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Notes Toward an Aesthetics of Violence

ROBERT APPELBAUM

Author's Preface. In trying to think about violence, aesthetics and the relation between the two, I found that I had to start over from the beginning. I had to allow my own preconceptions about violence and aesthetics – borrowed from any of a number of places, respectable (like Freud, Elias and Huizinga) and unrespectable (like my personal experiences of violence, and of Hollywood movies) – to be put into brackets, stored away for use at some other time. I had to submit my thinking to a kind of violence. And as for "aesthetics," since I was sure that I was interested, precisely, in the subjective quality of experiencing violence in an artistic or ritualistic form, I had to put aside presumptions of a thesis, a vision of what violence was objectively, or a knowledge of what the artwork was in its objective, material condition. Hence these "notes," where Freud, Elias, Huizinga, my personal experience and Hollywood movies all return, but in the condition of hypotheses and observations, from which, someday in the future, I might compose a real "aesthetics of violence."

The trouble with the violence in most films is that it is not violent enough.
– Arthur Penn, director of *Bonnie and Clyde* (cited in Hoberman, 1998: 125)

. . . violence is so good. It affects audiences in a big way. You know you're watching a movie.
– Quentin Tarantino, director of *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 2010)[1]

Let the young men now arise, and play before us. (2 Samuel 14)

In English, Latin and the Romance languages *violence* is etymologically linked with *violation* (*OED*; Williams, 1985: 329–31).The primary meaning of violence seems to be "physical force," especially impetuous or vehement force; but such a forcefulness already implies the idea of violation, of transgression: first of all, a transgression of the subject, transforming its condition from stillness or regularity to excessive or irregular motility, violence being a form of *agitation*; second, transgression of the object, causing injury or profanation. There can be violence without the violation of an object: a violent emotion, a violent game. But there is no violence, in this tradition, without a violation of or in the subject.

Violent games: boxing, American football, rugby. Players get hurt, but they get hurt within the rules. On the one hand, they are not really supposed to get hurt. Even in boxing, the goal is to win, not to injure. That is why the recorded speech that the former defensive coach of the New Orleans Saints, Gregg Williams delivered to his team before a game against the San Francisco 49ers ("We have got to do everything in the world to make sure we kill Frank Gore's head") was a scandal.[2] The goal is to win, not to injure. On the other hand, causing injury is an inevitable outcome of trying to win. In a "violent" game, players will always hurt one another. They *need* to hurt one another. The difference is this: injuring is not the same thing as winning, and being injured is not the same as losing. Even in boxing, and even in the case of a knock-out, it is possible for the winner to have been injured more seriously than the loser. A violent game is a game where injuring and being injured is within the rules and likely, perhaps even required, but where injuring or being injured is not the goal of playing, and where for that reason certain kinds of play (in boxing, hitting from behind; in American football, "killing" the head; in rugby, tackling too early) are prohibited.

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Have you ever been a victim of violence? Have you ever witnessed an act of violence? Have you ever engaged in an act of violence? These are questions that are probably fair to put to anyone who attempts to construct a philosophy of violence. But a violent sport probably does not count, since sport, played according to the rules, does not *intend* a victim. Instead, it only intends a *winner* and a *loser*.

"The only element common to all types of violence is the subjective point of view of the victim," writes Philippe Braud. "Violence exists because suffering exists" (Braud, 2004: 17–18). But that cannot be quite right. For in this case Braud is only talking about successful violence. But violence can fail, and still be violence. A bomb that fails to land on its target or detonate is still the instrument of a violent act. A violent emotion that fails to find a physical outlet is still a violent emotion; and violent thoughts, and especially violent thoughts which incline toward injuring another, but are only thoughts, are still violent. The common element to all types of violence is the subjective intention of the perpetrator. Violence exists because the intention to cause harm or damage exists. But harm may or may not be imagined from a "point of view of the victim," and damage – violence against property, violence against things – does not have a victim with a point of view.

Victimisation, then, and violence itself, as an intention. After a sequence of play in a game of (international) football, when the ball has been moved to another part of the field, one young woman is staggering on the ground, and another young woman, her opponent, kicks her in the face.[3] Had the kick been incidental to a play for the ball, a foul might be called. Observers might criticise the player for regrettably "aggressive play," the referee might issue a yellow card and award a free kick. But as the kick to the face is not incidental to a play for the ball, a red card ought to be shown, the perpetrator sent off; and observers outraged. There is a difference between being harmed and being victimised, as there is a difference between reckless play and malicious play. Reckless play causes regret; malicious play causes outrage. Reckless play is an embarrassment and against the rules of the game. Malicious play is offensive and against the rules of justice. And yet the same physical injury may result from each.

Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), a film about female boxing, comes to a catastrophe. A boxer whose emotions have gotten the better of her attacks her opponent from behind, after the bell, causing the opponent (played by Hillary Swank) to fall, crash her head against a stool, break her neck and end up paralyzed. This is a *catastrophe* in both a dramatic and a moral sense. In the dramatic sense, this event "turns" the action around, from one arc of development to another, from the protagonist's good fortune to her utter misfortune. In the moral sense, this event is disastrous; there can be no satisfactory recovery from it; there can be no appeal against its destructiveness, and no penalty against its perpetrator can mitigate the outrage the perpetrator has caused. As it happens, the perpetrator is penalised by being banned from professional boxing, and yet, though the observer recognises that the penalty is just, the observer finds no solace in it. "There is no future for the disaster," as Maurice Blanchot puts it (Blanchot, 1995: 2).

Defeating the other through the use of strategically superior force: this is the violence of the violent game. Harming the other unnecessarily while attempting to apply a strategically superior force: this is the violence of the violated game. Harming the other for the sake of harming the other: this is violence beyond the game: it is the violence of the catastrophe.

And so we watch, or read, or hear, or participate in interactive play – interactive play from the board game of chess to the video game *Mortal Kombat*. In each case, we operate

at an aesthetic remove. This is the remove, first of all, of *fiction*: the violence is not really happening. We are *safe*, and so is all the rest of the human race. We know that because we have been cued with the "keys" of a fictional frame.[4] But it is the remove, second of all, of *affect*. The violence we observe is *for our sake*. It is for the sake of causing us to think and feel. According to John Dewey and similar theorists – indeed, the idea appears at least as far back as Kant and Schiller – the aesthetic moment arrives, in addition, at the point where the object or action is perceived as *mimetic form*. I perceive the injury to the Hillary Swank character as the form of an injury. It is a pattern of injury, among other patterns. Fictionality and affectivity are linked, on this reading, with formality. Violence is perceived from an aesthetic remove when fictionality, affectivity and formality are combined in the experience of a mimetic representation. The violence cannot endanger us or anyone else, but it is *for our sake*, and it is for our sake, first of all, as form.[5]

Symbolic violence. All violence is already symbolic. Since violence is transgression, violence is intrinsic to the symbolic system which enables it, and makes it the violation of a code. For this reason, the common distinction between "symbolic violence" and "real violence" is difficult to locate, especially when the point of making the distinction is to suggest that not all violence is physical, that some violence is structural, verbal or gestural only, and yet just as regrettable or unjust as physical violence. Physical violence already harms both physically and symbolically. Indeed, physical harm which has no inner symbolic meaning attached to it is called either an *accident* or an *act of nature*. And though we can use the qualifying adjective and mention a "violent accident" or a "a violent storm, earthquake," etc., we cannot really say that the accident or the natural disaster is itself violence. For neither has symbolic intentionality. As for violence without physical force, however, violence that is only symbolic, that exists only in words, gestures, attitudes or laws – where, actually, is the violence in it? At what point does imposition, malice or intimidation turn into violence, if not at the point where physical force is used or threatened? It is difficult to pinpoint the injury in merely symbolic violence; it is hard to say when symbolic violence is really violent and perhaps it is not worth the trouble of trying to do so. Nevertheless, an intention to harm will be common both to real violence (which is also symbolic violence) and merely symbolic violence.

Coercion, it is true, need not be physical. It need not even be founded on the threat or fear of physical injury. Coercion can be systemic,[6] and it can be effective on the level of the symbolic, without a resort to force. All legal systems are coercive. But though all law may be guaranteed by what Derrida calls "the force of law," the supplementary power through which law enforces itself, the enforcement of the law, need not involve physical force (Derrida, 1990). Indeed, physical harm is often one of the least of the worries of someone who has been subjected to an undesired form of legal coercion. Coercion without violence is one of the great mysteries of power; but it is also one of the keys to power. From Arendt to Foucault and Derrida, and *pace* the Hobbesian tradition, this key to power comes from an ability of a social institution and its agents to cause effects *without* physical force.

Coercion is a more general problem than violence. Aggression is a more general problem than violence. But violence is the most intolerable of the three. I can tolerate the coercion of the state and pay my taxes, and I can tolerate the aggression of my boss and submit to his insults, but I cannot tolerate being physically harmed – unless, that is, I can agree that I am being legitimately punished for a crime or other offense, or else take pleasure or find a compensatory reward in being harmed. (Maybe I *deserve* being hanged or insulted. Maybe I *like* being hurt or harassed. Maybe by being harmed I receive an otherwise unobtainable benefit.) But that suggests that we should be wary of analyses that collate violence with

coercion or aggression. When coercion or aggression *become* violent, we may say that coercion or aggression were already *in potentia* violence: but when violence comes, it is not the potential that disturbs us.

Why do we read books, watch films, attend plays or look at pictures that depict violence?[7] One reason is curiosity. In a world where violence occurs, and makes a difference, we are curious to know what it is. This same curiosity can drive the adventurous soul to go looking for actual violence, or like the novelist William T. Vollman (2005) visiting warzones and states of anarchy in search of the moral essence of violence. But our curiosity about violence is inevitably a passionate curiosity, a longing for affect, too. I look for violence in order to feel something in response to the violence. And what do I want to feel? Why do I want to feel it? The hypothesis has been hazarded by more than one commentator that a public taste for aestheticized representations of violence corresponds with a removal of violence from everyday life that began in the long eighteenth century.[8] What we seek in violent entertainment is an "excitement" that has been more or less removed from everyday life. This is probably correct. But as actual violence becomes more remote from everyday life, simulations proliferate, and the idea of violence becomes just as central to everyday experience, if not more central, than it was in experientially bloodier times.

On a quiet spring afternoon, in Dolores Park in San Francisco, a group of about twenty male teenagers, probably students from the school across the street, Mission High, descend on an open square of lawn. Soon the young men form a ring of spectators. In the middle of the ring, two of the young men square off and start fighting with their fists. I watch, from about thirty metres away, downhill from the action. About twenty other people in the park watch intently from various heights, angles and distances. The fight is shockingly gruesome, brutal, "violent." These two young men are viciously hurting one another. Meanwhile the other young men stand by at a respectful distance, cheering the action, for there is a game-like quality to the fight in spite of its brutality. One of the two fighters dominates, and before long his opponent is down on the ground, his nose bloodied, his mouth cut. He staggers on his knees. The fight would seem to be over. But now, the dominant fighter goes at him again, kicking him in the jaw. The opponent goes down, gets up on his knees. The dominant fighter kicks him in the face again. The opponent goes down. The dominant fighter starts stomping on him. I yell, "Stop! I said stop!" The dominant fighter stops. "Who the hell are you?" he shouts back to me. And he and many of the other boys turn their gaze upon me, sneeringly. "I am a citizen of San Francisco," I shout back, embarrassed at my word choice. All the eyes of the all the people in the park, it seems, are on me. No one moves. "This is a public park," I continue. "You can't fight here. Go somewhere else if you want to fight. Not here." The boys hesitate. "I said go." The whole group starts to move off, down the hill. Some of them come in my direction as if to threaten me, but move on, and a lot of them throw me looks of contempt. The dominant fighter is especially defiant-looking as he moves off, but the loser of the fight seems at odds with me too, his face distorted with bruises and blood, an eye puffed up, his lips cut and swollen. They all leave, angry at me. No one else in the park says anything, or even looks in my direction anymore.

I said "Stop" at the moment when I perceived that a game of violence had turned into a violated game and was at the verge of becoming a catastrophe. I said "Stop" when from my point of view the violence had gone *too far*. The teenage boys did not agree with me. For them the kicking and the stomping were still within the rules, even if, had the dominant fighter kept going, he could have killed his adversary. But when I said "Stop" and identified myself, somewhat foolishly, as a "citizen of San Francisco" (a legally fictitious identity, for

American law recognises no such status as citizenship in a city, and yet the identity seemed to impress the crowd) I effectively *coerced* the group of boys through the power of a higher law. I said "Stop" and the boys obeyed. But notice, too, the qualification: I did not say, *do not fight*, I said, *do not fight here*. My higher law was territorial. And that was one of the things, I believe, that made it work. I prohibited violence in *my territory* – a "public park" – but licensed violence *in their territory*. But teenage boys do not ordinarily *have* a territory. That is one of the dilemmas of being a teenager. So the boys left the park; they knew that this was not their territory; but they left it resentfully.

We can attend to incidents of violence in works of art because violence occurs in the real world and it therefore interests us, but we commonly do so with the understanding that violence is a special case of that which occurs, and in at least two senses. In the first place, violence is a disruption; it is not an ordinary or routine occurrence. In the second place, violence is foundational; it is a foundation of that which is ordinary and routine (Maffesoli, 2009). But why do we believe these two things – that violence is both extraordinary and foundational? And why do we therefore believe that when we observe violence, or the representation of an act of violence, that we are seeing, by way of a disruption, the irruption of a truth? When, in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), the child of an unmarried couple kills his two siblings and then himself because he was led to believe that the three of them were too much of a burden to his parents, the forward motion of life for the protagonist comes to end: these deaths are also catastrophic truths that cannot be overcome. These odd mad deaths are the foundation of the life of Jude the Obscure.

A common complaint against violence in the movies is that it is often "sensational" rather than "meaningful." But just as it is difficult to distinguish "symbolic violence" from "real violence," since in the first place "real violence" is also symbolic, so it is difficult to distinguish between sensational violence and meaningful violence, since all meaningful violence is to some extent sensational, and all sensational violence is either already meaningful or subject to interpretations that provide it with meaning. It is *against the sensations* that real violence primarily works. But that is because sensations have a meaning, and the integrity of the subject of sensations has a meaning. The real complaint against violence in the movies, if there is any complaint at all to be made about it, is that it frequently comes in excess of the meaning attached to it, or else, even worse, that it frequently comes with the *wrong* meaning attached to it.

A scene from Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1975):

> Gittes starts to get into his car but Mulvihill and a SMALLER MAN stop him – Mulvihill pulling his coat down and pinning his arms – holding him tightly. The SMALLER MAN thrusts a switchblade knife about an inch and a half up Gittes' left nostril.
>
> SMALLER MAN (shaking with emotion): Hold it there, kitty cat. You are a very nosey fellow, kitty cat . . . you know what happens to nosey fellows? (The SMALLER MAN actually seems to be trembling with rage when he says this. Gittes doesn't move.) Wanna guess? No? Okay. They lose their noses. (With a quick flick the SMALLER MAN pulls back on the blade, laying Gittes' left nostril open about an inch further. Gittes screams. Blood gushes down onto his shirt and coat.) Next time you lose the whole thing, kitty cat. I'll cut it off and feed it to my goldfish, understand? (Towne, 1999: 52).

The scene from *Chinatown* is shocking. Among other things, it violates Hollywood conventions for the representation of violence. It shows, convincingly, the penetration and cutting of an orifice. But the scene is also a case of semantic adequation. The active image of the violence equals the meaning of the violence, although by way of displacement and condensation as well as by way of literal meaning. A "nosey fellow" has his nose cut. And

by implication, a man attempting to exercise his phallic power (solving a crime, helping a woman in distress and restoring his reputation, all in the interest of justice, and as an expression of his profession as a private "dick") is castrated – or rather forewarned about the coming of castration ("I'll cut it off") through an attack that mimics castration. This is violence that means through and through. It is *instrumental* violence since it serves the purposes of the "smaller man" and the people he works for; it is a "violence of the game." But it is symbolic violence too. It is violence that operates not only by harming someone but, in harming, by meaning something, by sending a message. This too may be part of the game. The game involves the sending and receiving of messages. But it is violence that shocks, that comes unexpectedly, that violates the rules of violence: and the shock is shared both by Gittes, the victim of the violence, and the audience of the film who have observed it.

The shock of the violent, the violence of the shock: this is what is both avoided and sought after in serious films like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Chinatown* and *Million Dollar Baby*. Intolerable violence, represented at a level which is intolerable for the viewer as the well as the victim, catastrophic violence, violence that turns things around, reversing fortune, but also violence which at once *signifies* and *shocks*, violence that is part of a game, but also violence that seems to operate against the game, that breaks it up, shatters what psychologists like to call "flow" – this is probably what director Arthur Penn would call violence that is "violent enough." It is violence that means precisely in its overdetermination.

Overdetermined violence may be contrasted with strategically underdetermined violence – frequently a theme in the films of Michael Haneke, for example, *Funny Games* (1997) and *Caché* (2005). The absence of determination in these films, since it is strategic, summons (but also comments on) the collusion of the filmgoer in the spectacle of violence. Violence *for us*, but violence that is not *wanted* (by us), or violence that is *wanting*, and therefore violence that must be supplied (for us, by us and against us) such is strategic underdetermination which is both more and less than "violent enough."

Of course, violence in representational art is all a game, but on two levels. On one level violence is a game for its represented participants – until it is not, and the game is violated. The good guys and the bad guys square off, or the Jets and the Sharks square off, and there is a battle that escalates to the point where there is no longer any free *play*, or to put it another way, where game theory no longer applies. Necessity takes over and self-interest is no longer what motivates the action: the pure need to complete the action of violence takes over. (This pure need is observable in film as early as *The Great Train Robbery* [1903].) On another level, violence is a game for its audience, its spectators – and it is always a game. But here is another distinction: the game is being played *for* the audience, and not *by* the audience. In other words, what I read in a book or see on a screen is a kind of "glass bead game," as the title of a novel by Herman Hesse (2000) puts it: it is played out in front of its audience, with winners and losers, although it is not played out, usually, in the *form* of a game. "You know you're watching a movie," as Quentin Tarrantino puts it, not in spite of the violence but because of the violence. Given the violence, movies are a spectator sport.

The aesthetics of violence would be the theory of this game, a game about violence where there are no real victims, since the sport is never really violent to those who are participating it in the role of spectators, but where culprits and victims are on text, acting and suffering *as if* violence is present. A violent sport that is so violent by nature that it is not *as if* but seriously harms or kills some of its participants – the Roman gladiatorial contests, traditional bullfighting – is still safe to the spectators (Guttman, 1998, building

upon Elias and Dunning, 1986). One of the primary functions of spectacle is to construct subjects as spectators, who cannot be harmed by the sport they watch. The gladiator whose turn comes next, watching a fight to the death, both is and is not a spectator in this sense. The same goes for people who know the gladiator whose turn is coming, and who care about him. Kant's notion of aesthetic judgment, where the aesthetic attitude depends upon indifference to the existence of the object, is salient here. If we are indifferent to the gladiator, if the gladiator is *only a player*, suffering *as if*, we are spectators. If we are not indifferent to him, if the gladiator is a person whose life and welfare is of concern to us, we cannot watch his fight to the death with the aesthetic indifference of a spectator. We are always interested. It seems to have been the case that gladiators, like bullfighters, or indeed like modern boxers and football players, had fans. And the fan is never emotionally indifferent. The fan identifies with the athlete, and in that identification will more or less strongly experience a simulation of self-interest identical to the athlete's. (I strike out when my batter on the field strikes out. I lose when my team loses. I die when my gladiator dies.) A complication may come from wagering, which adds a second game to the first game, and where the spectator or even the fan plays with his or her own self-interest at stake. (Not only do I survive when my gladiator survives, or win when my football team wins, but I win a supplement by having wagered something of myself with respect to the game. Or conversely, I lose a second time when my representatives lose.)

As if apparently has more dimensions than one, and so too does spectatorship. Spectatorship requires indifference, but it summons the spectator toward an interest in the other which simulates or which may even merge with a self-interest. Indifference to the thing except as form is normally coupled with a rapture of absorption in the thing as object – and it is in this space between indifference and rapture that *sport* takes place, as well as art.

The "aesthetics of violence" may be differentiated from the "poetics of violence." The latter would be concerned with the art of representing violence, and with the cultural systems that enable the art. The former is concerned with (as Kant insisted) the *subjective* point of view, of violence experienced subjectively from within the framework of what is recognised as a representation and a fiction (Kant, 1987: 44).

The Gulf War which "did not take place," according to Jean Baudrillard (1995), did not take place because Westerners were turned into spectators of a multi-media spectacle; they were prevented (partly by the splendour of the spectacle itself, partly by its brevity) from becoming interested in its victims. For those of us who were watching this spectacle from America, the role of the victim was occupied by the journalists in Baghdad who were reporting on it. They were in danger; they were frightened; they spoke to the public across phone lines, conveying their confusions and their fears; and the public cared. The real victims of the Gulf War were the CNN reporters Bernard Shaw, John Holliman and Peter Arnett, talking to us live on the phone: when it turned out that none of them had been harmed, they became, anticipating the logic of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) the real heroes of the war as well. The heroes of such a simulated war, such a war which did not take place, were neither the agents nor the victims of war, but rather those who were *saved* from the war and ultimately *safe* from the war: the heroes were stand-ins for the millions of spectators to the simulated war.[9]

We *never* respond to violence in an artwork with the same emotions as we do when we respond to violence in life unless the frame of representation has been so shattered for us that we respond *in error*. Similarly, we *never* respond to real life violence with the same

emotion as we do to violence in art unless, again, *in error*. These errors are nevertheless key to the aesthetics of violence: on the one side, there is an error that art will frequently attempt to trigger, when it tries to make violence "violent enough"; on the other side, there is the error with which everyday life may continually besiege, as in the circumstances of the Gulf War, the error of un-seriousness, when violence is no longer violence but only rather a spectacle, viewed with a mixture of detachment and absorption.

The early classics of Western literature are classics of violence. Rage governs *The Iliad*.[10] Retribution governs *The Odyssey*. But neither the rage nor the revenge can satisfy our modern, post-Christian standards of justice, or even of poetic justice. Perhaps they did not satisfy the early audience or early readers of the epics either: the brutality of Achilles desecrating Hector's corpse, the mass murder conducted by Odysseus of the suitors of his wife seem meant not to reassure its audience but to disturb and excite it. An aesthetics of violence would have to be able to account both violence which comes as a satisfaction and violence which comes as a disruption or an excess, whether in the interest of comedy, of tragedy, or some other arc of development. But such an aesthetics would also have to account for the explanations that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* openly offer for violence and its results, either necessity, i.e. fate, or the arbitrary will of the gods. It would also have to account for the necessities of action itself, of action as the play of a game.

Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1598–99), and Artemisia Gentileschi's Caravaggio-inspired *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1611–12), both in the Uffizi in Florence, make an innocent the culprit and a guilty-figure the victim in a representation of horrific violence. There is no solace, no justice, no pleasure of rage or revenge in these pictures. And yet they celebrate the violence.

It is apparently crucial whether the agent of violence – the gladiator, the epic hero, the biblical hero – in some way *represents* the spectator, acting on his or her behalf. In a violent sport, the agent represents the *fan*. In violent art, the agent – from Odysseus and Samson to James Bond – may also represent the spectator, and the spectator may also be constructed as a kind of fan.

But representation can mean either reproduction or substitution. "The hero represents me" means either (a) that the hero reproduces me in an ideal form and thus operates for me ideally or (b) that the hero is a substitute for me, most likely in ideal form, and thus operates in my place (see Pitkin, 1967). Psychoanalysis has uses for both forms of representation: the hero who reproduces me is the mirror image of my ideal I; the hero who substitutes for me is my objective me, seen from outside (that is, from the point of view of my subjectivity). The substitute hero is probably the one on Freud's mind when he talks about how violence in art as a "compensation." In fiction, Freud (1918) writes, "we still find people who know how to die, who are even quite capable of killing others. There alone the condition for reconciling ourselves to death is fulfilled, namely, if beneath all the vicissitudes of life a permanent life still remains to us. . . . In the realm of fiction we find the many lives in one for which we crave. We die in identification with a certain hero and yet we outlive him and, quite unharmed, are prepared to die again with the next hero."

Fictional violence is a game from which we always walk away, and sometimes with considerable satisfaction.

Comic violence. Most young people in the West are first introduced to representations of violence in the mode of comic violence (Cantor, 1998). Animated and live action features

(for example, the *Home Alone* series) show violence whose ostensible purpose is to make the viewer laugh. The violence is not only *not real*, it is actually *risible*: either because it is violence that does not really harm the make-believe victim (the coyote gets pushed off a cliff, he hits the ground with an "oof" and a cloud of dust, and *then gets up again, unharmed*), or else because it is violence that harms a make-believe figure who deserves to be harmed (the thieves in *Home Alone*, who are bad guys, and idiots to boot) and still the harm is not quite real. Yet to be investigated: the relation between the unharmed harmed and the deserved-to-harmed. And yet to be investigated as well: the relation between the comic violence designed for children to the fantastic violence designed for adolescents (superhero violence) and the black-humour violence designed for adults.[11] In Joel and Ethan Coen's *Fargo* (1996), a story of a kidnapping gone wrong comes to a climax with one of the kidnappers forcing the body parts of the corpse of the partner he has killed through a motorized woodchipper. It is a very funny scene. The late American film critic Roger Ebert (1996) wrote that *Fargo* was "one of the best movies I have ever seen," and added that "Films like *Fargo* are why I love the movies."

Henri Bergson (2010) would add, in somewhat the same spirit, that comic violence is *intellectual* violence. It is violence that has been de-emotionalised (which is to say, diverted from the emotional interest that ought to be taken in it). And it is funny precisely because it is violence without emotion (and hence, without responsibility). If children first get exposed to representations of violence by animated comedy, they are perhaps being taught about violence intellectually, and with it what Bergson calls "automatism," the persistence of the mechanical in human life, the impersonal rigidity beneath the sentimental elasticity that constitutes all serious human interchange.

Violence becoming its own premise: that would seem to be the case in the "new brutality" films of 1990s and later, or even the "ultraviolent" films that began to appear in the late 1960s, most notably with Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969).[12] But violence becomes its own premise in two senses. On the one hand, violence becomes the premise in the represented world of the characters, either because characters choose a life of violence or because the world the characters find themselves in is already governed by violence. When violence is the premise in this sense, violence is both problem and solution. There is no avoiding the *problem* of violence, and there is no *solution* to the problem but more violence. But on the other hand, violence also becomes its own premise in such a film when it is also the premise of the film as a *text*. Films like the Batman adventure *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) and the James Bond adventure *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012) are good examples of this. The "image" that is the text, as Gilles Deleuze might have put it, whether in "movement" or "time," is a driven patterning of violent movements and sequences.[13] The films are impelled to violent conclusions according to a logic that is at once moral (since rightly or wrongly, violence is the solution to violence in the worlds of these films) and textual, since the text constructs movements and sequences of violence as an expression of its imaginary energy. The best analogy is perhaps to a symphony whose climatic movement builds to the crashing of cymbals and the beating of drums. The text, film or symphony, requires crescendo and punctuation in the pursuit of a culmination, and the success of the film requires an orchestration where narrative elements of agents acting morally or immorally are bound to viscerally textual elements of sound and sight in motion – and the one complements or completes the other. Film directors have known this since the beginning of talkies, and before the talkies they knew about it too.

Narratives can also be premised on violence in this way: *The Odyssey*, Tom Clancy's thriller *Patriot Games* (1987). So can plays: *Hamlet*, Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware*

Women (1613–21). The rhythm of the narrative is tied to a rhythm of the text, the moral meaning of violence is tied to the emotional orchestration of the violence. Violence becomes risible, in any of these texts (but *Women Beware Women* is perhaps the best example), where the violence as moral act becomes detached from the violence as textual rhythm, where the later outpaces the former. Then the death of a character is no longer fearsome or pitiable. The deaths of Livia and Hippolito in the midst of *Women Beware Women* evoke laughter because they are intellectual deaths, following the logic of the text rather than the logic of narrative and moral meaning. Representation overtakes the represented. Perhaps the same goes for the death of Polonius in *Hamlet*.

Play can be intrinsic to violence, according to Johann Huizinga (1998), since violence so often contains an "agonistic" element. Agonistic violence follows rules, and is meant to conclude not just with the harming of a victim but with the assertion of winner. But play itself, as Roger Callois has argued in his updating of Huizinga, need not be agonistic. There are also kinds of play he calls (I am anglicising Callois's strange Greek and Latin terms) the "aleatory," the "mimetic," and the "giddy."[14] So far as it is undertaken as play, violence can be aleatory (Russian roulette, random drive-by shootings), mimetic (lynching or even legal execution along with many cases of terrorist violence, where a kind of political drama is staged), and "giddy" (violent conclusions to the "chicken game," mob violence at a football match, where the thrill in itself is the main objective). Meanwhile, within the framework of mimetic art, violence is fundamentally play. First of all, it is mimetic, and mimesis is play. But secondly, from the subjective, aesthetic point of view, the reader or spectator, committed to a representation, absorbed in the violent text, is committed to an experience of agony, chance, mimesis, and giddiness. This is what the stories of both Odysseus and James Bond give me: spectatorship at a play of violence, where the play itself involves all four elements, and the subjective experience itself is a confluence of agony, chance, mimesis and giddiness. Watching or reading about violence, while being absorbed in the action, elicits competitive agony, narrative suspense, the pleasure of form, and the thrill of vertiginous movement.

A *poetic* question could be about why people would want to create experiences of this kind through the representation of violence. The parallel *aesthetic* question would be about why people want to experience such experiences. But though parallel, the questions aren't symmetrical. For the first asks, what are the *intentions* of artists when they create a representation of violence? The second asks, what are the intentions of readers and viewers when they *submit themselves* to the intentions of artists?

On the subject of violence, when the question of the spectator or reader arises, the conventional response among both aestheticians and social psychologists has been to ask, on the one hand, about pity and fear and related emotions, and, on the other hand, about aggressiveness and anger. First of all, why do people submit themselves to experiences that may evoke pity, fear, aggressiveness and anger? Second of all, what are the results? These questions in all cases need to be supplemented by the categories of play – the agonistic, the aleatory, the mimetic and the giddy. Usually they aren't, and many opportunities for investigation are lost. A pre-occupation of social psychologists has been the *effect* of violent entertainment on members of the public. Specifically, the pre-occupation has been with the question as to whether violent entertainment increases or decreases the disposition toward violence. Surprisingly, the answer so far seems to be, for the majority of adults, neither, but for many younger people, maybe, depending on factors like gender, intelligence, and family life.[15] But social psychologists have not been able to measure the responses of readers and spectators with a view toward the *quality* of representations. They have not even been able to measure responses with a view toward the *ideology* of representations. By this I mean both the general ideology implicit in any text (though to be sure, that ideology may

be neither coherent nor consistent) and the ideology of violence that is included in or that is supplementary to that general ideology. Yet surely it is because of quality and ideology that *Fargo* makes viewers laugh, and aficionados of film avid admirers. And surely it is because of quality and ideology that *Hamlet* (which ends in a slaughter) makes viewers sombrely thoughtful, pitiful and amazed. These aspects of "quality" and "ideology" have not been the domain, so far, of social psychology. It is likely they never shall. It is likely too, then, that social psychology and critical studies (or "aesthetics," as it is often called in Continental Europe) will never have much to say to one another on the subject of violence.

If "quality" and ideology" are exhaustive terms, roughly equivalent in their being pared to "form" and "content," and thus together a totalization of that which is subject to assessment or "aesthetic judgment" in a text of violence, they must nevertheless be further qualified. Specific to violence there must be considered, for quality, the verisimilitude of the violence and conversely, the deliberate falsification of alienation effects; and for ideology, the science of violence that the text intends, along with the language of violence that is used to intend it.

Strife, war, coercion and aggression are names for phenomena that can easily be identified: strife in a family quarrel, war in a military battle, coercion in an abduction, aggression in a slap. But these words also designate conditions, metaphysical, epistemological, historical, social, psychological. For Heraclitus, strife is the condition for existence. For Hobbes, war is the condition of human nature. For Rousseau, as for Marx, coercion is the condition of human society and hence of social division. For Freud, aggression is a fundamental drive. Any number of other examples could be given. Derrida (perhaps inconsistently) attributes phenomenological violence to a kind of "arché-violence," and "arché-violence" to "force."[16] The point is: if any of these ideas about the conditions of human life are correct, then a work of art that represents violence is doing its job.

The question for critical studies is how well the work of art is doing its job, and how and why. But the question is not only about the representation *of* violence, it is also about a representation *to* violence. *Bonnie and Clyde* has said something to violence. So has *Jude the Obscure*. If potentiality is not what disturbs the victim of violence, nevertheless it is to this potentiality, before or after the experience of the artwork, that the artwork addresses itself – and the poetics of violence becomes exchanged for an aesthetics of violence.

Safe from violence but approached by it, taunted by it all the same, the aesthetic subject is at once detached and absorbed by the potentialities of violence to which the artwork has given fictional form. With regard to the potential of real violence, the subject has many possible responses, and those responses are played back to the subject in the form of art. The subject can be, will be, always (but not really always) *secure* from violence. But the subject can be, will be, always (but not really always) *threatened* by violence, and sometimes therefore harmed by violence. The subject can engage in violence too. The subject can initiate violence. The subject itself is a potential for violence. But the subject can try in many ways to avoid violence, to escape it, to ignore it, to oppose or, alas, even in spite of itself, benefit from violence enacted elsewhere, or even here, but by other subjects. All of these potentialities are combined in the experience of even the simplest experience of violence in art – and it is to the agonistic, mimetic, aleatory and giddy game of experiencing these potentialities that the aesthetics of violence is devoted.

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NOTES

1 "Quentin Tarantino: Violence Is the Best Way to Control an Audience', *The Telegraph*, 12 Jan. 2010. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/film-news/6975563/Quentin-Tarantino-violence-is-the-best-way-to-control-an-audience.html For a summary of Tarantino's public statements on violence, see Esther Zuckerman 'Everything Quentin Tarantino Really Thinks About Violence and the Movies," *The Atlantic Wire*,11 Jan. 2013. http://news.yahoo.com/everything-quentin-tarantino-really-thinks-violence-movies-200748205.html

2 An edited version of the speech, with transcript, is available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhnn9kbqQUA&feature=related

3 A video of such an incident is available at http://network.yardbarker.com/all_sports/article_external/female_high_school_soccer_player_kicks_opponent_in_face_during_game/11984830

4 See Goffman, 1974. There is some compelling evidence that the fictional frame and the safety it implies are essential to an aesthetic, which is to say pleasurable experience of images of violence. See McCauley, 1998; Shaw, 2004.

5 The aesthetician may thus claim that "artworks are alive in that they speak in a fashion that is denied to natural objects and the subjects who make them." Adorno, 1997: 5.

6 The central point in Žižek, 2008. Žižek calls systemic violence "objective violence" as opposed to the kind of violence being highlighted in these notes, violence with subjective intentionality, which Zizek calls, simply, "subjective violence".

7 The question is asked and answered from a variety of disciplinary standpoints in *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, ed. Jeffrey Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

8 The case is documented at large in Pinker, 2011, especially 71–154, following the lead of Elias, 2000, though without regard to increases of violent entertainment in proportion to decreases in actual violence. Elias and Dunning, 1986, however, predict this phenomenon.

9 *Saving Private Ryan* also makes a counterargument, to be sure: for Private Ryan refuses to be saved, and engages in heroic effort along with his would-be saviours to fight the German enemy. But in the end, this Private Ryan both refuses to be saved and then *is* saved: and this is the role played later by Peter Arnett, who remained at his station reporting on the war, while Shaw and Holliman fled. (For a thoughtful reflection on the contexts of the movie, see Bodnar, 2001.)

10 In a famous essay Simone Weil (2007) goes further and argues that the *Iliad* is about "force", a concept which I allude to above when mentioning Derrida.

11 The term "black humour" originates with André Breton in his *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1940). Breton declines to define black comedy (said by the *OED* to involve "presenting tragic or distressing situations in humorous terms"), but he declares that it is the "mortal enemy of sentimentality" (873).

12 On the "new brutality" see Gormley, 2005. "Ultraviolence" is the expression used by Prince, 2000. For an overview, see the essays collected in Slocum, 2001.

13 For a Deleuzean reading of violence in the cinema, see Abel, 2007.

14 Callois, 2001. I am not sure whether Callois's four categories are exhaustive, but I find them comprehensive of most instances. A chief problem with Callois's theory, in any case, and his departure from Huizinga, has to do with the term "play" itself: in French *jeu* will do for what in English can be a distinction between *play* and *game*. Callois usually thinks of *jeu* as *game*, but that prevents him from being able to identify an element of play in everyday (i.e. "serious") life, whereas for Huizinga the persistence of elements of play in all areas of life, however serious or playful, is precisely what makes the study of play so important. I am more on the side of Huizinga in this, although I agree with Callois on the limitations of Huizinga's analysis, which fails to distinguish clearly between the agonistic and the mimetic, and does not account for the aleatory or the giddy.

15 A definitive statement on behalf of the social psychology community is issued in Krahe et al., 2012. The statement is nearly identical to Anderson et al., 2003 and to the more extensive Potter, 1999. Still, there are many detractors in the fields of social psychology and media studies. A volume devoted to the problem of looking for violence effects in response to violence media is *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate*, (Barker and Petley, 2001) where the editors accuse social psychologists of witchcraft hunting. Also see Carter, 2003, esp. 1–20. The main problem is in the testing and documenting of "effects", and the bias involved in the search for discrete effects, without reference to the context either of the media representation or the laboratory conditions through which effects are measured. Carter also argues that "effects" experiments are ideologically predisposed against political and economic explanations of violence. An appreciation of two of the main aspects of the analysis here – culture and gaming – are missing from most social psychological accounts as well. A single example may do at this point: Potter documents the fact that media violence in Japan is just as high in terms of frequency as in the United States, and that violence in children's programming in Japan is especially high. But then he omits to mention the fact that Japan has one of the lowest rates of violent crime in the world. (The United States has the highest violent crime rate among the developed countries, but still a much lower crime rate than many less developed countries.) See Waldman, 2013 and Everitt, 2001.

16 Derrida, 1978, especially but not exclusively, chapters one, "Force and Signification" and four, "Violence and Metaphysics." Also Derrida, 1990. In the latter, Derrida notes, "in the many texts considered deconstructive,

and particularly in certain of those that I've published myself, recourse to the word 'force' is quite frequent, and in strategic places I would even say decisive, but at the same time always or almost always accompanied by an explicit reserve, a guardedness. I have often called for vigilance, I have asked myself to keep in mind the risks spread by this word, whether it be the risk of an obscure, substantialist, occulto-mystic concept or-the risk of giving authorization to violent, unjust, arbitrary force" (927–29). This reader is not satisfied that Derrida has finally clarified his meaning when he uses the word "force". But see Parrish, 2007; Marsh, 2009; and Elmore, 2012.

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