

REGARDING WOUNDED BODIES ON THE KILLING  
FIELDS OF THE CINEMA  
OR, *CAN VIOLENT SPECTACLES IN AMERICAN POPULAR  
FICTION & FILM POSSIBLY BE JUSTIFIED?*

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**Abstract**

In her book *Trauma Cinema* (2005), Janet Walker is primarily interested in films that adopt catastrophe as their subject matter and trauma as their aesthetic in documentary treatments of incest and the Holocaust; but she also examines the classic Hollywood melodrama *King's Row*, adapted from a book “spiced with harlots, idiots, nymphomaniacs and homosexuals,” concerning “three fathers who become sexually enamored of their daughters,” as well as “a sadistic doctor who performs unnecessary operations for the gloating pleasure of seeing his patients suffer to the human breaking point, and a whole horde of half-witted, sensual creatures preoccupied with sex” (to quote a contemporary review of the perverse source novel). Walker was especially interested in alterations deemed necessary in order to get the project past the Production Code, which certainly would have prohibited incest. We are interested in later standards that became less stringent in permitting screen representations of sex and violence after such groundbreaking pictures as Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie & Clyde* and Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*, particularly the popular and critical success of Francis Coppola’s *The Godfather* during the 1970s and its sequel, *The Godfather, Part II*—both of them brutal films when judged against earlier gangster pictures which, before 1968, could not have been so explicit and graphic. We will also discuss 1970s violence in the context of the Vietnam War—notably Francis Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* and Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* and *Born on the 4th of July*, in an attempt to explain America’s demonstrable fascination with violence.

**Keywords:** *film studies, media violence, movie “realism”, trauma, sexual violence, national identity, the American Frontier, the Western myth, immigration,*

This paper is a speculation about media violence and what purposes, emotional or rhetorical, such violence could possibly serve. It will not attempt to deal with computer-generated violence commonly used by pointless but popular action -

adventure spectacles to sustain viewer interest at the box-office or to generate second-generation video games. My interest is purely in truly disturbing violent effects that may be used to serve some worthwhile moral purpose that may somehow alleviate human suffering, or put such suffering into some intelligible context that makes moral sense, such as the hideous spectacle of genocide that Alain Resnais used in *Night & Fog*, his Holocaust documentary, a distinctive and unforgettable indictment of National Socialism and its wretched excesses and enthusiasms. But this was an extreme case because the images of that documentary were reality-based. Movie “realism” can also be put to fictive use and has been so used, permissibly, perhaps, by Steven Spielberg in *Schindler’s List* and even in *Saving Private Ryan*. But what is there about such stories that would make such violent footage “permissible”? There is always the danger of trivializing movie violence, and the moral justification can only be found embedded in the narrative. I could find a justification for such anti-nuclear films as *The War Game*, made by Peter Watkins for BBC in 1965, for example, or its progeny, such as Nicholas Meyer’s television drama *The Day After* (speculating about a nuclear attack on Kansas City and a family drama concerning the survivors) or Mick Jackson’s *Threads*, a BBC drama portraying the possible after-effects of nuclear war on the very fabric of society that eclipsed all previous anti-nuclear films, though to my knowledge it has not been widely seen outside of Britain. I could also attempt to make a case for the satirical treatment of Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*, released the same year as *The War Game* (which it greatly eclipsed because of its flamboyance and humor). But such a film as *WarGames* (1982) I would be likely to reject as commercial claptrap kidstuff, merely trivial entertainment exploiting nuclear anxieties.

With four potential nuclear reactor “accidents” threatening in Japan during the spring of 2011, in my opinion nuclear politics should be the last thing Hollywood would consider turning into either “entertainment” or “infotainment.” However, memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are deeply embedded in the Japanese national consciousness and have surfaced in the work of Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998, arguably Japan’s greatest film director), early in his career in such a picture as *I Live in Fear* (1955), and towards the end of his career in such an allegorical feature as *Dreams* (1990), an “omnibus” film whose most powerful episode disturbingly symbolizes national nuclear anxieties. Memories of Japan’s nuclear nightmare were later enhanced by the Soviet Union’s nuclear “accident” at Chernobyl in 1986, which left a contaminated wasteland of 15,000 square miles, roughly the size of Switzerland, according to an official report made by the Ukrainian Parliament.

The degree to which violence has been marginalized might be considered a useful index for measuring how “civilized” a culture may be. Appalling examples of violent behavior can easily be found, for example, by examining the historical record, such as the extreme cruelty ascribed to that 15<sup>th</sup>

Century Romanian national hero Vlad Țepeș whose image was expanded to monstrous proportions by Bram Stoker and his innumerable imitators and adaptors. Francis Coppola stretched that legend perversely and metaphysically in his flamboyant movie treatment he called “*Bram Stoker’s Dracula*,” even though the inventions and innovations of the screenplay by James V. Hart went far beyond the bloody formula of the source text. As a matter of fact, violence is where you find it, and one needn’t necessarily seek it out in Sighișoara.

The American novelist Cormac McCarthy, for instance, found hideous examples of violence by examining the historical record of skirmishes on the Texican-Mexican border in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, fictively and brilliantly adapted to his novel *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), soon (perhaps) to become a motion picture (negotiations have been in play for years, but a breakthrough may be forthcoming in 2012). McCarthy’s later novel, *No Country for Old Men*, written in 2005 and filmed by the Coen Brothers in 2007, was judged by the Motion Picture Academy to have been not only the best film of 2007, but the best film adapted from another medium that year (adapted by the Coen Brothers themselves). The film opens with a monumental massacre after a drug deal had gone seriously wrong on the Texas border. And from there, the story follows a cowboy on the run (who has taken a stash of money from the killing fields), a larger-than-life ruthless assassin who apparently intends to recover the stolen money after having killed an appalling number of generally innocent victims, and an about-to-retire sheriff who apparently means well, but is either reluctant or helpless to stop the horrendous violent repercussions these events have put in motion.

In her book *Trauma Cinema* (2005), Janet Walker was primarily interested in films that adapted catastrophe as their subject matter and trauma as their aesthetic in documentary treatments of incest and the Holocaust; but she also examined the classic Hollywood melodrama *King’s Row* (1942), adapted from a book “spiced with harlots, idiots, nymphomaniacs and homosexuals,” concerning “three fathers who become sexually enamored of their daughters,” as well as “a sadistic doctor who performs unnecessary operations for the gloating pleasure of seeing his patients suffer to the human breaking-point, and a whole horde of half-witted, sensual creatures preoccupied with sex” (to quote a contemporary review from the *Daily News*, dated June 7, 1940, of the perverse source novel by Harry Bellamann, also quoted by Janet Walker). Walker was especially interested in the alterations deemed necessary in order to get this film project past the Production Code, which certainly would have prohibited incest. But we are interested in later permutations of that Code, which was much changed by the 1960s.

During the 1960’s in Hollywood, decent boundaries of civility were severely tested, starting with the sexual taboos involving homosexuality, incest, and cannibalism in the screen adaptation of Tennessee Williams’s *Suddenly*,

*Last Summer*, wickedly and perversely adapted by Gore Vidal for director Joseph L. Mankiewicz in 1959. The spectacular perversions of this play were in the source material, but Vidal's screenplay refused to pull its punches. Even so, both Katharine Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor were nominated for Academy Awards for their performances in the most shocking film to be seen in decades in America. But that film's pornographic potential was amply wrapped in metaphor and allegory, likely, perhaps, to go over the heads of many viewers who were neither theatre-goers nor accustomed to the strange Gothic concerns of Tennessee Williams.

Outside of America, such violence might be seen as pornographic, by a less one-sided Puritanical society, and by the mid-1960s, pornographic violence had become endemic in American films. Of course, American films had always been violent, but in movie Westerns and Films Noirs the violence had been softened and stylized by Hollywood. With *The Wild Bunch* in 1969 that stylization changed, however, when director Sam Peckinpah took movie "realism" to a new threshold in the shoot-outs that bookended his grim tale of heroic anachronisms caught up in a disappearing frontier<sup>1</sup>. Two years before *The Wild Bunch*, Arthur Penn had tested and re-set the limits of movie violence with his bullet-riddled spectacle at the conclusion of his iconic gangster film, *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967). A new era of tolerance would eventually change the MPAA Production Code's values during that decade, but though sexual issues continued to be sublimated for the most part, violence was blatantly exploited in American popular films.

American history is scarred by the violence of our ancestors, from the Revolutionary War (which displaced roughly one-fifth of the population, those colonial Americans who were Loyalists and chose to go north to Canada or to return to Britain rather than stay and be persecuted for their royalist loyalty), to the American Civil War, to the arguably genocidal treatment of native Americans, on to the so-called "vanishing Frontier" to borrow the term coined by Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner's thesis influenced Teddy Roosevelt and other "progressives," who linked the Frontier myth to tenets of Social Darwinism, creating a justification for imperialism carried forward by a "natural aristocracy" of Anglo-Saxon corporate capitalists. This myth won out over the counter-populist myth of renegade heroes, fighting the corporate control of railroads, banks, and the government. Both *Bonnie & Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* plug into this counter-myth, and it took forty years for Clint Eastwood to turn

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<sup>1</sup> The larger meaning of violence on the Frontier of the American West up to the year 1890 has been intelligently probed and discussed by historian Richard Slotkin, in the framework of two books: *Gunfighter Nation* (1992) and his earlier book *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* (1973).

that around with the brutality of *Unforgiven* (1992). Regardless, to this day Western myths still serve to define Frontier America's "identity."

In short, then, Americans' sense of national memory and identity has been all too largely shaped by a false "myth," as explained by Richard Slotkin: "the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievements of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy and a phenomenally dynamic and 'progressive' civilization." At the heart of this myth was the notion that "violence is an essential and necessary part of the process through which its democratic values are defended and enforced." Accepting this load of baloney, Sean Aloysius O'Feeney (1895-1973) turned himself into a Hollywood Ford that rode roughshod over American history, building a misleading mythic image of the American West that many Americans probably believe to this day, or at least those not inclined to read Wesleyan Professor Slotkin.

Parallel to the Frontier myth stands the myth of America as an immigrant nation, which could be defined several ways, Jewish American, for example, Irish American, or, even more commonly, Italian American. The first two *Godfather* films give a particularized and iconic view of Italian American identity that has as much to do with family as with the Mafia and criminal codes of honor, even though of course Italian American involves a whole lot more than merely Sicilian American underworld connotations. In his book *Hollywood's Italian American Filmmakers* (2011), Jonathan Cavallero describes Francis Coppola's Italian American nostalgia as "seductive" in its view of "American culture as the corrupter of a pristine and idyllic Italian culture" (101). But the *Godfather* films "are also critical of the Corleones, never allowing viewers to forget that this seemingly ideal Italian American family is sustained by bloodshed, extortion, and murder." The *Godfather, Part III* (1990), moreover, serves as a corrective, Cavallero seems to suggest, and "plays more like a [Martin] Scorsese film, where ethnic dysfunction is dramatized through a series of images, scenes, and intratextual references that comment upon and starkly undermine the comforting myths of the previous two installments" (101). Now, that is well said, while placing *Godfather III* in a context that helps to explain its standing as the least popular film in the *Godfather* trilogy.

I should like to conclude, however, with comments about Cormac McCarthy's more recent Border Trilogy, consisting of three novels: *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998), a trilogy critic Diane Luce described as "a lullaby singing to sleep the vanishing cowboy" (163). The first issue of that trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses*, signalled a breakthrough for McCarthy's popularity as a writer, and it was the first of his novels to be adapted to film, by Billy Bob Thornton, with a cast that should have assured box-office success, headed by Matt Damon, Henry Thomas, Lucas

Black, and Penelope Cruz. The novel is not so violent as *Blood Meridian* or *No Country for Old Men*, but violent enough, certainly, as movies go. Here, the violence is used to demonstrate differences in cultural values regarding life and death, as a young American, accused of being a horse thief, is about to be dispatched by Mexican police. This film adaptation never became popular, however; the reason is explained by a documentary about the making of the film made by Peter Josyph. As documented by interviews with the cast, crew, screenwriter Ted Talley (whose greatest success was his adaptation of *The Silence of the Lambs*) and director Billy Bob Thornton, everyone on the project knew what needed to be done to make the film not only successful but also faithful to the source novel; unfortunately, however, that decision was made by the studio, not by the director, who would have insisted that a longer treatment be released.

But have I answered my initial question: “Can Violent Spectacles in American Popular Fiction & Film Possibly Be Justified?” Well, yes, if it helps to stabilize or to clarify moral issues or questions of national memory and cultural identity, as I believe was the case in Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven*, and even in *No Country for Old Men*. In *The Wild Bunch*, a code unites the “Bunch” and their pursuer, Robert Ryan, as well. That code is violated when one of the “Bunch” is left behind in the confusion of the initial bank robbery, but fulfilled in the final shoot-out, when Mapache and his followers are massacred in reprisal for the death of the martyred Angel, held hostage and wildly avenged by the “Bunch.” So, if you somehow thought the Western was dead, think again!

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