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# The Stylisation of Violence in Film

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Joanne Finnegan

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## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) 3D Model Making. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Joanne Finnegan

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the stylisation of violence in film with the use of different elements of filmmaking. It involves a deep analysis of scenes, genres, cinematography, lighting, soundtracks, and special effects. In each chapter there is a case study on a film director to help understand film styles are created. The directors included are John Carpenter, Tim Burton, and Quentin Tarantino. Film style, the history of violence and purpose of violence in cinema will be discussed, and how stylised violence is designed as an experience for the audience.

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## **Introduction**

## Introduction

This thesis will explore how violence is stylised in film by the different elements of filmmaking and how this is overall influenced by the director's film style and level of involvement.

Violence in film is often stylised with influence from the director and other parts of the filmmaking process. Stylising films is a way of creating a unique visual on screen. In some cases, directors have their own style of filmmaking, which is used consistently throughout their work and can be easily recognised by their audience. In this thesis there will be further examination into stylisation and how it influences scenes of violence on screen.

Stylisation is a term often used in the art community. Throughout the centuries there have been many art styles formed. The stylisation of art involves a certain method, including colours and materials. This method is used consistently throughout the artwork, and each element affects the overall visual composition. In the early renaissance era, there was a conformed art style which created a coherent visual amongst all artists' work. This can be seen in the earlier works of Giotto, particularly in his 'Madonna and Child' painting. When compared side by side to other work of the time, the paintings mirror each other. The conformity of such styles of art limited an artist's signature.

It was not till later in the Renaissance when artists began to break the conformities of this style and create innovative styles of their own. This controversial progression of style has been seen throughout the ages of art in such breakout styles as cubism, expressionism, and impressionism. However, these styles have now become highly regarded and praised in the art world. The stylisation of art can be directly compared to that of the stylisation of film. Director's (much like artists) produce new visuals using the elements of filmmaking to influence the final piece and thus develop a new art form or stylisation. At the beginning of any new style of art or film it can get a controversial reception, however, as the film industry and society evolve, we learn to admire such past endeavours and are eager to be spectators of more unique film styles.

The stylisation of violence combines elements such as colour, exaggeration and less conventional methods of film making. Violence is often understood as a use of force to physical harm of someone or something intentionally. There is also the use of the word violent to describe something sudden or powerful which does not have to involve physical harm. It can often show distaste of graphical content. Violence in film often comes under scrutiny. In *Violence and the Media* there is a discussion about the 'concerns about the social impacts of film' and how the audience could be influenced to engage in violence in their everyday life



because they witnessed it in cinema.<sup>1</sup> This speaks to the idea that violence in film can only have a negative outcome, however it can be used for different purposes depending on the director which will be explored throughout this thesis.

The authors of *Violence and The Media* refer to violence in film as a 'central importance for the popular appeal of film'.<sup>2</sup> This idea of violence influencing a film's popularity is evidence of the evolvment of the audience's preferences.

How has the stylisation of violence developed throughout the years as well as during the directors' careers? Throughout the chapters, there will be a look into what has influenced the outcome of the directors' styles and how they portray violence on screen. Style can often be an expressive exaggeration and often a tell-tale sign in violent scenes, as it lacks realism. There will be a discussion on how swaying from reality can benefit the viewers' experience will be investigated throughout the text.

This thesis will apply to genre theory in film and the use of violence in different genres will be compared to learn more about how genre can influence the meaning of violence in film. For example, how violence in the action genre is 'not about the violence. The violence stands to represent the drive, the motivation of characters. It's this intense drive to achieve something.'<sup>3</sup> In contrast, violence in the horror genre feeds a different purpose for both the characters and audience.

By learning more about the elements of filmmaking and how they are all needed to create the final piece of work, this topic of discussion will provide valuable information for the artists or makers in the film industry. It will be helpful in creating a more informed design process and aiding in focusing on a multitude of aspects of the filmmaking process that impact the final look. Developing a deeper understanding and thought process into the display of violence on screen will improve the actions taken by artists and makers to have more effect on the audiences' reactions.

Understanding how to use elements of film making while creating will help shape how makers can show off their work in films and achieve their desired effect. Learning how lighting and cinematography can affect the visuals on screen will help in the conceptualisation period of a project. This will be useful to know when considering materials and colours.

A director's style and vision for a film can influence the outcome of every scene, including aspects such as the colours, themes, dialogue, and added special effects. It is important for

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, Cynthia, and C. Kay Weaver. *Violence and the Media*. Open University Press, 2003. Pg. 42

<sup>2</sup> Carter, Cynthia, and C. Kay Weaver, pg. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Donovan, Barna William. *Blood, Guns, and Testosterone. Action Films, Audiences, and a Thirst for Violence*. Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010. pg. 213.

makers to understand a director's film to create coherent pieces to match the overall aesthetics of the work. This may require undertaking new genres, themes, colours, and concepts to suit the film style at hand.

This topic will be explored with the following methods: case studies, scene analysis, critical comparisons, and film theory. Structurally, this thesis will include three chapters. In each chapter, there will be a case study on a director. The directors that will be discussed are John Carpenter, Tim Burton, and Quentin Tarantino. Sub-headings will be used to delve into the different elements of film making including screenplay, themes, soundtrack, cinematography, and special effects. By using sections, it will develop a wider understanding for us of the similarities and differences in how each director approaches their own style to film making thus, influencing the stylisation of violence in their work. Contrasts will be noted between the directors, as they become apparent in the research process.

To understand how violence can be stylised in film, the different aspects of film must be discussed. This will be explored by breaking down the filmmaking process into sub-sections such as soundtrack, cinematography, lighting, and special effects including makeup. Each element brings the film together and can add a unique style to a director's work. This will be discussed in relation to the stylisation of violence on screen.

The first chapter will delve in the work of John Carpenter and his film style. There will be a talk about his influence on the horror genre and how he is said to have founded the sub-genre of slasher films with his film *Halloween*. Adding to that will be a discussion on how Carpenter's screenplay and composing adds suspense to the violence on screen. Lighting and cinematography techniques will be researched into. This will develop a better understanding of how this affects the audience's reaction and how additions to violent scenes such as the use of the 'cheap scare', dark scenes or ominous tracking shots of characters influence this. Special effects will be looked at, such as the work of Rob Bottin on *The Thing* will be researched to understand how such violent transformations of the creatures in *The Thing* are made and how this influences the audience's response.

Secondly, the next chapter will be about Tim Burton's work. How Burton is influenced by German expressionism and Hammer horror will be investigated to understand the development of his films. Reoccurring dark themes and plots are a staple in Burton's work, the common theme of death and misfit characters will be explored in this chapter. Furthermore, there will be a discussion on the use of music and musical numbers which often feature in his films. How does this affect the violence accompanying the soundtrack? Burton has an eye for exaggeration in colour, violence, and character creation. This concept will be explored through these sub-headings: special effects, lighting and cinematography, animation, and character design.

The last chapter will involve a discussion of Quentin Tarantino's film style. Common genres such as comedy, western and crime will be mentioned alongside reoccurring themes of revenge and re-written historic events. Afterwards, there will be a look into how postmodernist and independent filmmaking has influenced Tarantino's style throughout the years. Heavy dialogue plays an important role in adding suspense in Tarantino's work and his depiction of violence. This will be investigated through scene analyses. The audience's relationship with his films will be discussed through examples of pastiche and intertextuality. How Tarantino uses certain types of camera shots throughout his work will help bring an understanding to how he remains consistent in his film style. Special effects and the soundtrack often come hand in hand in his work. These two elements of filmmaking will be explored to gauge how the audience responds to a hyperbole of violence mixed with recognisable background music, and how he adds shock value with his use of stylised violence.

Carter, Cynthia, and Weaver refer to Hill's comment on violence in film and the audiences need for graphical content:

'Certain scenes from specific films produce intense response [sic], and part of the process of viewing violence is to anticipate and explore such feelings . . . Evidence suggests participants may expect, even desire, to be shocked or excited, to feel a rush of emotions when viewing fictional violence.' (Hill 1997: 33)<sup>4</sup>

This idea of the audience's desire for violence in relation to film and how does violence have a purpose in film will be investigated further as the stylisation of violence in film is explored throughout the chapters.

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<sup>4</sup> Carter, Cynthia, and C. Kay Weaver, pg. 66.

## **Chapter 1: John Carpenter**

## Chapter 1

### Introduction to John Carpenter

John Carpenter's film career started with *Captain Voyeur* in 1969. Much of his directing career ran throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, he is very much still involved in cinema as a producer and composer in the present day. Carpenter's style and his use of violence in his work has a purpose. It is used to further the plot as well as create a response from the audience, usually that of fear.

In this chapter, there will be a case study on John Carpenter. He is a renowned director and his films have stood the test of time. Carpenter has composed several of his movies' soundtracks and with the combination of these two skills he has created his own style with a certain atmosphere unlike any other. John Carpenter has influenced the film industry for over forty decades. To understand what makes his directing style unique and how it influences the violence on screen, we must first look at how Carpenter gained his inspiration and knowledge.

His love of cinema began as a child when he used to "ran to the movies to escape" from his bad neighbourhood he expressed in an interview with Film.Media.Music.<sup>5</sup> Carpenter has been quoted to love the Western genre in several interviews. He has expressed his admiration for Alfred Hitchcock and how his films have been of significant influence on him. Looking further into Carpenter it is evident previous work inspired him, such as *Pyscho* and *The Exorcist*. This relates back to the history of violence in film and how 'In 1960 Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* played a monumental role in the development of cinema's violent imagination.'<sup>6</sup>

Carpenter has spent years in the industry with an array of careers from director to composer and screenplay writer to actor. He started composing scores to add to his student films and began enjoying the process.<sup>7</sup>

Carpenter tries to gain full creative control over the final cut of his films, which he learned early in college. "Creative control is the essence of having the ability to make your own movie, and not someone else's."<sup>8</sup> This shows how important it is for him to make his mark on each film he creates, which is also clear in the title of several of his movies, which include his full name.

### Themes, Genre & Plot

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<sup>5</sup> John Carpenter Interview, Kaya Savas, Film.Media.Music, Youtube, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Carter, Cynthia, and C. Kay Weaver, pg. 52.

<sup>7</sup> John Carpenter Interview, Kaya Savas, Film.Media.Music, Youtube, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> John Carpenter Interview, Kaya Savas, Film.Media.Music, Youtube, 2018.

The portrayal of violence throughout the different genres in film is a key element in this writing. In terms of Carpenter, it is impertinent to discuss the horror genre and more specific the slasher genre. Graphic films have become more abundant and popular throughout the years, this can be seen by the creation of the slasher genre, a sub-genre of horror. Carpenter has been named one of the founders of this sub-genre with his film *Halloween*. In *Violence and the Media*, the history of violence is explained that 'Filmgoers' considerable readiness to watch cinema's increasingly graphic and, in the case of the horror genre, grotesque and gratuitous displays of violence in the 1970s and 1980s' which shows why Carpenter's work in the horror genre had such a fanbase.<sup>9</sup>

Donovan compares the use of violence in genres, in particular action versus horror. His writing is compressed of a collection of interview responses from film goers discussing the topic and their opinions. When referring to horror films one interviewee remarked that 'the violence is enjoyable because it creates a feeling of pleasurable suspense, tension, and excitement'.<sup>10</sup> This avid horror fan continues by explaining the violence caused by the serial killers in these slasher films are 'the stars of the films'.<sup>11</sup> This poses an interesting question into the glorification of violence in media, and what is the true purpose of using violence in film?

## Soundtrack

John Carpenter scored the film with a piano melody with a synthesiser base. The score for *Halloween* is one of the most recognisable scores in film history. An ominous and chilling sound created by the piano to add to the moments of suspense and terror throughout the film. The score is replayed every time the killer, Michael Myers, enters the scene. With the use of this repetition, it signals danger to the audience and creates a sense of fear around the score. The ending of *Halloween* is accompanied by a harrowing sound of heavy breathing from the killer, making it known to the audience that he is an unstoppable force.

*The Thing* was mainly composed by Ennio Morricone, as Carpenter wanted a European musical approach to the soundtrack. However, Carpenter created some bridge music which were mostly tonal and synthesised sounds so he could add them to the moments of tension in the film. The soundtrack is a combination of these two composers which has resulted in an unsettling and eerie composition which is very fitting for this film.

## Cinematography & Lighting

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<sup>9</sup> Carter, Cynthia, and C. Kay Weaver. Pg.59.

<sup>10</sup>Donovan, Barna William. Blood, Guns, and Testosterone. Action Films, Audiences, and a Thirst for Violence. Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010.

<sup>11</sup>Donovan, p. 213

The camera work and lighting used in *Halloween* is used to its advantage. Dark backgrounds and minimal light are seen usually illuminating from natural sources like streetlamps or electrical items visual in scene. There are very few artificial lighting fixtures used, which could have resulted from the low budget. These circumstances have been used to their advantage, as the killer often surprises his victims by waiting in these dark spots. It is more believable and realistic to offscreen to have less lighting in the night-time, but in film can lead to poor scene quality.

The director uses different shots for the several death scenes. The opening scene is shot as a point of view of the killer walking into the house. After the killer gets up the stairs the camera is now behind a mask and the audience witnesses the first killing in the killer's point of view.

The creature designs heavily influenced all the camera shots and lighting in *The Thing*. These creatures were designed by Rob Bottin. Each shot of the creatures was planned and executed in advance to show the creatures in the most flattering lighting and get the best shots. They tried to minimize the shots of the creature as they were afraid of the censorship, which is a great telling of how disturbing the designs were. The set for the film was painted with all neutral colours to give it a dismal atmosphere in stark contrast to the saturation of the creatures and the light of the pyro techniques used in the film.

John Carpenter has been coined as the creator of the cliché 'cheap scare' used countless times in the horror genre. This involves the antagonist popping on and off screen quickly with a burst of loud music. This technique can be seen in *Halloween* as the antagonist, Michael Myers, appears on and off screen creating an unease in the audience watching as it scares them.

## Special Effects

Jim Kendrick argues about the meaning of violence when referring to film. Kendrick refers to an interesting topic about films are violent, with minimal physical violence shown on screen. Films such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* avoid showing direct violence, however there were connotations to violence such as the graphic dismembered corpses of the characters after death. This is a classical Hollywood move of off-screen deaths but does not make the film any less violence, which results in concluding that violence is a perception in film and not always just the visual of physical harm.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kendrick, James. *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre*. Wallflower, 2009. p.7.

The special effects or makeup effects used in *Halloween* are evidence of its low budget, but do not affect the overall horror of the story. Carpenter used smart camera shots to hide any discrepancies to the special effects. The first death is seen through a mask and cleverly covers the area of the victim's body being stabbed by a knife until the victim falls to the ground when the audience sees her covered in fake blood. (Fig. 1.)



Fig. 1. -Film Still, *Halloween*, John Carpenter, Compass International Pictures, 1978.

The killing of the three teenagers by strangulation, which the audience gets a direct view of The killer shows his strength in these scenes and even picks up Bob while straggling him with one arm before stabbing him leaving his hanging mid air dead (Fig 2&3). Sound is used more to convey the violence in these scenes and there little blood seen because the lighting is so dark.

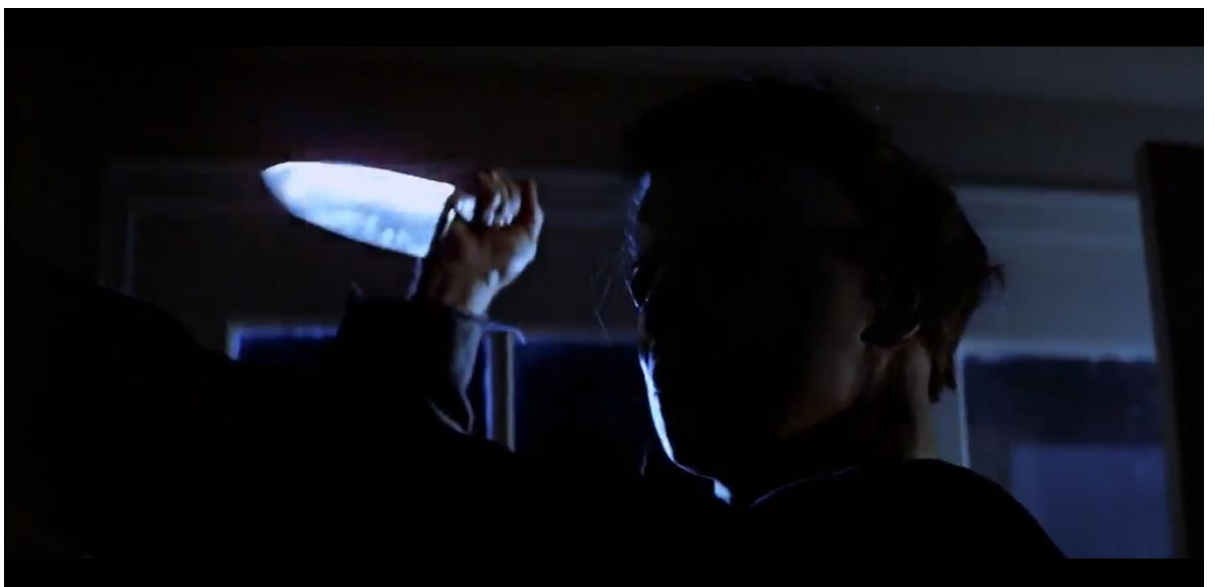


Figure 2: Film Still, *Halloween*, John Carpenter, Compass International Pictures, 1978.





Figure 3: *Film Still, Halloween, John Carpenter, Compass International Pictures, 1978.*

Bottin's creature designs in *The Thing* were of great controversy and Carpenter questioned some of his ideas stating they were "too weird" but in the end trusted Bottin's process as he didn't want just "a guy in a suit".<sup>13</sup> The creature violently transforms throughout the film, leaving the audience disturbed. They spent 1.5 million dollars on creature effects throughout the production. A series of different methods were used to convey these violent scenes. Hand puppets, reverse video for the tentacles spewing out of 'the dog thing', prosthetics and many food items like mayonnaise, creamed corn, melted bubble gum and jelly were all used in creating violence and gore. Bottin tried to introduce more colour and reduce the amount of fake blood into his designs to make them less grotesque. His "appalling creativity" made the film memorable and a real showcase for special effects in film.



Figure 4: *Behind the Scenes, The Thing, John Carpenter, The Truman – Foster Company, 1982.*

<sup>13</sup> John Carpenter Interview, Kaya Savas, Film.Media.Music, Youtube, 2018.

There are many violent scenes throughout the films apart from the creatures' transformations. Guns and fire are used throughout the film, but tiny amounts of fake blood are used in these scenes.

## **Chapter Review**

John Carpenter's stylisation of violence plays a unique role in the overall response to his work. He creates tension, shock, and horror for his audience with the use of violence. The purpose of violence throughout his films is to invoke such responses from his audience as he creates an experience which makes it a memorable occasion which people come back for. His older films still resonate the same effect on viewers because of his film style with help from the different element of film making soundtrack, cinematography, and special effects. Similarly, to Kendrick writing, history and the development of film violence will be further explored through the decades of each directors' careers. As well as how stylisation and censorship have shaped the contemporary film industry influencing the stylisation of violence and how is it given a purpose by the director.

## **Chapter 2: Tim Burton**

## Chapter 2

### Introduction to Tim Burton

The next director being discussed is Tim Burton for his unique style in film. His style is gothic, dark, and often disturbing, which lays a hand in stylising the violence on screen. Burton's films are recognisable because 'he employs a number of recurring themes and motifs that create a cohesive and personal vision'.<sup>14</sup>

Whether it is a film or stop animation piece, there is a coherent theme seen throughout his work. Violence and gore often play a large role in the visuals and stylisation of Burton's films. This will be discussed through examples such as *Sleepy Hollow* and *Sweeney Todd*. What makes Tim Burton's style so different and memorable? To gauge this there will be research into the themes and plots, special effects and make-up and the lighting and cinematography.

Tim Burton was born in 1958. As a child, Tim Burton considered himself an outsider and has said to have always felt isolated in his gloomy bedroom. Like many others, he enjoyed using films as a means of escape from his home life. The classic monster movies of the 1930s is his favourite but there is also a strong reflection of early German Expressionism in his work too. The influence of German Expressionism can be seen in Burton's work. 'The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (1919) with its twisted sets, forced perspective backdrops and use of psychological realism over material realism sees reflection in a number of Burton's scenes.'<sup>15</sup> These visuals can be seen resembled in the sets of *Beetlejuice*.

Burton's started as an animator for Disney in the early 1980s and soon progressed to a director as his concept art was too gothic for Disney's aesthetic.

### Themes, Plot & Genre

Tim Burton's work has a lot of consistent themes such as death, resurrection, and societal outcasts. Odell describes 'his morbid themes' but refers to Burton's unique approach to such dark concepts:

'what makes Burton's work so unusual is that the use of such devices does not make for depressing viewing. It is another contradiction. His films deal with the sinister and macabre but somehow manage to be uplifting examples of entertainment.'<sup>16</sup>

His use of stylisation influences the macabre themes into theatrical visuals, heart-warming conclusions, and loveable misfit characters. Burton's use of violence is not always used as a

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<sup>14</sup> Odell, Colin. *Tim Burton*. Pocket Essentials, 2001. p.9.

<sup>15</sup> Odell, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Odell, p.9

graphic visual but also to explore themes of death if not create a better understanding of such morbid topics for the viewers.

When looking at genre in Burton's work, much like Carpenter's work with horror/action it differs from the superhero or spy action films as violence in the 'action genre is a metaphorical means to an end that will help solve the philosophical challenge each film presents. The violence in the action films is a symbolic struggle, a noble, righteous anger focused at injustice.'<sup>17</sup> This heroic use of violence is less graphic when compared to the works of Carpenter, Burton, and Quentin Tarantino, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Soundtrack

Sound plays an important role in Burton's film, much like Carpenter's work they help to create the atmosphere and tension. Marić explores this element of filmmaking in relation to film style. Here she refers to the work of Coulthard:

'the music scores in films usually do, which is "guiding viewer response, cuing narrative significance, encouraging, and shaping affective and identificatory engagement, providing rhythm and temporal and spatial unity, and tying music to characters' thoughts and actions" (Coulthard, 2009).'<sup>18</sup>

As Coulthard mentions, the purpose of sound is a method used to help guide the audience or create a certain response of which the director seeks.

Danny Elfman is one of the main composers that Tim Burton hires for his films. The consistent use of this composer's work creates a distinct atmosphere seen throughout Burton's work. Odell describes Elfman's music as 'distinctive music [that] perfectly complements the images on screen - be they manic, ethereal or haunting. His rhythms can be full of purpose or incredibly complex and his melodies eminently memorable.'<sup>19</sup> The addition of Elfman's music plays a key role in Burton's film style. There is also an element of fun whilst also a way of telling the story in a very theatrical way with many of Burton's films including musical numbers. This can be seen in *The Corpse Bride* with the song sung by skeleton's called *Remains of the Day* and the very famous *This is Halloween* in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, both composed by Danny Elfman. These songs continue with the macabre theme and visuals but remain child friendly and fun. On the other hand, *Sweeney Todd* is an entire musical filled with stylised violence, romanticized with its musical numbers.

## Cinematography & Lighting

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<sup>17</sup>Donovan, p.213

<sup>18</sup>Marić, Luka. Characteristics of Quentin Tarantino's Style; Karakteristike Stila Quentina Tarantina. 2017. P.2

<sup>19</sup> Odell, p.7

### Opening Credit Scenes

Opening credits are important in Tim Burton's eyes as he feels they can show the themes and symbolisms of the plot, as well as building the world and atmosphere around the story from the very beginning. This can be seen in several on his films.

### The Use of Colour

Burton uses colour to show 'to indicate extremities of scale' in characters and settings which is 'similarly reflected in the colour schemes'<sup>20</sup>. This element can be seen throughout several films.

There is an emphasis on violence in *Sweeney Todd* as the barber sings to his barber knives. Using lighting highlights the metal of the blades and they shine bright compared to the dark, dismal background. It glorifies the tools, making it symbolic even before the murdering begins. (Fig. 5.)



Figure 5: Film Still, *Sweeney Todd*, Tim Burton, The Zanuck Company, 2007.

### **Animation & Character Design**

The use of animation allows more macabre imagery and violence while being able to remain child friendly and fun. 'His films deal with the sinister and macabre but somehow manage to be uplifting examples of entertainment.'<sup>21</sup> It is important to note this balance of in Burton's work as it influences how violence is stylised throughout his films.

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<sup>20</sup> Odell, p. 201.

<sup>21</sup> Odell, p. 9

Burton is often credited for the story and character designs of his films. He has created most of the wonderful and quirky character's seen in his work. The director often goes back to his roots by sketching and drawing in his own unique style of art. His concept art displays his passion for character creations, which heavily influences the final design seen on screen. For example, his two drawings of the re-imaged Willy Wonka and his own character Edward Scissorhands, both compared to their final on-screen rendition. We can see how much influence Burton's design has on the final costume. Here, Edward Scissorhands design is tall and frail but dressed in aggressive leather clothing. (Fig.7.) The final film look shows these traits and attributes as Edward shows softness and innocence in his face while his clothing and scissor-hands appear threatening. (Fig.6.) Burton's character designs rely heavily on the makeup department to convey his fantastical shaped character's into wearable designs for actors and harness the emotional depth of the character.

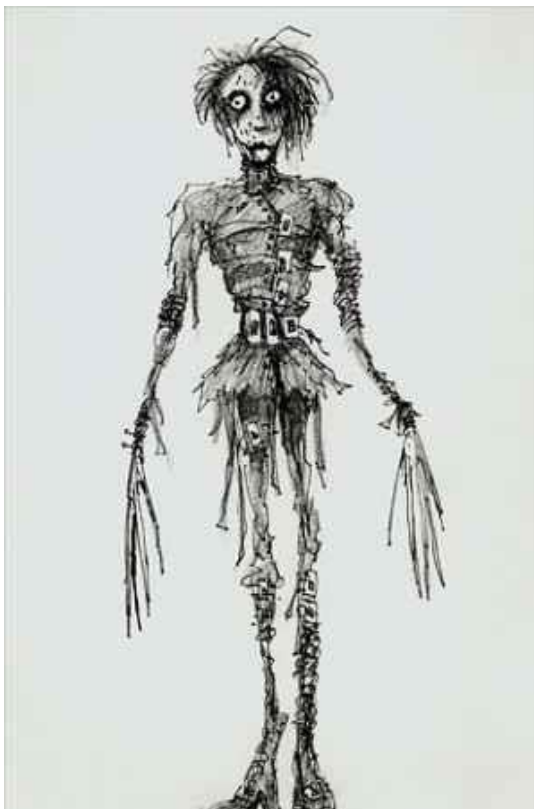


Figure 7: Concept Art, Edward Scissorhands, Tim Burton, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1990.



Figure 6: Film Still, Edward Scissorhands, Tim Burton, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1990.

## Special Effects

The use of special effects creates the gore and violence we see on screen. Audiences fascination and consumption of graphic content could be considered a tradition. 'It could then be said that in these terms film violence continues to serve viewers' fascination for 'unbeautiful' and

repulsive sights just as much today as Gunning (1994) argues it did over 100 years ago.<sup>22</sup> Before films, crowds would gather in streets to watch hangings as entertainment. Luckily, in the present day the audience can experience violence without the reality through film. Burton does not shy away from stylising these scenes of violence by using bright red blood or overly exaggerated artery sprays highlighting, 'the attraction of period horror films produced by Hammer' is 'clear'.<sup>23</sup> These methods and similarities can be seen in such films as *Sleepy Hollow* and *Sweeney Todd* and are used to stylise violence.

Hammer Films, or hammer horror as it is often referred to, has had an immense influence on Burton. *Sleepy Hollow* is a great example of showing Burton's admiration for the genre, as he is quoted to have said, "It felt good... to feel like you're making a Hammer horror film".<sup>24</sup> *Sleepy Hollow* is filled with gore and violent scenes showing bright red blood, violent transformations of the headless horseman and exaggeration. The flashback scene of Ichabod's mother's gruesome death where 'The iron maiden slowly opens and out flops his mother, gushing oceans of blood. In post-production Burton decided that the scene seriously lacked gore and extensive CGI work was required to add the missing viscera.'<sup>25</sup> (Fig 8) The outcome of this scene is horrifying, much like the flood of blood in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. It is a hyperbole meaning to shock the audience.

Figure 8: Film Still, *Sleepy Hollow*, Tim Burton, Paramount Pictures, 1999.



<sup>22</sup> Carter, Cynthia, and C. Kay Weaver, p.68

<sup>23</sup> Odell, p.9

<sup>24</sup> "Tim Burton." Hutchinson's Biography Database, July 2011, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Odell, Colin. Tim Burton, Pocket Essentials, 2001.



The violent scenes in *Sweeney Todd* were stylised using blood. The opening credit sequence of *Sweeney Todd* subtly shadows the plot of the film with violent visual imagery of bright red blood. (Fig.9.)



Figure 9: *Film Still, Sweeney Todd, Tim Burton, The Zanuck Company, 2007.*

It is foreboding of the violence about to ensue and sets the tone for the film. The contrast of the bright red blood against the dark background mimics the stylisation seen throughout the violent scenes of murder by Sweeney Todd. This stark contrast highlights the blood, this method is often seen in Hammer Horror, which Burton hails a lot of his horror influence from. During the scenes where the barber kills his victims, he slashes their throats which is followed by gushing red blood almost resembling a water hose with its velocity. This exaggerated use of blood is not realist but stylised to add to the gothic fantasy theme of the plot. (Fig.10.)



Figure 10: *Film Still, Sweeney Todd, Tim Burton, The Zanuck Company, 2007.*

## Chapter Review

Burton's unique style translates into how violence is stylised in his films. Using dark themes, he can add gore but with the use of lighting, editing and practical effects. However sinister the theme of the plot is, it still results in a unique, uplifting, and entertaining film. Burton's use of violence adds to the plot but does not remove the fun theatrical nature of his misfit characters or quirky musical numbers. Both Burton and Carpenter use violence to design an experience for their audience to react, admire, fear, and excite them. It is evident to note that 'how any one film portrayal of violence is intricately bound to the specific social and cultural conditions of its production and reception'.<sup>26</sup> Consideration for how the use of film style, the purpose of violence and the context around the violent scenes in film can help in understanding the stylisation of violence in film.

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<sup>26</sup> Carter, Cynthia and Weaver, P.43

## **Chapter 3: Quentin Tarantino**

## Chapter 3

### Introduction to Quentin Tarantino

In this chapter, Quentin Tarantino's films will be discussed and analysed on how he stylises violence throughout his films. This topic will be explored in a similar method as the previous two chapters by analysing the different elements of film making including screenplay, soundtrack, special effects and directing styles. An in-depth look into scenes will help to further understand the display of violence and style in Tarantino's work.

Quentin Tarantino is known to make violent films however he adds stylisation to this violence. He styles scenes with the use of interesting screenplay, exaggerated violence, and distinct camera techniques. Although he is a film violence enthusiast, he distinctively separates film violence and real-life violence. He has stated that he 'get a big kick out of violence in movies and can enjoy violence in movies but find it totally abhorrent in real life'.<sup>27</sup> This is important to note in understanding how the director aims to use violence in their work.

Tarantino's directing career started in the 1990s with his film *Reservoir Dogs*. There is a lot to compare between the three directors whose careers all started a decade after one another. According to *Violence and the Media* authors 'in the 1990s these fears focused on violent movies that many saw it as celebrating violence against cherished social institutions such as the family, law enforcement agencies, and even the news media'.<sup>28</sup> Tarantino's work is a great example of this new development of violence in film in the 1990s.

Marić Luca explores this concept of film style in her thesis *Characteristics of Quentin Tarantino's Style*. She discusses how Tarantino is both a postmodern and independent filmmaker and how this has influenced his directing style. Postmodernist films usually sway from the normal path of film, much like the postmodern art form it aims to be less 'normal' with its visuals and story. Similarly, independent filmmaking has left Tarantino with more freedom to express his own style in his work.<sup>29</sup> Throughout this chapter, will be a discussion on how Tarantino's film step outside the conventional film box and how this has helped shape his style of filmmaking and the violence on screen.

### Themes, Plot & Genre

As previously discussed, themes, plot and genre play a key role in stylising the violence we see on screen. These elements impact the end visuals and the audience response to violence in such

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<sup>27</sup> Marić, Luka. *Characteristics of Quentin Tarantino's Style*; *Karakteristike Stila Quentina Tarantina*. 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Carter, Cynthia, and C. Kay Weaver, p.66

<sup>29</sup> Marić, p.6

films. Tarantino writes unconventional stories that go against our expectations as an audience. He surprises, confuses, and makes his audience question the plot. This level of uncertainty throughout his films makes it engaging and exciting to watch the unknown unravel in front of you. Reoccurring genres of film such as western, comedy and crime are seen time and time again in Tarantino films allow him to write the script with a heavy amount of violence.

Revenge, a theme repeatedly used by Tarantino in his films. However, cliché amount the plot of revenge Tarantino makes it his own by flipping it on its head. Giroux discusses the difference between symbolic violence and hyper real violence. Symbolic violence can be seen in Spielberg's *Schindler's List* as this violence is a representation of the cruel history of the Holocaust. This use of violence has its meaning, and there is a reason to show it. On the other hand, Giroux discusses hyper-realistic violence while using Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* as his examples.<sup>30</sup> However, in relating back to revenge the plots of *Inglorious Basterds* and *Django Unchained* could be both symbolic and hyper-realistic violence. These stories are based loosely on historic events but having said they are a more idealised outcome of the past. *Inglorious Basterds* follows Jewish-Americans getting revenge on the Nazis and thus ending the world early, moreover, *Django Unchained* shows a former slave get successful revenge on his oppressors. As Lipszyc describes it, Tarantino 'juxtaposes the standardized violence of movie killing with the unassimilable crime of slavery'.<sup>31</sup> Both stories create a sense of enjoyment for the audience as the people we see as evil, Nazis or slave owners, get the end we think they deserve and furthermore handed to them by the little guy.

Lipszyc also adds 'the hyperbolic revenge at the end of the movie sufficiently goes to show that this is also a film about films'.<sup>32</sup> Tarantino uses violence to show the power of cinema, a way of imagining the past in a new light, a journey of revenge or a villain getting the demise we wished had occurred in real life. The stylisation of violence has a purpose that differs from director to director.

### Screenplay

Some may consider the dialogue by Tarantino as overkill and can be overstretched or referred to as 'over-boiled' by Giroux.<sup>33</sup> However, these seemingly meaningless 'silly conversations or surprisingly down-to-earth, everyday life events or solutions' between characters aids in

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<sup>30</sup> Giroux, Henry A. "Racism and the Aesthetic of Hyper-Real Violence: Pulp Fiction and Other Visual Tragedies." *Social Identities*, vol. 1, no. Aug. 1995, p. 333.

<sup>31</sup> Adam Lipszyc. *Affect Unchained: Violence, Voyeurism and Affection in the Art of Quentin Tarantino*, Eidos, Volume 4, No.2, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Lipszyc, p. 135

<sup>33</sup> Giroux, p. 333.

building the audiences' understanding of that character and their relationships with others.<sup>34</sup> Many of the heavy dialogue scenes Tarantino makes creates an uneasy tension for minutes at a time. The audience can never be sure when all hell will break loose and the violence begins. More character development can lead the violent scene to have more meaning or 'a moral conclusion' as the audience will begin rooting for a certain side or feel more emotions at a loss of life or as revenge is served.<sup>35</sup>

The opening scene of *Reservoir Dogs* was set in a diner with the group of characters casually discussing Madonna's song *Like a Virgin* and this is followed by an argument as one of the men refuse to tip the waitress. If this scene were in a more conventional film, it would be edited down or even cut for its lack of relevance to the plot, but not in a Tarantino film. The dialogue helps the audience get a gage for the characters. Tarantino's character makes sexist remarks while discussing the pop song and does not want to tip and argues until he is forced to give in by the character paying for their meal. His use of dialogue builds character and relationship making, which 'blurs the line between tenderness and violence' further into the plot when violence is shown involving the characters.<sup>36</sup>

Other director's like Carpenter and Burton often rarely on dialogue but more so the action being played out. The dialogue is used to directly progress the plot or add the emotion to a scene. Tarantino's dialogue can often be irrelevant and take up a considerable amount of screen time. However, it can be 'very moving and profound in its morality and its human interaction'.<sup>37</sup> Carpenter's and Burton's work rarely contains heavy dialogue scenes with no action or change of pace.

## Cinematography & Lighting

Cinematography, lighting, editing, and shooting are all influenced by the director's vision for their film and overall style. Tarantino uses these elements of filmmaking to express his stylisation of violence by making it a focus in his work.

Tarantino uses several different shot choices, some more uncommon than others. Like John Carpenter, he uses a lot of tracking shots following the character from behind like in *Halloween* or Tarantino's *Kill Bill*. However, his use of 360 degrees shots, corpse's point of view, extreme close-ups and bird eye views differs to Carpenter's work. The POV shot is often seen in Tim

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<sup>34</sup> Lipszyc, p. 133

<sup>35</sup> Brintnall, Kent L. *Tarantino's Incarnational Theology: 'Reservoir Dogs,' Crucifixions and Spectacular Violence*. *Cross Currents*, vol. 54, no. 1, Spring 2004, pp. 66–75.

<sup>36</sup> Brintnall, p.69

<sup>37</sup> Brintnall, p.69

Burton's work, especially in *Edward Scissorhands* but what differs is how Tarantino uses it to show a corpse's POV for example in *Pulp Fiction*.

Tarantino often uses pastiche in his films, which creates a nostalgic feel for his audience. It is also 'common feature of postmodern films'.<sup>38</sup> As Marić describes it, pastiche is the imitation of someone else's style and can often be seen used in film. Imitating scenes from past films can be a way to pay homage to classic films or a way to achieve the same visual quality to your own work. Tarantino describes it simply as "taking what you like that already existed and putting it into your own work".<sup>39</sup> The visuals of *Samurai Fiction* can be seen mirrored in *Kill Bill* with the starkly saturated background contrasting the silhouettes. (Fig. 11). Pastiche can be used in any scene, but Tarantino has imitated this style during a scene of violence.



Figure 11.- 'Samurai Fiction' Scene vs. 'Kill Bill' Scene

Censorship has influenced all directors' final products, which can be seen in both Carpenter's and Burton's work. In *Kill Bill* the use of black and white in the final fight scene was both a way around censorship and a stylistic choice for the visuals of this violent scene.

## Special Effects & Soundtrack

The visual aspect of stylising violence heavily relies on special effects, as mentioned in the first two chapters. Tarantino's work is no different in its reliance on special effects to deliver his vision on to screen. His hyperbole of violence and colour is an essential in his stylisation of

<sup>38</sup>Marić, p.16

<sup>39</sup> DrSalvadoctopus, *Quentin Tarantino on Making Movies*, Youtube, 2013.

violent scenes. Even though he refers to the use of violence as ‘good cinema’ there is clearly a purpose to his stylisation of it.<sup>40</sup>

Exaggeration and contrast are techniques often used by directors as a stylised choice as discussed in the second chapter of this text on Tim Burton. Tarantino uses colour contrast for costume design, props and practical effects which makes each item stand out amongst the rest of the scene and adds to character personality or growth.

Blood is very exaggerated in Tarantino’s work during the violent scenes. Similarly, the hyperbole use of blood by Burton, which was inspired by the Hammer Films that was discussed in the previous chapter. The blood is a vivid red and purposely made to be unrealistic. It can be seen throughout his films such as *Kill Bill* after the protagonist slaughters a room full of ‘bad guys’. (Fig. 12)



Figure 12 : Film Still, *Kill Bill*, Quentin Tarantino, *A Band Apart*, 2003.

This sudden exaggeration adds to the shock value of Tarantino’s work. He creates an experience and makes the audience react to the stylisation of violence. The use of ‘extreme scenes of violence’ can be ‘ironic’ or ‘humorous’.<sup>41</sup> It is a method of making entertaining whilst being self-aware of the extremities and somewhat ludicrous visuals being produced. This idea can also be said for Tarantino’s use of music throughout his work.

Music can affect the audience’s feelings throughout a film and impact how they react to more shocking or violent scenes. Sometimes, the soundtrack can detract from the violence on screen and make the scene seem more playful than gory. Tarantino holds great testament to this idea, as he often is seen balancing out horrific bloody scene with obnoxious songs. He adds music to violent scenes to stylised it, however it is sometimes overpowering or too loud for a scene.

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<sup>40</sup>Marić, p.20

<sup>41</sup>Marić, p.21



Tarantino's use of music differs to that of John Carpenter and Tim Burton. Carpenter and Burton both use music to add emotion or atmosphere to their scenes. Tarantino often uses mainstream songs in his films, creating a more realist like radio background rather than a tension building synthesized sound like Carpenter's work or a fantastical melody from Danny Elfman, Tim Burton's main composer.

## **Chapter Review**

The stylisation of violence is prevalent in Quentin Tarantino's work, which is an example of how the different elements of filmmaking, be it screenplay or special effects, they all play a role in the overall stylising of violent scenes. Tarantino's hyperbole of violence with bloods mirrors that of Tim Burton work. His use of screenplay reflects similar tension and unease as seen in John Carpenter's work. This element of unconventional film making influenced by postmodernism and independent filmmaking that Tarantino is known for creates his own style for violence easily recognisable by his audience. 'Tarantino also wants to emphasize the power of cinema, literally turning it into a weapon in one of the scenes.'<sup>42</sup> This is how the director has made stylised violence into a key element of his own film style, as well as a distinctive purpose in film making.

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<sup>42</sup> Marić, p.19

## **Conclusion**

## Conclusion

This thesis discussed how directors play a hand in how violence is depicted in their films. Following this writing it can be concluded that the stylisation of violence in film is heavily influenced by the directors in charge of the work. Stylising violence can create a unique visual for films and a recognisable form of expression related to the director of the work. It also helps in separating what is real and what is cinema. Distancing displays of violence from reality can make the audience enjoy the theatrics more. 'Violence, like every other quality, must have a thematic purpose within the plan of the movie if it is to be useful or meaningful'.<sup>43</sup> The idea of using stylised violence purposefully was explored through three directors.

This writing was formed with the use of three chapters exploring separate directors and how their work depicts violence on screen. By exploring and analysing the directors' work it can be concluded that several elements of the filmmaking process are needed to create a film style. What more, with the stylisation of violence it is imperative to add unique elements to individualise a director's vision. Creators in the film industry must learn about branching out into different styles or following a certain film style under their director's vision. Knowing more about how different elements of filmmaking can affect the visual outcome of props or models is an invaluable resource for makers. Informing the design process is key to the overall final look of a project on screen.

The creators of the creatures in John Carpenter's *The Thing* focused on how lighting would affect the visuals and its importance to the film. From this example, there is more understanding gathered around the effects of lighting and cinematography's influences on the final capture of practical effects or models. This importance is furthermore seconded using lighting on sharp metal objects as seen in *Sweeney Todd* and *Halloween*. Using lighting made these objects into symbols of death for the violence about to follow.

Throughout the three chapters in this thesis, was a focus on how several directors stylise violence in their films. It was achieved with a coherent structure set for the chapters, each discussing the different elements of film as subheadings and how this effected the overall outcome of violence on screen. The subheadings used such as themes, special effects, soundtrack, and screenplay played a crucial role in breaking down how style is formed in film, allowing a critical analysis of each director's work. Among these subheadings was the accompaniment of in-depth scene analyses to further examine each element of filmmaking by these directors.

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<sup>43</sup> Allen, Brooke. *Blood and Gore*. Hudson Review, vol. 72, no. 4, Winter 2020, p. 620

Another area of interest throughout this thesis is the purpose and effect of stylised violence in film. From discussing 'spectacularized violence' in the film industry its clear there is a concern about the negative effects it can have on the audience but as it is put in *Violence and the Media* it 'simultaneously [encourages] consideration of the morality of violent acts'.<sup>44</sup> The use of violence by directors differs, and it requires further understanding and revision to see the purpose of violence in each case.

In chapter one, there was an analysis done on the work of John Carpenter. There was a deep dive into his influence on horror films and the slasher sub-genre and where he was influenced in his earlier years. Carpenter's use of lighting and cinematography in his work, and how this created more suspense and dread in the audience, particularly through films such as *Halloween* was discussed. Carpenter also used lighting and shots to mask or hid some violence away from viewers, but this reduction of violence did not impede the audience's fear. The special effects team who has worked with him on his visions were also mentioned and resulted in a wider understanding of how lighting and shots are taken of physical models. This was brought up while researching *The Thing* and Rob Bottin, the head creator, was made to saturate the colour of the creatures and reduce their screen time for fear of censorship.

This then led into the second chapter about Tim Burton. Similarly, to the first chapter an investigation into the influences of Burton's style and this concluded in a talk about German Expressionism and Hammer Film Productions with several examples drawn from stills of Burton's films. Character creation by Tim Burton is discussed leading into talks about exaggeration and colour. Exaggeration and theatrics are used to display violence and adding to that the quirky characters make the scenes less serious and distancing itself from reality.

Finishing with the last chapter featuring Quentin Tarantino, it explores the influence of postmodernism and independent film making on his approaching to film making. It has led him to be more expressive and experimental, with shots and heavy dialogue scenes. Furthering from the norm, Tarantino can be seen exaggerating violence with extreme sprays of blood and everyday songs. Discussing reoccurring genres and themes used by the director have shown another consistency in his style which the audience can recognise and know what kind of film to expect. However, there is always a layer of uncertainty about unfolding events in Tarantino's work, which draws in viewers, as well as the use of pastiche, which adds a nostalgic feel but twisted on its head. The use of 'the hyperbolic violence, the purposely trivial conversations and the more or less seductive sentimentality into the realm where films are not about anything in particular, but they are to do something'.<sup>45</sup> Here, Lipszyc sums up Tarantino's work and the

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<sup>44</sup> Carter, Cynthia, and C. Kay Weaver. P.62

<sup>45</sup> Lipszyc, p. 133

experience he brings to his audience, including how Tarantino's stylisation of film and his use of violence has a meaning and a purpose.

A director who is heavily involved throughout the filmmaking process holds great responsibility in the overall film style. This is evident in all three of the directors that were discussed. John Carpenter played a hand in both composing and the screenplay for several of his films. Tim Burton influenced the visuals with his character creations. Finally, Quentin Tarantino centred his stories around his own written dialogue. Not only does this involvement create a coherent amount of work, but it also adds an individual style of film to each director, thus in the cases of these three directors stylising the violence shown.

Stylisation of violence functions as entertainment to film goers and gives them an immersive experience, but the hyperbole of violence creates a distant between what is real and what is cinema. Stylised violence creates a more expressive visual and brings greater entertainment for the audience. However, in the words of Carter, Cynthia, and Weaver, 'Cinematic depictions of violence cannot be considered simply as entertainment' and that 'film representations of violence are intrinsically connected to the social, cultural, economic and institutional ideologies of their production and reception'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Carter, Cynthia, and C. Kay Weaver. P.69

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