

Indecent Exposure: The Historical Trajectory of Ultra-Violent Film

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“To me [*Psycho*] is a fun picture.”
—Alfred Hitchcock¹

“Violence is one of the most fun things to watch.”
—Quentin Tarantino²

An ultra-violent film is defined as “the unsettling contemplation of flawed, debased behavior viewed up close and without a secure moral reference point.”¹ That definition, however, does not mention the artistry required to walk the line between inspired and indecent. Instead of predictably repelling viewers, directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, and Quentin Tarantino invite their audiences to become participatory in the act of murder, complete with threatening weapons, gasping victims, and copious amounts of splattering, oozing blood. Ultra-violent films also highlight evil, psychopathic, or borderline personalities in the roles of sympathetic main characters to further set audiences emotionally and morally adrift.² With the lack of a secure moral reference point, these movies aim to leave spectators disoriented and uncomfortable, yet somehow exhilarated. To achieve this careful balance, successful directors of ultra-violent movies use highly technical filming techniques to force an emotional response on the director’s victims, his captive audience. Through the use of montage, angles, framing, sound, and blood technology, combined with a frank look at the contemporary world, directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, and Quentin Tarantino push the envelope of censorship and make violence into a visceral and aesthetic experience for film-goers.

Contrary to popular opinion, ultra-violent films were not invented for the video game generation. The genre has existed since 1960, when Alfred Hitchcock’s thriller, *Psycho*, showed for the first time at movie theaters. As film writer Stephen Prince says, “Ultra-violence emerged in the 1960s, and movies have never been the same since.”³ One reviewer of *Psycho* said, “*Psycho* is surely the sickest film ever made. It is also one of the most technically exciting films of recent years, and perhaps an omen.”⁴ It was an omen. Since *Psycho*, many violent films have been released, usually in the horror or slasher genre. However, horror and slasher films, although violent, are not technically ultra-violent. Ultra-

¹ Prince, Stephen. *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998. xv.

² Prince, Stephen. *Savage Cinema*, xv.

³ Prince, Stephen. *Screening Violence*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001. 6.

⁴ Callenbach, Ernest. Review of *Psycho*, by Alfred Hitchcock. *Film Quarterly* 14 no. 1 (Autumn, 1960): 47–49. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1211065>> (Accessed: 22/09/2009)

violent films represent a specific methodology and philosophy, whereas horror and slasher films containing extended scenes of carnage and graphic death depiction are so excessive that they tend to overload the audience's psyche to the point of necessary stereotyping: if you have seen one deranged, inbred cannibal, you have seen them all. Successful ultra-violence never overloads the audience or leads to stereotyping; it keeps them engaged, yet horrified by presenting the rare "aesthetic" view of violence.

Aesthetic filmmaking is also commonly misunderstood. Aesthetic violence is improperly

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interpreted as being, like the horror genre, so filled with blood that audiences are forced to react, but the proper definition is akin to Hitchcock's view of "pure cinema." To Hitchcock, pure cinema consists of "us[ing] the cinematic art to achieve something of a mass emotion"

by employing a fiercely technical presentation with every idea, image, and, most importantly, reaction, all planned in advance by the director.⁵ Aesthetic violence presents a "stylized rendition of violence,"⁶ by using only the camera and the sound to shock audiences, as opposed to using story, acting, or dialogue. As Alfred Hitchcock said, "If you've designed a picture correctly, in terms of its emotional impact, the Japanese audience would scream at the same time as the Indian audience."⁷

Psycho, Alfred Hitchcock's most analyzed movie, is the first mainstream example of aesthetic ultra-violence. In *Psycho*, the audience follows Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) who is desperately in love, but barred by money problems from living happily ever after. She steals \$40,000 and skips town, only to be brutally murdered, in one of the most famous scenes of cinema, by a psychopathic mother at an unassuming motel just off the main highway. After Marion's death, *Psycho* drops the plot of

⁵ Kolker, *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho: a Casebook*, 20.

⁶ Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 49.

⁷ Kolker, *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho: a Casebook*, 164.

Marion's theft, and instead sympathetically follows the psychopath's son, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), as he tries to evade the unofficial investigation into the mystery of Marion's disappearance while protecting his mother. The truth about the psychopathic mother is finally revealed at the end of the film.⁸

Hitchcock did not shy from depicting violence, and tried to make the violence he showed as realistic as possible by showing it in quick cuts and flashes, called montages. Montages later became a cinema standard for depicting violence, but in 1960, Hitchcock felt the need to defend his groundbreaking use of montages to depict violence:

"If you stand next to a train as it's speeding through a station, you feel it; it almost knocks you down. But if you look at the same train from a distance of some two miles, you don't feel anything at all. In the same way, if you're going to show two men fighting with each other, you're not going to get very much by simply photographing that fight.... The only way to do it is to get into the fight and make the public feel it."⁹

The most famous scene in *Psycho*, and one that purportedly caused an entire generation of film-goers to develop a phobia of showers, is the stabbing scene in the shower. In this scene, Hitchcock used his signature technique of violent montage to "allow his audience to create what they thought they saw," without actually having seen any real violence.¹⁰ Each cut of the butcher knife that the psychopathic mother uses to stab Marion corresponds to a new "cut" in the montage. Accompanied by the swishing sound of the knife flying through

⁸ *Psycho*. DVD. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. 1960; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 1998.

⁹ Kolker, *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho: a Casebook*, 10.

¹⁰ *Making of Psycho*. "Janet Leigh interview." DVD. Directed by Laurent Bouzereau. 1997; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios Home Video, 2005.

the air and the fleshy sound of Marion's body being sliced into pieces, the shower scene seems intensely real. This scene is the most arresting in the movie and shows Hitchcock's true cinematic genius and ability to emotionally involve any audience. Contemporary viewers, hardened by *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Exorcist*, still cannot help gasping in shock and horror while watching Marion Crane murdered in her shower.

Ultra-violent film does not rest solely on montage violence; it also employs unsettling camera angles, such as the low angles (in addition to extreme close-ups) Hitchcock uses in *Psycho* during the parlor scene, meant to set the audience on edge during a relatively banal conversation between Norman Bates and Marion Crane. Another commonality of ultra-violent film technique is framing, especially canted frames in which the horizon lines in each shot are slanted to subtly inform the audience that something is wrong.

The judicious use of sound is yet another technical aspect involved in ultra-violent film. In *Psycho*, Hitchcock warns his viewers that his characters are facing imminent danger by increasing the background sounds: rainfall and wipers on a car's windshield, water from a shower head, an increase in the noise of crickets and frogs in a tense outdoor scene. Music is also an intrinsic part of *Psycho*. The score, written and conducted by Bernard Herrmann, uses a stripped-down, strings-only "orchestra" that is meant to further disorient Hitchcock's audience by depriving them of diegetic music, or music that comes from a source in the film such as a radio, a television, or a play the characters are watching.¹¹ Herrmann's score also directs what the audience pays attention to; for instance, when Marion is deliberating at her home about taking the \$40,000, the score gets wobbly, as if loose morals are also loosening the music.

It is remarkable that *Psycho* was as violent as it was, considering the censorship that Hitchcock faced in 1960 when the film was released. The censorship laws of the 1960s were very restrictive, but the time was right for Hitchcock

¹¹ Kolker, *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho: a Casebook*, 112.

to push the envelope by releasing a risqué film. In 1915, free speech rights had been outlawed in film because film was for profit. At that time, all films that were released and distributed in America had to be stamped with the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) seal of approval. While the major film companies agreed with the 1915 ruling, by the 1950s major companies were releasing and distributing films without the MPAA's knowledge. In light of the rampant illegal movie distribution, the Supreme Court granted First Amendment rights to the movie companies in 1952, but imagery and plots were still censored. When Hitchcock produced *Psycho*, he had to have the movie approved, and several scenes were edited for more acceptable public viewing.¹² The MPAA underestimated the American audience though, because 1960s audiences walked out of *Psycho* "laughing in horror, like on a roller coaster.... They came out with a sense of tremendous enjoyment. This was a lovely evening they'd had, watching these murders."¹³ Some critics found the movie too bloody, describing the psychotic mother as "defiant at creeping up with a knife and sticking holes into people, drawing considerable blood,"¹⁴ while others said that the film was "superbly constructed, both shot-by-shot and in the overall organization by which the shocks are distributed and built up

to."¹⁵ The success of the movie is in the audience's reaction. As screenwriter Joseph Stefano said, "it never occurred to me that the audience would yell at the screen: 'don't go down there!'"¹⁶

Taxi Driver, Martin Scorsese's ultra-violent masterpiece, was heavily influenced by *Psycho*. The film, like *Psycho*, was highly technical,

¹² Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 13.

¹³ *Making of Psycho*. "Peggy Robertson interview."

¹⁴ Kolker, *Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho: a Casebook*, 58.

¹⁵ Callenbach, *Review of Psycho*, by Alfred Hitchcock.

¹⁶ *Making of Psycho*. "Joseph Stefano interview."

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employing the use of montage, angles, framing, and sound to emotionally involve the audience. Scorsese agrees that the beauty of *Taxi Driver* is in the technical details:

“The exhilaration of the violence at the end of...*Taxi Driver*—because it is shot a certain way...is also in the creation of that [holocaust] scene in the editing, in the camera moves, in the use of music, and the use of sound effects, and in the movement within the frame of the characters...and that’s where the exhilaration comes in.”¹⁷

In *Taxi Driver*, an isolated and twisted young veteran, Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro) gets a graveyard-shift job as a cab driver in New York City, and as he watches people who live trashy lives on the street, he formulates a plan to kill a senator who is running for president. He fails to assassinate the presidential candidate, and instead decides to save an extremely young prostitute, Iris (Jodie Foster) by shooting his way through her apartment building that serves as a brothel. After his psychotic and maniacal killing spree, Travis is chillingly celebrated as a hero in the news, because he happened to kill a mob boss amongst the carnage.¹⁸

Scorsese, like Hitchcock, depicts the violence in *Taxi Driver* in montage form. During the holocaust scene at the end, in which Travis kills everyone who confronts him, all the shots are quick and correspond with each gunshot. Scorsese also apes Hitchcock in this scene by interspersing slow motion takes with quick, choppy cuts, which Hitchcock did in the shower scene. The first violent act Travis commits in the film, shooting a burglar who tries to rob a convenience store, is finished by the senseless violence of the store owner beating the dead thief’s body with a lead pipe. This scene is handled exactly like Hitchcock’s shower scene,

with each hit of the lead pipe accompanied by a cut in the montage; the *Taxi Driver* scene inside the convenience store is one of Scorsese’s many homages to Hitchcock. The difference between the *Taxi Driver* montage and the *Psycho* montage is that while Hitchcock’s murder happens in a sterile atmosphere (the shower), Scorsese’s murder is more tense because it happens on a grimy floor that the audience realizes will not be fully cleaned, which psychologically makes the murder more chilling and realistic.

Although many shots directly echo Hitchcock’s influence on Scorsese, the music that Scorsese uses is even more of an homage. Scorsese employed Hitchcock’s score composer, Bernard Herrmann, for *Taxi Driver*, and while the sultry saxophone that Herrmann used in *Taxi Driver* does not reflect the nerve-shattering strings in *Psycho*, the lack of diatonic music throughout the movie is disorienting. The most obvious musical reference that is used during *Taxi Driver* occurs just before the convenience store scene. As Travis is walking into the store, Herrmann plays the exact three-note Norman Bates theme that he used in *Psycho*. This use of the exact same theme, a sound-print intrinsically linked with *Psycho*, suggests that Travis Bickle and Norman Bates have a similar off-balance view of the world, and also hints at the danger that both characters represent.¹⁹ In contrast to Hitchcock, Scorsese turns off the music completely during scenes of violence, making the violence seem more real and uncomfortable to the audience.

Scorsese is able to get away with a lot more than Hitchcock, due to changes in censorship laws that occurred shortly before *Taxi Driver* was filmed. After the 1952 Supreme Court ruling that granted free speech to films, while still maintaining that they follow the code of the MPAA created in 1930, there was a brief period in which filmmakers complied with the seeming freedom of the new regulations. However, the regulations soon began to feel like restrictions, and films began to be released that did not follow the MPAA code. By 1966, the code was revised and the content rules from 1930 were

¹⁷ Prince, *Screening Violence*, 27.

¹⁸ *Taxi Driver*. DVD. Directed by Martin Scorsese. 1976; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures, 2007.

¹⁹ Kolker, *Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho: a Casebook*, 116.

dropped and replaced by ten broad guiding principles such as “restraint shall be exercised in portraying the taking of a life.” Violent films that had previously received Mature Audiences Only ratings began to be released on television for the general public.²⁰ To justify this move, the MPAA “asked viewers to reorient themselves with the new styles, aims, and functions of the modern, harder-edged picture.”²¹ In 1967 violent films such as Sergio Leone’s *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* were released, and that year *Time* magazine said, “United States movies are now treating once-shocking themes with a maturity and candor unthinkable even six years ago.”²²

After the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy in April and June of 1968, filmmakers and the MPAA agreed to briefly tone down the scenes they showed of brutality, but by autumn of 1968 the brutality and violence had returned. On October 7, 1968, the MPAA released an entirely new rating system (the G-M-R-X system, in which all movies follow a specific letter-rating; we follow a revised version of that rating system today), designed to keep children out of violent movies, in response to increased cultural concerns about violence and youth.²³ In December 1968, the president of the MPAA defended the freedom it now gave to young and upcoming filmmakers who were “not bound by the conventions of a conformist past.”²⁴ He continued his defense of approving violent films by citing the Vietnam War: “For the first time in the history of this country, people are exposed to instant coverage of a war in progress. When so many movie critics complain about violence on film, I don’t think they realize the impact of thirty minutes on the...newscast—and that’s real violence.”²⁵ Arthur Penn, the director of *Bonnie and Clyde*, said, “Every night on the news we [see] kids lifted out in body bags, with blood all over the

place. Why, suddenly, the cinema [has] to be immaculate, I’ll never know.”²⁶

In addition to the Vietnam War, Americans were also confronted on a daily basis with other kinds of crime. National street crime rates rose significantly with the advent of the war, and President Richard Nixon’s “law-and-order platform” of his 1968 (and 1972) campaigns reflected the rising rates of homicide, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, and fear. The rising rates of violence in film simply corresponded to society’s experience of violence. In a 1968 poll, a national sample showed that eighty-one percent of the country “believed all law and order had broken down,” and fifty-one percent of the country claimed “they would shoot an attacker if personally threatened.”²⁷ *Taxi Driver* was released in 1976, after the end of the Vietnam War, but still in a time period in which American fears of random, violent acts prevailed. The violence and fear in the film is entirely based on American’s perception of violence in their daily world.

Blood, a major feature of ultra-violent film, was also a prevalent feature of *Taxi Driver*. While *Psycho* was banned from showing fresh blood, Scorsese’s R-rated picture had much looser restrictions that allowed him to not only show fresh blood, but to use the new “squib” technology, invented for *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 to show splattering blood. Squibs are “condoms filled with fake blood, wired to detonate so as to simulate bullet strikes and blood sprays.”²⁸ In the final holocaust scene of *Taxi Driver*, blood splatters everywhere. Travis shoots Iris’s pimp to gain entrance to her apartment building, and then shoots off

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²⁰ Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 13.

²¹ Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 14.

²² Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 16.

²³ Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 26.

²⁴ Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 14.

²⁵ Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 25.

²⁶ Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 26.

²⁷ Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 28.

²⁸ Prince, *Screening Violence*, 10–11.

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fingers and faces, and blows bodies down hallways, all accompanied by copious amounts of blood splatter. Scorsese's violence was so extreme that his production company became nervous that they would receive an M (mature) rating, and they requested that he cut some of

the violence. Scorsese brilliantly compromised by desaturating the color from the holocaust scene, so that the blood would not be quite so garish when it splattered, and this is the version that was released.²⁹ Hitchcock had no access to squib technology, and instead purposefully filmed *Psycho* in black and white so that he could use chocolate sauce for the draining blood in the shower scene; he thought the texture of chocolate sauce was the most realistic representation of blood.³⁰

Quentin Tarantino is the most recent ultra-violent filmmaker. His film, *Pulp Fiction*, released in 1994, wasn't his most violent, but it was his most critically acclaimed. Like Scorsese and Hitchcock, Tarantino is a very technical director and uses angles, framing, and sound to enhance the ultra-violent feel of *Pulp Fiction*.

In *Pulp Fiction*, three stories intertwine with non-linear timing. The first, and last story, "Pumpkin and Honey Bunny," follows a trashy couple who only call each other by the nicknames "Pumpkin" (Tim Roth) and "Honey Bunny" (Amanda Plummer). When they decide to pull their next heist at the diner they are in, they pull out their guns and mug everyone in the diner. Between the Pumpkin and Honey Bunny story comes the story of "Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace's Wife," in which a contract hitman, Vincent Vega (John Travolta), has been ordered to take Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman), the wife of the mob boss that employs him, out for dinner while the mob boss, Marcellus

²⁹ Horsley, Jake. *American Chaos: from Touch of Evil to The Terminator. Vol. 1 of The Blood Poets, A Cinema of Savagery 1958-1999*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1999, 221.

³⁰ *Making of Psycho*. "Janet Leigh interview."

Wallace (Ving Rhames), is out of town. Mia has a dangerous cocaine habit, and when she snorts Vincent's heroin, mistaking it for cocaine, she falls into a near-fatal overdose and is saved by Vincent and a needle of adrenaline that "looks like a prop from *Moby Dick*."³¹ The third story, "The Gold Watch," is sandwiched between both halves of the "Pumpkin and Honey Bunny" story, and both halves of the "Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace's Wife" story. It follows the ultra-violent story of Butch (Bruce Willis), a boxer who kills a man in the ring, steals the mob's money, and must escape town before he is found and killed.³²

Tarantino does not present his violence in a montage form. He wishes, like Hitchcock, to break out of the now-standard, Hitchcockian presentation of violence and present violence in another Hitchcock form: pure cinema. According to Tarantino, "I was trying to do violence where cinema doesn't intrude. [The violent scenes] are done in real time. Cinema isn't coming in and showing you a lot of poppy cuts."³³ In the scene where Mia overdoses, and the ultra-violent scene near the end when Butch and Marcellus are trapped and raped by a sadomasochism gang, all the violence happens in (near) real time. This technique adds to the audience's discomfort while watching the film, because the standards of filming that had previously been set in place were turned upside-down, leaving the audience feeling like involved participants in the violent scenes.

Tarantino also uses Hitchcockian angles in *Pulp Fiction*. He uses high angles to warn of impending danger in otherwise normal scenes, such as the one used in the beginning of the film when Vincent Vega and his partner wait for the elevator in an apartment building that will soon be the scene of a crime. Tarantino's low angles with close-ups in the diner scene between Pumpkin and Honey Bunny copy Hitchcock's parlor scene in *Psycho*. During Mia's overdose

³¹ Peary, Quentin Tarantino: Interviews, 71.

³² *Pulp Fiction*. DVD. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. 1994; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2002.

³³ Bouzereau, Laurent. *From Sam Peckinpah to Quentin Tarantino*. New York: Citadel Press, 2000, 74.

scene, Tarantino uses canted frames to the same effect as his predecessors: unsettling the audience. The framing in *Pulp Fiction*, like the framing in *Taxi Driver*, is directly taken from *Psycho*. In the “Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace’s Wife” segment, John Travolta drives down a wide Los Angeles street, high on heroin, with framing that looks just like Marion Crane driving towards the inevitable Bates Motel, and Travis Bickle driving through the midnight streets of New York City. In “The Gold Watch” segment, while Butch is running away from Marcellus Wallace, the man he stole money from, he is waiting at a stoplight and Marcellus Wallace walks directly in front of his car. In an homage to the exact same scene (and plot) in *Psycho*, Marcellus stops in the middle of the road and stares at Butch through the windshield. This same scene was in *Taxi Driver* as well, though not as directly copied from Hitchcock. *Taxi Driver*’s Travis Bickle mistakenly almost hits Iris, while *Pulp Fiction*’s Butch intentionally hits Marcellus Wallace, throwing Marcellus far across the intersection, covered in blood. Since Butch ran a red light to hit Marcellus, he is now in the path of oncoming traffic, and he gets hit as well, leaving both characters bathed in blood.

Tarantino’s use of sound also refers back to Scorsese and Hitchcock. When danger and violence are imminent for the characters in *Pulp Fiction*, the soundtrack silences and the background sounds become louder and more ominous, such as the overdubbed clanking that is heard while Vincent’s drug dealer frantically searches through his messy storage room for the shot of adrenaline that will revive Mia from her comatose, overdosed state. As soon as safety returns for the characters, Tarantino uses the Hitchcock technique of returning the music instantly and jarringly. Instead of Hitchcock and Herrmann’s shrill strings, however, Tarantino supplies *Pulp Fiction* with a loud, non-diegetic, surf music soundtrack.

Tarantino did not face much censorship when he made *Pulp Fiction*. After the slasher films of the 1970s and the gore fests of the 1980s, blood on screen, even the gratuitous amounts that Tarantino used, did not give him

any higher than an R rating. If his characters had refrained from cursing, Tarantino would probably have received a PG-13 rating for *Pulp Fiction*. He was able to show “graphic imagery of bodily mutilation,”³⁴ and the prosthetic and latex technology of the 1980s allowed Tarantino to show bullets ripping through flesh and limbs being hacked off, all with dazzling, splattering, squib-enabled blood-spray.³⁵ Like Scorsese, Tarantino’s producers became worried with the amount of violence in *Pulp Fiction*, but Tarantino rightly pointed out that the most graphic violence was not actually shown in the film, only suggested. When Butch escapes from the gruesome basement of the sadomasochism pawnshop, he goes back to rescue Marcellus and maims, then kills the sadomasochism perpetrators with a sleek katana he finds in the pawnshop. Butch does slice and stab the sadomasochism perpetrators, but the actual contact between katana and flesh happens just outside of the range of the camera’s framing. Like Hitchcock, Tarantino allowed his audience to see what they wanted to see.

Ultra-violent film has undergone many phases, from the black and white, chocolate syrup-filled *Psycho*, to the desaturated and squib-laden *Taxi Driver*, and currently to the super vibrant, latex and blood filled *Pulp Fiction*. The next logical step for ultra-violence might be three-dimensional films filled with realistic, flying blood, or victim’s screams that are personalized with audience member names. For the squeamish, this could be the final straw, but for violent movie junkies, this would be heaven.



³⁴ Prince, *Screening Violence*, 14.

³⁵ Prince, *Screening Violence*, 15.