

At the Limit: Violence and Contemporary Representation
Guidelines for Final Paper, p. 1

Eugenie Brinkema

What is New This Time:

- Papers should be 8-10 pages long.
- You must write about more than one text; this is a comparative paper.
- You will have the option of designing your own topic (more below).

What Stays the Same:

- The paper should be in 12-point font, double-spaced, Times New Roman or Times font.
- You should rewatch the films about which you write—all are available in the Film Office.
- Feel free to come to my office hours or make an appointment to talk. You can always email me your thesis for feedback. If you have any questions about your earlier papers, please just ask.

NOTE:

Your final paper for this class should be a summation of your investment in the course material and, therefore, needs to grow out of the work we've done on violence in contemporary literature and film. This paper is an opportunity to take all of our course material, work with it, but also go beyond it and connect it to your specific intellectual interests. For those of you who have wanted to explore tangents and related theoretical issues in your shorter papers, this is the chance to write that longer, more complex, more nuanced paper.

In general, I want you to engage with as many films and theoretical issues as possible this semester, so your films and readings for this paper should be ones on which you have not yet written. Thus, the period of texts for this paper is the material from week ten to fourteen (TV/Celebrity; Postmodern Graphic; Regarding the Pain of Others; We are what we watch?). With prior permission, you can write on other texts so long as you didn't write on them earlier—if you didn't write about *Henry* and are desperate to connect it to *Man Bites Dog*, we can talk about that, but overall these papers should be engaging with the problems of (re)mediation, the graphic, style, pain, trauma, reflexivity, criticism, etc. from the last third of the course.

II. Topics for Final Paper:

1. **Pain.** Consider either Scarry's epistemology of pain or Sontag's ethics of regarding the pain of others, and read it in relation to one or two texts: *Reservoir Dogs*; *Oldboy*; *Funny Games*; and *Benny's Video* might all work especially well here. Articulate how you see your chosen theorist defining and accounting for images of pain: what kinds of problems emerge when talking about the pain of others? How do your chosen texts present or grapple with pain as a problem? Do

At the Limit: Violence and Contemporary Representation

Guidelines for Final Paper, p. 2

they concur with your theorist, or argue for another relation to pain? How do the texts represent the regarding of pain (in the text) and how does this relate to our spectatorial regarding of pain? Is there an aesthetic of regarding the pain of others? A politics? An ethics to it? What kinds of critical problems are present when dealing with representations of the pain of others? Does it demand a different approach, or a specific mode of critique? Is pain different from other things we can regard? What is the relationship between violence and pain? Do your texts bind those terms together or do they de-couple them?

2. Violence and Humor/Violence and Laughter. Choose two texts and consider the relationship between humor and violence in them. Consider the cartoonish; the absurd; gross-out humor; splatter; camp; parody. Or, you might focus on laughter more specifically and write an argument about its specific usage (or related forms: the smirk and wink in *Funny Games*; the laugh track in *Natural Born Killers*—that use of the word track is so very interesting; the absurd or surreal or ironic in *Man Bites Dog*, etc.)

Be specific in how you define your terms and how your films deploy the figure you define: how do the texts use humor, and how or where do they fail to use it? Is humor in the image? In the use of sound? In the narrative? In juxtaposition or incongruity? Is it in absurdity? Are there several or different modes of humor in your very violent texts? Do the texts change their approach or tone in regards to humor over the course of the text? (If so, what is the tipping point in which tone shifts?) What does the usage of humor in any form mean in a text that is about violence: is violence presented humorously, is humor presented violently? What does it mean for a text to juxtapose those two figures? What does it mean for spectatorship? What does it mean for criticism? Is humor a way of downplaying violence, or can it make violence more violent? What are the ethics of deploying humor in this way?

3. Violence, Looking, and Videotape(s). Consider and describe reflexive moments of videotaping or watching scenes of violence in two texts; make an argument about how these films use embedded screens or reflexive references to mediation as either an agent of violence or for a critique of violence; *and* make use of Bazin's argument about obscenity and death and time in formulating your argument (do you agree with him? do your films complicate his account? etc.). Consider *Man Bites Dog*; *Natural Born Killers*; *Funny Games*; *Benny's Video*; and/or *Tesis*.

Is there a logic to embedded scenes of videography; how is filming a victim linked diegetically to violence and/or how is showing us violence through embedded filming linked to a critique of violence? Does putting a diegetic frame around violence make the violence more violent, or more distant; does it increase the affective experience or mitigate it? Is watching violence (diegetically) pleasurable or unpleasurable? Are there ways of connecting our spectatorial work to these scenes of people watching terrible things? Are there ways of watching filmed violence that are more or less complicit with violence? How do different looks function in the texts you've chosen; are there looks that undo violence?

At the Limit: Violence and Contemporary Representation
Guidelines for Final Paper, p. 3

4. Noise. Water. Meat.

[EB: This is the title of a fantastic book about the uses of sound in contemporary art, each of these titular words being ways in which sound is generated in different practices... It obviously also has other resonances in the context of our course; I couldn't resist.]

Pick two texts and make an argument about their use of sound (including: voice, music, effects, noise, silence; but also: the muffled, the distinct, the loud, the whispering, the fragile, the painful, the hard and rhythmic, the lyrical and languid) and how that use of sound relates to violence. You'll want to make sure you have a grasp on some language for the analysis of sound (diegetic/extradiegetic; timbre; frequency; pitch; sound and/vs. image; on- vs. off-screen sound —talk to me if you're not sure), and you'll want to be clear on how the sonic as such (not words as they *mean*, but words as they sound) relates to violence. You might also consider a sonic figure such as laughter; the scream; breathing; gasping; suffocating; televisual or media noise; and read that figure in relation to violence. How does sound work in the text, and how does sound work on spectators? Does sound seem to have a privileged relationship to violence that is different from either language or the image's relationship? Why is that; what does that mean for thinking about violent texts?

5. Time and Duration. Pick two texts and think about the figure of time, temporality, and duration. Make an argument about how the texts deal with the problem of time: historical time; memorialized time; felt time (duration; boredom); the time of trauma; the time of grief; the time of shock; quick time; long time; familial time; the past; the present; the future; story vs. plot time; anachronies (narrative out of linear time); etc. Every paper will want to create an argument about the relationship between time and violence, and speculate in the conclusion on the significance of that argued-for relationship. This topic would work especially well for *Reservoir Dogs*; *Oldboy*; *Funny Games*; and/or *Benny's Video*.

Speculate on the broader relationship between time, duration and violence. How would the texts have been different with a different formal relationship to time and narrative? Do we experience violence *in* time, or as something that punctures or destroys or exists outside of time? Does time lessen violence or exacerbate it? Does time mitigate certain forms of violence, but amplify others? If you relate representations of time to felt/spectatorial time, what is that relationship? What is the time of spectatorship, and how does that relate to violence?

6. Form and Content. Choose any two or three texts and make an argument about the relationship between form (how the work is structured) and content (more on that in a moment). You'll want to identify and focus on key formal traits—don't just list them or move from trait to trait—and analyze how they appear, how they work across the text as a whole,

At the Limit: Violence and Contemporary Representation

Guidelines for Final Paper, p. 4

how they change or modify over the course of the work. This is an enormous topic, with lots of potential directions; formal traits might include: style; a certain use of editing; light; color; visual composition; repetition; hyperbole; overloading or exhaustion; voice; tone; surface relations; blankness (literal: whiteness; or metaphorical: emptiness); a relation to staging (of bodies; of representation).

Consider how form relates to what you take to be the content of the text. This may not be an easy and neat distinction. Make an argument about it: does form collude with violence or mitigate it? Is form how meaning is conveyed or is form the meaning of your work? (And if so, what does that in fact *mean*?)

7. Is it the case that we are what we _____?
document?
televise?
aestheticize?
stylize?
study?
watch?
critique?

Choose two texts and make an argument that *it is* or *is not* the case that we are what we _____. You can pick your own formulation from the above, or generate your own. Make an argument about how you see your chosen texts posing, exploring and either answering or suspending this question. Compare and contrast how each text deals with this formulation, and speculate on the significance of their relations or differences in how they address it. Every paper should address the significance of this formulation in the specific case of violent texts. Your conclusion should reflect on the significance of the fleshed-out formulation: what does it mean for that final figure (those who document; those who watch; those who study/critique)? What do we do with this formulation: does it teach us about violence? Does it demand a certain adoption or refraining from some activity or gesture? Does it require a new or different method of critique or thinking or writing (about violence)?

And, finally, you were waiting for it, right?

8. What is “violence”? No, really: what is it? Is it, in fact, a “what,” or is that ontological word the wrong figure to use? Is “violence” in another form: the who; the when; the where; the how? Can we only speak of *violences*? Is it something that resists definition? Something that changes depending on critical approaches? Choose at least two texts from the last half of our semester (though you could work on more if you wanted to create a taxonomy of types; we can talk about this) and analyze how they define, present, trouble, complicate, etc. “violence.” These texts can include films, novels, but also critical texts (Sontag, Scarry, etc.). Articulate

At the Limit: Violence and Contemporary Representation

Guidelines for Final Paper, p. 5

their definitions of violence (which you may have to extrapolate or argue for), and make a tight, coherent argument about how to think about “violence” in light of these offerings. Do you want to quibble with, disagree with, totally reject, these definitions?

You should offer or speculate on a positive definition of violence that encompasses the complexities of the term that you want to see... do any of your chosen texts get close to that definition? If “violence” is not definable, are there texts that suggest just that? Every paper should consider this: What does it mean for criticism to define “violence” or to be unable to define it? How does one begin to write about it, then?

***** OR, you can design your own topic in consultation with me—**

If you want to do this, go ahead and write it out as though it were a topic (you don't have to have quite as many sub-questions as I like to, but give it a term/concept/topic and generate a few questions that your topic will pose). You must meet with me to talk about a paper topic you design on your own so I can make sure it's a fitting scope. Plan on meeting with me at least a week before the paper is due; you can come to office hours or email to set up an appointment

Be sure to remember that this is designed to let you speak to your particular intellectual interests, but that doesn't mean choosing a final paper topic is a free for all. Your final paper must speak, in some way, to central issues that have come up in this class, and must be about violence in contemporary representation, even as you may want to problematize any of those terms. So, for example, “I want to write about the history of the MPAA regulations in the late 1960s and how *Bonnie and Clyde* changed the aesthetic representation of violence” **is not** a topic that sufficiently grows out of our class material, as it's outside of our historical era, and involves methods more appropriate to a film history course. However, “I want to write about the relationship between flat, quick, banal representations of violence and more elaborate, aestheticized, choreographed violence, focusing on three films from our class” **is** a viable topic.

If you want to put course material in dialogue with material that we haven't focused on in class, that's fine, but it will need to address at least one of our texts and be in dialogue with conceptual issues we have discussed. If, for example, you really wanted to write on “torture porn” and ultraviolent recent horror films, that's fine and we can make that possible as one of your texts, and a conceptual area like pain—but you would want to contextualize that discussion in relation to certain films we watched, such as *Funny Games*, and you would need to make reference to the readings we did on pain. In short, think about your paper topic this way: it should start with our course material, especially that of the last third of the course; it should engage films and readings we've looked at; and, if you then want to, you can go from there.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

CMS.840 / 21L.435 At the Limit: Violence in Contemporary Representation
Fall 2013

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.