventing international laws that grant universal civil liberties to all human beings. One need only recall the paradoxical logic of the legal exception that is granted to the sovereign, articulated forcefully by Judith Butler, that underpinned the indefinite detention of both American and non-American detainees in Guantanamo Bay (Butler 2004). Two films directed by Kathryn Bigelow, *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), depict the desire for retribution in war while offering viewers the sadistic, and therefore deeply unsettling, pleasure of seeing America's enemies be captured and pitilessly assassinated. Violent warfare in the new millennium is depicted as highly complex, in an age where drones and remote IEDs have enabled killing to take place from a distance while mediated through imaging and surveillance technologies. This complexity is also reflected in the ways Bigelow's films problematize the moral certainty that insists upon the binary between good and evil.

More recently, the insurrection on the US capital building on January 6, 2021 reminded us of the extent to which the justification for violence is entrenched by the narrative of grievance. In a context where the difference between fact and "fake news" has become increasingly tenuous, this narrative remains intoxicating for some in its power to embolden and envision righteous revenge against one's imagined enemies. As film as a medium has lost its urgency in our understanding of these events, the news and social media have unquestionably gained importance in forming this understanding. The narrative of grievance remains affectively and emotionally compelling in our current context. But as these technologies continue to inform and mislead, inducing more distrust and uncertainty, moral and otherwise, into civil society, the need for critically thinking about the ambivalences between violence and the media becomes all the more urgent.

The chapters in the Handbook of Violence in Film and Media are organized into five parts, which I will describe briefly below, and each part consists of five original chapter contributions. Part I, "Critical Models," introduces readers to a series of critical approaches that have been deployed to evaluate issues of violence in film and media. Drawing from cultural studies approaches, media theory, philosophies of violence, and cognitive science research on violence and the brain, these chapters bring readers quickly to the kinds of questions that will be brought to bear on many of the essays in the Handbook. Individual texts such as Antoine Fuqua's film, *The Equalizer* (2014), Michael Haneke's cinema, and the video game *Control* (2019) are analyzed to draw out claims that will have universal relevance beyond these particular case studies. Readers will discover how violence in film and media may be discursively framed more

broadly. While these chapters critically address issues of morality through individual instances, questions about the representation of violence generally, its aesthetics and politics, and power to shock and provoke are raised as well.

Part II, "Histories of Violence in Film and Media," features chapters that contextualize representations of violence within social, industrial, technological, and political contexts. They examine how cultural politics in the film industry and national censorship policy constitute and are constituted by cinematic representations of violence. The chapters also demonstrate how narratives about national history and stories circulating in the news media are regarded in the cinema, opening up opportunities for viewers to reflect on the legal and moral frames for understanding historical violence, but also about how history informs its representation. The essays in this section show that film and media do not simply and straightforwardly represent violence but that they relate to history in myriad and nuanced ways. This is made particularly evident as the final chapter in this section considers the digital infrastructure that makes possible the development and distribution of assaultive images online.

Part III, "The Aesthetics of Aggression," considers the possibility of whether the representation of violence may be appreciated for their particular aesthetic and formal qualities. Past scholarship has addressed this problem by considering the cathartic experience of violence in art, but these essays approach it with renewed force and with contemporary events in mind: the depiction of warfare in the twenty-first century, the new extremity in European art house cinema, and the representation of racialized violence. While previous chapters have evaluated how film and media interact with history, these essays ask readers to consider the formal aspects that make these interactions possible—including editing, cinematography, spaces of exhibition, self-reflexivity, and off-screen space—and that contribute to the depiction of explicit events on screen. Through these considerations, one may quickly realize the key importance of the reality of aggressive imagery, constituted through the aesthetics of the media, in addition to what the media indexes in reality.

In the chapters that make up "The Politics and Ethics of Brutal Media," authors directly connect readings of violence in film and media to their politics as well as to their corresponding political ideologies. The image of justified violence is often understood to empower spectators by appealing to the melodrama of beset victims, a key means of solicitation that encourages the taking of political sides. On the one hand, some of the essays in this section work through the politics that is mobilized to rationalize violence, particularly right-wing and extremist ideology, while also critiquing them and laying bare their futility. The moral righteousness that underpins political violence, often in the name of civil disobedience, is ultimately one of the moral impoverishment according to this critique. Its objectification through sound and image provides the opportunity for viewers to judge the exercise of moral judgment itself and to shift the critical discussion around violence from morality

to ethics. This shift can perhaps be perceived most acutely when considering extremely difficult images and which induce immediate moral objection.

The notion of "triggering" is one of the topics covered in "Affected Audiences," which focuses on a crucial topic that is in dire need of further research and theorization. All the chapters in the Handbook touch on the topic of affect more or less, and this section offers ways of thinking about it in terms of phenomenology, theories of emotion, audience response research, and the politics of trigger warnings. Indeed, it could be argued that settling this fundamental issue is key for determining the aesthetics and politics of violent representations more generally. In order to bring issues of spectatorship into further relief, the chapters examine experiences of disgust, revulsion, and "sadistic laughter" to describe how embodied viewers are affected and affect ideological apparatuses that position viewers. Reflection on the place of the spectator returns us to a problem that I have tried to raise throughout this introduction—the role and place of the critical scholar who reflects on violence in film and media.

REFERENCES

Agamben, Giorgio. 2000. *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*. Translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Benjamin, Walter. 1999. "Critique of Violence." In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913–1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 236–252. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bersani, Leo and Ulysse Dutoit. 1985. *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture*. New York: Shocken.

Brown, Wendy. 1995. *States of Injury*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Butler, Judith. 2004. "Indefinite Detention." In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 50–100. New York: Verso.

Clover, Carol. 1987. "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film." *Representations* 20 (Autumn): 187–228.

Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2006. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Carol Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Prince, Stephen, ed. 2000. *Screening Violence*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Scarry, Elaine. 1985. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador.

Williams, Linda. 1991. "Film Bodies, Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44, No. 4 (Summer): 2–13.

Critical Models

Equality in the Face of Violence?—Diverging Paths of Moral Speculation in Violent Fiction

Henry Bacon

Violence in action films such as Antoine Fuqua's *The Equalizer* (2014) appeals to our imaginary desires, above all the way we may like to fantasize about spectacular violence being used to restore what we would recognize as being a just state of affairs. This is different from what we might actually hope to happen and very far removed from what we know about how things work out in the real world. By contrast, Dominic Savage's *Born Equal* (2006), a film about the moral fragility of a number of characters from very different social circumstances, appeals to our need for thoughtful representations about the real world. We have a need for narratives that offer plausible explanations of why crimes are actually committed, and what their real consequences are.

One crucial question is what kind of patterns of engagement these films evoke. This entails exploring the semantics of understanding in the double meaning of the word, first of all as comprehension and secondly as a form of sympathy. This will be explored in terms of two theories that have been developed to explain how we understand other people as well as fictional characters, *theory of mind* and *embodied simulation* theories as analysed by Gal Raz and Talma Hendler. They have demonstrated that the two theories relate to two different kinds of stimuli giving rise to activity in different parts of the brain. As regards making sense of characters in films, they suggest that a film may contain both eso- and para-dramatic factors, the former tending to evoke

H. Bacon (✉)
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: henry.bacon@helsinki.fi

13

embodied simulation, the latter the kind of cognitive responses examined in the theory of mind approach. These factors will be employed to the study of the contrasting strategies of spectator appeal in the two films to be examined.

The principle guideline of this article is crystallized by Wyatt Moss-Wellington in his *Narrative Humanism*: "If it is clear how ethics are inextricable from narrative (even those that purposefully frustrate ethical intelligibility or minimise ethical evaluations within the diegesis), and if we accept that our quotidian engagements with story media are proliferating, then it also makes sense to ask how we should value the relative ethical strategies employed by various contemporary narratives, and what we want from narrative ethics."[1]

Enjoying and Questioning Fictional Violence

In a fairly early scene in Antoine Fuqua's film *The Equalizer* (2014), Robert McCall (Denzel Washington) enters the office of Slavi (David Meunier), the local leader of Russian Mafia in Boston. McCall has befriended a young woman Alina (Chloë Grace Moretz), whom Slavi exploits as a prostitute and has just beaten brutally. McCall offers the pimp almost ten thousand dollars for her release. Slavi mocks him revealing his absolute contempt for the girl as well as the man, who in his view is just trying to buy a good piece of property for cheap. He throws the money back to McCall and tells him to go and jerk off for every dollar and then come back—perhaps the girl is by that time in a condition in which he can have her free. McCall takes the money and goes to the door.

What do we hope will happen next? It has already become apparent that McCall is a man of high moral standards, caring for people who are being exploited. Having entered a pimp's den all alone and appearing perfectly cool, he clearly is fearless. He has not been intimidated by the armed men looking at him with smug contempt. Furthermore, given the genre, we are likely expecting that he has the ability to deal with bad guys. Most of us are highly likely to want to see him turn back and give the slimy pimp and his henchmen their badly needed comeuppance. And this is what McCall does, using as his weapons only items available at the office. In 28 seconds—McCall times his effort—all of Slavi's henchmen are dead. Just before Slavi himself expires, McCall points out to him: "In about 30 seconds, your body is gonna shut down and you're gonna suffocate. Alina, the girl you beat, her life is gonna go on. Yours is gonna end right here, on this funky floor for 9800 dollars. You should have taken the money." After Slavi has expired, McCall adds quietly: "I'm sorry."

This was to be expected. Even as McCall is negotiating with Slavi, he is checking out what he can use as weapons, he even organizes items such as glass skulls on the table. As he has closed the door there is a terrific zoom into the pupil of his eye followed by a sequence of shots showing all the details he observes in the room. Even more importantly, in terms of genre expectations