

The Many Shades of Red

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Steven Jay Schneider (ed.) (2004) *New Hollywood Violence*
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While there is a great deal of talk about violence in the media and much ink has been spilled in various newspapers and magazines, until about 10 years ago there had been surprisingly little significant humanistic scholarship done on the topic. Recent book publications like the Depth of Field Series' *Screening Violence* (2000; edited by Stephen Prince) and the American Film Institute's *Violence and the American Cinema* (2001; edited by J. David Slocum), as well as conferences like the 2001 meeting held at the University of Missouri–St. Louis titled 'Violence, Cinema, and American Culture' have provided much-needed academic context to what otherwise often devolves into political brow-beating and social-scientific number crunching.

New Hollywood Violence, which is part of Manchester University Press' diverse 'Inside Popular Film' series and includes several essays first presented at the 2001 'Violence, Cinema, and American Culture' conference, is a welcome addition to this growing literature, especially as it places front and center the complex and often contradictory roles of screen violence in contemporary American cinema. Drawing from Murray Smith and Thomas Schatz, editor Steven Jay Schneider defines the 'New Hollywood' as 'a return to genre filmmaking following America's flirtation with European art cinema in the late 1960s and early 1970s, albeit a return 'now marked by greater self-consciousness, as well as supercharged by new special effects, saturation booking, engorged production budgets and, occasionally, even larger advertising budgets'' (xiv).

The breadth of Hollywood cinema covered in the book's 15 essays is quite broad, ranging from the new ghettocentric films of John Singleton, to Terrence Malick's elegiac *The Thin Red Line* (1998), to the action spectacles of Arnold Schwarzenegger, to the homosocial cinematic world of Quentin Tarantino. Oddly enough, not a single essay is devoted exclusively to that most violent of genres, the horror film, which is perhaps reflective of how that genre had fallen on hard times in the mid-1990s prior to its resurgence following the smash success of *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and the new wave of '70s horror classic remakes. The writers contributing to the volume are also intriguingly varied, running the gamut from established voices in the realm of cinematic violence such as J. David Slocum, Stephen Prince, and Martin Barker, to a number of doctoral students making their first significant dent in academic publishing.

Following an introduction by Thomas Schatz that lays out the familiar story of how screen violence has evolved in Hollywood filmmaking from the silent era to the modern blockbuster, the book is clearly organized into four main sections: 'Surveys and Schemas,' 'Spectacle and Style,' 'Race and Gender,' and 'Politics and Ideology.'

The 'Surveys and Schemas' section contains essays that offer broad historical, political, and ideological contexts for the role of screen violence in Hollywood. J. David Slocum's opening essay, 'The 'Film Violence' Trope: New Hollywood, 'the Sixties,' and the Politics of History,' offers an impressive start, cutting through the obvious and questioning the very historical and analytical foundations of the concept of 'film violence,' which Slocum argues is 'a shorthand that circumscribes meaning and authorizes delimited explanations of a wide range of phenomena' (29).

This second essay, 'Hitchcock and the Dramaturgy of Screen Violence' by Murray Pomerance, is an attempt to make sense of different forms of screen violence by categorizing them, an approach utilized in previous publications by Henry Giroux (1995) and Devin McKinney (1993), among others. Pomerance devises a taxonomy based on probability and irony of presentation, which results in four categories of screen violence: mechanical, mythic, idiomorphic, and dramaturgical. While critics might find gray areas between and among these categories, they still hold the potential to help explain and illustrate the flexibility of screen violence as a signifier.

The next chapter, Martin Barker's 'Violence Redux,' covers very familiar ground for those who have read Barker's other publications. His primary point is that violence is a social concept, not an object, which emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s and has

maintained surprising explanatory force in relation to the mass media while its meanings have become fractured and questionable in virtually every other realm. Barker takes to task the seemingly objective conclusions of social scientific research regarding media effects, especially as it relies on the social concept of 'violence' as if it were an empirically testable object instead of, as he argues, 'a central repository for a set of fears about social change, which at the same time proffers an understanding of those changes in an ideologically-skewed way' (73).

The final chapter in the opening section, 'The Big Impossible: Action-Adventure's Appeal to Adolescent Boys' by Theresa Webb and Nick Browne, attempts to connect the culture of action films to American adolescent boys' 'culture of cruelty' by examining closely 14 action films released in 1994 and arguing that they function primarily to socialize boys by providing role models and focusing male adolescent aggression toward possible military service. It makes for an intriguing companion piece to Todd Onderdonk's chapter 'Tarantino's Deadly Homosocial,' which appears much later in the book and suggests that Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is a 'seminal example' of a film whose male homosocial relations support and encourage 'the gender bias and homophobia of American capitalism' (287). Pairing the chapters together suggests that action films begin the task of socializing adolescent boys while Tarantino's crime capers solidify the work in young adulthood.

Despite the title of the second section, 'Spectacle and Style,' the only area *New Hollywood Violence* doesn't address as thoroughly as one might hope is the area of film aesthetics. For example, Fred Pfeil's chapter 'Terrence Malick's War Film Sutra: Mediating on *The Thin Red Line*' has little to do with film aesthetics, or even film violence for that matter, but is rather an examination of Malick's film as a Buddhist meditation on singularity based on how his film presents death in comparison to Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987).

As Stephen Prince rightly points out at the end of his Afterword, 'without close attention to formal design — to what filmmakers are actually doing with the audiovisual elements of cinema — we will be unable to explain the elemental pull that violence has within the history of cinema' (322). A number of the essays in the 'Spectacle and Style' section do mention formal film elements as part of their larger ideological and historical discussions, but the only essay that puts aesthetics front and center is editor Steven Jay Schneider's 'Killing in Style: The Aestheticization of Violence in Donald Cammell's *White*

of the Eye_.' Schneider's close textual analysis is thorough and interesting, and he makes a compelling argument about Cammell's use of violence to conflate himself as director with the film's killer. However, the general obscurity of the film and the cult status of Cammell as an auteur keep the piece from providing anything more than an intriguing and isolated case study.

There is also some discussion of cinema aesthetics in Geoff King's "Killingly Funny: Mixing Modalities in New Hollywood's Comedy-With-Violence,' which argues that mixing comedy with graphic violence is a specific contribution of the New Hollywood. King shows how this can be used to make violence both pleasurable and disturbing, and he offers formal analysis of several example films, including *American Psycho* (2000), *Very Bad Things* (1998), and *Series 7: The Contenders* (2001).

The mixing of comedy and violence, especially in the films of Arnold Schwarzenegger, is also addressed later in the book in David Tetzlaff's "Too Much Red Meat!" Perhaps because he is mounting a vigorous argument to recuperate the critical standing of Schwarzenegger's much-maligned *Commando* (1985), Tetzlaff adopts a somewhat cheeky writing style, one that effectively matches the comic-book excesses of his object of study, but without compromising his own critical insight and alleged seriousness. On the other hand, Thomas Leitch's 'Aristotle v. the Action Film' argues that the action genre has evolved (perhaps backwards) from its Aristotlean roots of tragedy, logical causation, and ethical consequences and replaced 'human insight' with artless 'spectacle.'

The last two sections, 'Race and Gender' and 'Politics and Ideology,' place film violence into social contexts, thereby foregrounding cultural studies issues such as identification, representation, and hegemony. Paula J. Massood tackles race directly in 'From Homeboy to *Baby Boy*: Masculinity and Violence in the Films of John Singleton,' showing how black masculinity is constructed in Singleton's films in relation to justified violence, often at the expense of the invisibility or marginalization of black women. The role of female characters in violent films is addressed in Jacinda Read's chapter on the kitschy postmodern *Charlie's Angels* (2000), which she effectively shows to be much more complex in merging issues of femininity, violence, and culture than most would assume. Using a history of female protagonists as her foundation, Read shows how the three 'Angels' resist essentialist notions of gender and instead construct femininity as performance.

Several chapters explore the social function of violence in contemporary Hollywood films, most notably Sylvia Chong's 'From 'Blood Auteursm' to the Violence of Pornography: Sam Peckinpah and Oliver Stone' and Ken Windrum's '*Fight Club* and the Political (Im)Potence of Consumer Era Revolt.' Chong's chapter uses Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) to talk about the shifting discourses around film violence from the 1960s to the 1990s. Interestingly, she ends by suggesting that the problem with film violence is not in the films themselves, but rather in their reception, particularly by those who reify violence by either celebrating or condemning it, thus 'collapsing the differences between types of violence and their deployment' (265), a grave mistake that Martin Barker would argue happened a long time ago. Windrum's chapter uses the deployment of heavily masculinized violence in *Fight Club* (1999) to question whether any product of Hollywood can successfully present a critique of 'the franchised, corporate culture of late consumer-era capitalism' (304). Windrum finds *Fight Club* to be an essentially incoherent text, and for that reason it fails to work as critique and sustain any revolutionary potential.

As a whole, *New Hollywood Violence* presents an intriguing and multifaceted overview of the ways in which screen violence can be deployed in contemporary films. The book will work well as a primer for thinking about screen violence in the modern age, and the inclusion of a wide range of genres and critical approaches strengthens the oft-heard, but still frequently ignored argument that screen violence is not a simple object, but rather a complex set of signifying practices that can be deployed for purposes both reactionary and progressive. The book in no way reaches any kind of consensus about how screen violence should be treated by either Hollywood producers or film scholars, not that such a consensus could possibly be expected given the complexities of screen violence both formal and cultural. This is a topic whose surface has only begun to be scratched.

Bibliography

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