

Session Thirteen Lecture Notes: Is it the Case that We Are What We Watch?

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

Today: Last Class — asking: Is it the case that we are what we watch?

All semester, in various ways, we've been thinking about the problem of violence in relation to representation and representation's relationship to the real. Why does violence sometimes seem to function as the graphic imperative, the proof of the real, the stages so high as real-representaion/hyperreal seem to blur?

Representation is a presentation to the mind of an idea or an image; it's a rendering of something else, it symbolizes or stands in for something else (why representation can have a political and an aesthetic meaning). This was not a course in "real" violence as such, however, throughout the semester we've been deploying the problem of the "real" as it's negotiated and bound up with the represented; both we and our films have had a hard time strictly separating the two ontological categories – even though a distinction between the two seems to be of paramount importance. We see that especially when the categories blur and collapse, as in both of the films today.

We began this course with a discussion of the complex intertwining of representation and the real in the case of the Rolling Stone cover (and the network of visual and semiotic relations it put in play) — **The reason I opened the course this way was to pose the problem of representation, semiotics (meaning: the study of signs) and the recycling of images, tropes and citations in circulating forms of media. So from the first day of class, any firm divide that suggests that we're "only" studying representation—or that violent representation is an entirely separate thing from thinking about "real" violence—was a difficult division to hold fast and firm.**

"Snuff" as a concept is a great example of this difficult division: "snuff" as a generic term of the filming of actual murders (not as a byproduct, i.e. a photojournalist capturing an execution, but as part of the act of violence) attributed to a man who claimed the Manson Family filmed actual murders; it's a very powerful urban legend without substantiation. It's been applied to "mondo" horror (*Faces of Death*—real series; in *Tesis*, Fresh Blood film they watch; visual documents of death); then, myth amplified after film *Snuff* 1975, where a woman appears to be murdered on camera (popular conception of snuff entirely relies on simulated texts about snuff). But—real snuff film = viral terror videos of executions?

This semester, in texts ranging from *American Psycho* to *Man Bites Dog* and *Natural Born Killers*, we have talked about multiple ways in which the blurring between art and life takes place in postmodern culture and in postmodern representation, we've also talked about the often violent consequences of that melding and confusion.

So one big question this week is: **Can representation that itself is *about* the bleed between real violence and represented violence force a new relationship to that complex intertextual relationship?**

Set up: again, back to last week – Sontag talks about fascination with horror, the challenge to look without flinching, the pleasure of flinching; the question of what we cannot take our eyes away from – and whether our eyes might even develop a “taste for the horrific”?

I want to point out this **twin move of fascination alongside distress**, beauty and horror, curiosity and disgust - seem to be thematized and also operative in the films this week. I want to make a comment about the **Heysel Stadium disaster in Brussels in 1985**, which was an event in which soccer hooliganism led to a terrible riot, a fence collapsed and 39 fans were killed.

Baudrillard, writing of the event, argued that such an event was, in a way, expected, that the political void of modern politics takes an implosive form.

He writes, “There is another logic at work here, too, **the logic of attempted role reversal**: spectators (English fans in this case) turn themselves into actors; usurping the role of the protagonists (players), under the gaze of the media, they invent their own spectacle (which...is somewhat more fascinating than the official one). Now is this not precisely what is expected of the modern spectator? Is he not supposed to abandon his spectatorish inertia and intervene in the spectacle himself?”

In the films for this week, as well, both of which, in different ways, show us people who move from spectators to actors to directors (from watching violence to screening violence to doing violence)— in place of passive spectatorship at an external spectacle, the spectators turn themselves into actors and in Baudrillard’s words “invent their own spectacle.” **That second spectacle, as Baudrillard parenthetically allows of the riot, is more fascinating than the official one.** What is this second spectacle – the invented spectacle – in each of our films today?

So the big question today is: can these texts suggest a new way of thinking about violence, violent representation, and our relationship to it as consumers, as spectators, and as critics?

→ *Tesis* – curiosity twinned with disgust/but her frustration is our frustration

ANGELA: investigator (to conduct research, to investigate) – awakens in the video; actually is the one who ends up making a snuff film (footage of real death)

[Tesis: snuff not only functions as a rendition of perverse sadistic or masochistic drives, but also satisfies an inherent need to confront images of mortality. Desire to see death = desire to know death, or to experience death of the other b/c miss death of the self...]

CURIOSITY: to see real dead body; to understand violence → participation/conscription (end of Thesis, they turn away, close elevator while patients and us are made to look at the images they’d been pursuing and now ignore → Imminent broadcast of the snuff films on TV (they leave/reject the spectacle – refusal to watch)

*** THESIS: dissertation but also argument

CASTRO: Spanish cinema must rival Hollywood by “giving audiences what they want”/ argument about what kind of film one must make

NB: Bosco setting up the mise-en-scene and camera equipment

What kind of director is Bosco? What kinds of films is he making? 1:53, description of tortures

Will disassemble and then reassemble her (hat; fragmentation; aesthetics)

El Bosco = Spanish name for Hieronymus Bosch, Flemish painter of carnivalesque grotesquerie, surreal, but gorgeous

- compare framing of his images in the real (white/red) with brute video aesthetic

FRAME: to cut/contain/but also exclude; it's a point of view on something (but also: Angela's curiosity leads to her getting that image and also being the ultimate director of a snuff film)

** She turns away from images at the end – the film makes an argument about images continuing (must look away: relate to Sontag; ecology of terrible things)*

[NB: Benny's mother: TWO MODES OF WATCHING/giggling and sobbing; laughter and tears; all affect -- vs. father's rationality]

Haneke's films employ modernist techniques to violently move spectators. While the images are often bereft of violence, **the ASSAULTIVE REALISM OF SOUND** "wages war against the inauthenticity of postmodernity" (131).

TRUE FOR TESIS TOO – SNUFF IS UNWATCHABLE, BUT CAN LISTEN TO IT, BUT WHAT ONE HEARS IS UNBEARABLE...

Dialectic of sounds (classical/rock; can close eyes/unclosed ears; audio-visual in title of thesis)

→ **ATTEND TO THE PYRAMID SCENE** and problems of causality

Airplane Game, Cause/Effect, VCR Logic (connect to Funny Games)
ROLE OF RECRUITMENT

FINAL COMMENTS ON COURSE

All of the films today were about the distinction between real violence and represented violence, but they put pressure on that distinction; perhaps it did not hold. The aesthetic term for embedded representations is **mise-en-abîme**, which means to put into the abyss... but in contemporary violence representations, are we falling helplessly into that abyss, and losing something important in the process, or is the fall itself of value, offering an experience of intensity and disorientation that we can find productive?

This returns me to that thing that has been haunting us all semester: the definition of violence, the question **WHAT IS VIOLENCE?**

→ GO BACK TO FIRST DAY

We will continually **define** and redefine the term “violence” this semester. We ventured a few in that first class...

an act of aggression (as one against a person who resists)

wild, forceful, disruptive (violent storm)

physical or verbal force against self or other (PHYSICAL OR PSYCHIC)

great force or energy or power or emotional intensity (OPENS IT UP TO FORM)

= exercise of force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property (OED)

- **A few questions: does violence require a victim?**
- **Is violence the same thing as force or intensity or great energy?**
- **Does violence have to result in physical harm, or can it be emotional, moral, affective? Is violence always unjust or impermissible? (Is the notion of “Justified violence” an oxymoron?)**
- **Is violence singular or can it be collective? Does there have to be an individual person behind violence or can an abstraction (a state, a peoples) be violent?**
- **Is violence only destructive or can it also be creative (can it produce the new or only obliterate)?**

Etymology Violence – old word; 13th c., physical forced used to inflict injury or damage; *violentia* (Latin), "vehemence, impetuosity," (words that mean “carried away”) from violentus "vehement, forcible,"

Shares roots with “violate”

early 15c., "to break" (an oath, etc.), from L. violatus

violation

early 15c., from L. violationem (nom. violatio) "an injury, irreverence," from violatus, pp. of violare "to violate, treat with violence, outrage, dishonor," perhaps related to vis "violence, strength."

→ Carried away is a productive sense: loss of self; loss of control (but we also think of violence as an imposition of will over another: so instead of being carried away, which suggests a loss on the part of the doer of violence, it can also suggest a carrying away of another: an obliteration of their selfhood).

In Middle English, violence was a word applied in reference to heat or sunlight, with the sense of “having some quality so strongly as to produce a powerful effect.” That’s quite interesting, b/c it makes it a question of **power, force, quality of intensity**. Again, that suggests that style or form (or even light itself, which is the substance of cinema) or something like repetitive language (the sound of the signifier in a novel) could function as a kind of violence. If violence is a quality of intensity, then could anything be or become violence?

Throughout the semester our novels and films and critical texts defined, figured and complicated violence in their own ways. Today, we reflected on whether we can speak of violence or only violences; whether criticism is a way out of violence or a cop-out from dealing with violence.

NB: How language works the same way for Nietzsche. He often referred to “the mysterious X of the thing in itself” — we believe we know something of that X because we speak of it, inquire into it, study it; but in fact, “we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities”. So there is no content to truth for Nietzsche: it’s a Form, a process of becoming and forgetting, invention and naturalization. And there is no content to language that would correspond to the “things themselves.” We don’t know essential qualities, but we do know conventional designations. So violence would only be a metaphor for things - there would be no X of the thing in itself. That might make us very politically and ethically uncomfortable: if we don’t know what violence is, how can we stop/solve/identify/fix it?

New set of questions today, at the end of the course:

What if violence doesn’t have an “is” – *what is violence* is the wrong question to ask? What if violence is plural? There are only violences? Or only effects? Only the forces that it enacts (not an ontology). Being/non-being/becoming (presses on metaphysical categories of opposition: only being/non-being)...what if violence is not (on level of being: in the world, as a thing) but always becoming, in the process of appearing or disappearing, not fixed or certain. What if that’s part of how violence does its work? What does that mean for form? What does that mean for critique? If we don’t have an object to hold on to, point to, identify and secure, how do we do critical labor on it?

Classical metaphysics -- ontological opposition between Being and non-Being (two categories). Deleuze insists on importance of third term: Becoming.

What he calls “pure becoming” is not a particular becoming OF some corporeal entity, a passage of this entity from one to another state, but a becoming-it-itself, extracted from its corporeal base. So not “violence becoming” something else, or something “becoming violence” but violence as a “becoming-in-itself.” The temporality of Being is the present; pure becoming sidesteps the present; because it never "actually occurs," it is "always forthcoming and already past." It is always about to take place or just having taken place, but never taking place in and of itself. It suspends causality, sequentiality, directionality and is in a constant state of flux.

Maybe we can’t say “violence is...” because its nature is to be in a state of passage, just about to arrive or just having arrived; come to terms with it too early or always too late – **maybe it resists definition** (both linguistic and, perhaps, visual: fuzzy around the edges)...

This is not a solvable problem, and there won’t be any neat summations today. But I do have some comments to make that may be useful; each of which will give us a different perspective on violence, representation, and the titles of today’s films:

(1) Etymology of cruelty:

[FORCE EXTERNAL TO A SYSTEM THAT DENATURES IT]

Violence is “the application of a force that remains foreign to the dynamic or energetic system into which it intervenes.”

Violence “denatures, wrecks, and massacres that which it assaults,” and “takes away its form and meaning” while exhausting itself “in its raging” (16).

Finally, violence is monstrous, but also monstrative (monster comes from *monstrare*: to show, to present something): violence **demonstrates**, it exposes itself, and shows us something. Indeed, the worst form of violence involves a specifically visual, even chromatic, desire:

The word “Cruelty” takes its name from bloodshed (*cruor*, as distinct from *sanguis*, the blood that circulates in the body). He who is cruel and violent wants to see blood spilt. [. . .] He who is cruel wants to appropriate death: not by gazing into the emptiness of the depths, but, on the contrary, by filling his eyes with red (by “seeing red”) . . .

This is one way of thinking about violence – cruelty is in the act of making present spilled blood; this opens up the charge of violent representation (not in its content but in what it makes present). That visual desire would implicate all of us in violence; to look is to collude with violence as such. There would be no escape except in a blanket refusal.

Tesis: dissertation/thesis; proposition;

late 14c., “unaccented syllable or note,” from L. thesis “unaccented syllable in poetry,” later “stressed part of a metrical foot,” from **Gk. thesis “a proposition,” also “downbeat” (in music)**, originally “a setting down or placing,” from root of *tithenai* “to place, put, set,” from PIE base **dhe-* “to put, to do” (see *factitious*). Sense in logic of “a proposition, **statement to be proved**” is first recorded 1570s; that of “dissertation written by a candidate for a university degree” is from 1650s.

Statement to be proved – a proposition / it’s open, not settled (a form of logic: an opening move, something yet-to-be-proven)... a setting down or placing, but an unsettled, not-fixed setting... it keeps it open. **Final shot: they refuse to look. The proposition (why not watch?) becomes settled in the order, Don’t look.**

(2) But here’s **another** way of thinking about violence and representation:

TITLES: Haneke’s title is a trap, as many titles are: the named video does not belong to Benny as an object or property, even less so is it an item of exchange or circulation, a product or pedagogical device. *Benny’s Video* should be read as *Benny’s Vide-o*, *Benny’s I-see*, but also Benny’s “I look,” “I observe,” even “I understand.”

Regard in this class: looking and a caring —to look, and to regard, each of which involves “watching, waiting, observing, tending attentively,” but also respecting, considering, being open to something’s power and accountability, standing guard over something (the pain of others; the terror of others).

This notion would suggest that it is our duty to look, to regard: but to look in a certain way, to Vide-o responsibly, to try to see more, but to tend to the image, to care about what we see, to stand guard over it, to regard it as we regard it.

What is it we are regarding? Often: death. Jean-Luc Nancy: “Death is part of life, instead of making life part of (or parted from) something other than itself. Death *is neither* the opposite of life *nor* the passage into another life: it is the blind spot that opens up the looking” (*Evidence* 18). So looking on violence is a way of opening up the image to death from the point of view of life; this point of view suggests that regarding violence is not only *not* complicit with violence but is the possible site of an ethical practice. One **must** look, one must regard...

This semester, we’ve seen how, for all that violence is about pain, suffering, fear, and death, it can also be about intensity, aesthetics, time, and even ethical possibility. In a way, I think that violence doesn’t resolve that contradiction —

Violence, perhaps, in the end, is the site where the very terms of this debate are staged: the ground on which the question—You MUST look, or DO NOT LOOK? Regard or disregard?—is continually and renewably posed.

I hope this class has complicated for you what the concept of “violence”, and perhaps also the concept of “representation” might mean—and I hope this class has produced more questions and contradictions than answers for you. My wager is that tarrying with violence requires **always re-posing** the kinds of questions we’ve considered this semester; that part of the **violence of violence** is precisely in its refusal to fit narrow, resolved answers. So to the extent that questions remain, my sense is that we have done justice by our subject.

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