

## Session Eleven Lecture Notes: Postmodern Graphic: Gore, Humor, Cartoons

Professor Eugenie Brinkema

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

Last week, on *Natural Born Killers* and *Man Bites Dog*, we talked about mediation and the media, but also remediation, immediacy, television, reality TV, liveness, media celebrity, and complicity. (This week, radio and the tv again key)

Continuation → *Natural Born Killers*, written by Tarantino, and this week, we watched his directorial debut from 1992: *Reservoir Dogs*.

NBK: Cartoonish / graphic novel as one of the forms... The cartoon poses the question of differentiation on the level of form and ethical and corporeal questions about the status of the body being done violence to.

We asked the questions: does documentation always lead to participation or collusion? What is the relationship between, and is there a crucial difference between being an observer and being a participant? What does it mean to profit from violence?

Today, we're still dealing with postmodern formal issues and issues of mediation, but this week our turn is towards **the cartoonish, the garish, gore, humor, and issues dealing with style.**

That's where I want to begin tonight – make a few comments on style; then coolness; then a few comments on the cartoonish.

### STYLE

**A way of thinking about today's class, asks: WHAT IS THE POINT OF VIOLENCE? (point as in style / inscription; point as in purpose...)**

Etymology style:

c.1300, stile, "designation, title, **manner or mode of expression**," from O.Fr. estile "a stake, pale," **from L. stilus "stake, instrument for writing, manner of writing, mode of expression**," from PIE \*sti-lo-, from base \*sti- "point, prick, pierce" (see stick (v.)). Spelling modified by influence of Gk. stylos "pillar." Meaning "mode or fashion of life" is from 1770.

(a) link to violence – point, prick, pierce (stylus; pin)

(b) instrument for writing (pointed one)

And, in case of *Oldboy* is a film in part about the pen as weapon, writing/recording/archiving as a form of violence (and, in addition, about things associated with pens, other types of tools: everything from scissors to hammers)

I asked you to keep in mind as you watched how you would describe the style of each film: its tone, rhythm, visual signature, trademarks, affect, mood, etc. Style is something closer to the "signature" or unique "look" of a text. Both films this week centered on words (lots of talking,

confessing, writing) – but also distinct visual styles (color, editing, sound) – how do words and style relate?

Keep in mind how violence is depicted: is blood just another word for red?

Is death banal, flat, unspectacular, or is death something visually marked as significant? Is death an opportunity for stylistic virtuosity: Violence as style (field of opportunity for music, dance, visual signature) – chance to show off choreography; camera movements; hipness/coolness; a certain relation to music or the movement of bodies or saturated color or breaking glass...

Violence as opportunity for choreography/movement of bodies in space/smashing glass/blood sprays/style

**What was the style of violence in these films? Reverse it: what is the violence of style itself?**  
Danger of stylized violence/aestheticization of violence

Ref in Oldboy “I don’t like the style” (haircut) – what does it mean to like or not like style? Can style make horrific things pleasurable? Consumable?

**-- Is this old fashioned or novel: new extreme, new brutality, OR old-fashioned sentimental (even classical: retelling of Oedipus Rex)...**  
**COOLNESS**

Consider a quote from Quentin Tarantino, “A movie doesn’t have to do everything. A movie just has to do a couple of things. If it does those things well and gives you a cool night at the movies, an emotion, that’s good enough.”

Tarantino invokes “cool” and “emotion” -- suggests that what the cinema is (or should be, or only need be) is something affective. This interest in *movies* that *move* you; violence also moves bodies (displaces them/throws them across space/but also, perhaps, moves us: disgusts us, arouses us, causes horror or empathy or even shame). Wants to orchestrate the language of film to do something forceful to the body of the spectator (for Tarantino, the diffusion is linked to that key word, “cool”). Wants to make us undergo something, want to make us feel something wild and new/affectively displace us, even perhaps do violence *to* us.

NB: Key phrase in Tarantino’s work: “Be Cool!” – cool, as in still, calm, affectless; cool as in style, mood, tone, disposition, hip. It’s as often an order from one character to another in a moment of extreme tension, where violence is about to or has just erupted (be cool!) and an order from Tarantino to his film style itself: Be Cool.

**CARTOONISH**

**Exaggeration/hyperbolization of idea of the cartoonish (graphic, explicit, gory): *Reservoir Dogs* and its unique, ironic, even playful relationship to violence; *Old Boy*, which is actually based on a work of Japanese manga.**

Cf *Oldboy* and *Reservoir Dogs* – violence vs gore  
black humor

Hawkins: “There is a great deal of violence in the film, but surprisingly little gore. As in Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1991), the most gruesome scenes actually take place off-screen. The visual suggestion that someone is using a claw hammer to forcibly extract teeth — and revenge — is enough alone to make many viewers look away . **Much of the violence that does take place on screen has a comic book quality that mitigates the effect.** (For example, an animated line appears on screen and seems to link Oh Dae-Su to a potential informant at the opening of one menacing moment. And there is a black-humor sequence about suicide that seems almost Monty Pythonesque in its abruptness. In addition, there are continual shifts in register (at one point she imagines herself on a subway train with an enormous ant) that work to occasionally blunt, or at least distract us from, the film’s humanistic message — that revenge is pointless.”)

These are often the violent films with which we’re most familiar (the mode of the cartoonish more broadly), but also perhaps should bother us the most because they are **open to charges of trivializing or stylizing violence** as just a **plastic element**, and death just one of many interesting kinetic things that can happen to a body.

**Cartoon Violence/Cartoon Physics.** An animator at Walt Disney Studios that said, "Animation follows the laws of physics... unless it's funnier otherwise."

In the world of cartoon physics, there are no hospital bills, no scars, no dismemberment, and, most importantly, no hangovers. You can die again and again and again; fall of endless cliffs.

**Death: instead of being instantaneous, unique, permanent – just one of many things that might happen to a body**

Cartoon physics came from era of **vaudeville**. Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, and Abbot and Costello are the progenitors of cartoon violence. Slapstick, people falling down, vaudeville – all about the comic potential in things that can happen to bodies, including violent things. No consequences.

Keep in mind:

Body as plastic: field of movement, things that can be dis-assembled and re-assembled.

Dis-memberment: dis-unity and fragmentability of the body.

Partial objects (teeth, nipple, ear, mouth)

Teeth/ear/body as plastic, something that can be taken apart

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>.