

**The Justification of Violence: An
Analysis of Literary and Cinematic
Representations of Extreme Violence,
and Attempts to Justify Them**

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines the concept of fictional violence in literature and film. This subject has been approached by dividing the research into three main subtopics. The first explores the combination of humour and fictional violence, more specifically the effect humour has on the presentation and reception of violence. The second chapter scrutinises debates around the justification of fictional violence by those who adopt a satirical defence of their work. This is structured by exploring examples of work defended by satirical purposes, and analysing the strengths and weaknesses in such justifications. The final chapter will focus on how violence is perceived differently when fictional depictions are presented with elements of realism. This section will explore how creators of fictional violence strive for a sense of realism in their fiction, and the subsequent effects of this portrayal.

My motivation for choosing this subject matter stemmed from an interest in why writers and directors use extreme violence and other taboo and transgressive topics in their fiction. I aspired to create an investigation that can probe the topic of fictional violence when used in different ways, with a scope that included a selection of authors, directors, as well as forms, including film and texts.

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INTRODUCTION

This research project aims to look at various representations of violence, different ways of approaching violence, and the multiple ways in which writers and directors utilise the theme in their works. I first dealt with the topic of fictional violence in my undergraduate dissertation, for which I chose to study violence specifically in the fiction of the American writer, Chuck Palahniuk. In this dissertation I explored Palahniuk's deployment of fictional violence in his writing. The dissertation introduced me to a variety of debates surrounding the topic of violence in literature and film. After completing my undergraduate dissertation I wanted to increase the scope of my research to include other creators of fictional violence as well as a variety of cinematic and literary forms.

Fictitious violence is a common element in literature and film which occurs increasingly more, and to a more graphic extent, in our contemporary society. Whether it is films, books, or video games, violence generally exists in many forms of entertainment, however I shall focus on the more extreme cases of fictional violence. I aim to analyse how writers and directors approach such a sensitive topic, and how they defend and justify the inclusion of extreme fictional violence. This will also include explorations into how we as readers/audience members respond to various representations of violence. There are multiple ways in which people can attempt to justify the use of violence and horror, which will be a focal point of this thesis. In order to achieve this I will separate the topic of violence into three main sections: violence and humour, violence and the satire defence, and the realistic presentation of fictional violence.

In order to address my first topic, the use of humour and violence, I intend to initially focus on the form of the graphic novel, in particular Garth Ennis' *The Boys Series: Name of the Game*. The rise of importance of the graphic novel inspired me to use the form in this section. Its past involvement with both humour and violence means that it fits comfortably into this section of the thesis. The form of the graphic novel itself is experiencing an increase in popularity in

recent years, establishing itself a section in bookstore from around 2001. This rise in popularity is visible in the accolades the genre has accumulated, specifically within the past 6 years. Another motivation for utilising the graphic novel form was stimulated by the interest in the presentation of fictional violence in a form that combines visual illustrations of violence, potentially more than its use of words.

This will be followed by an examination of the film adaptation of *American Psycho*, directed by Mary Harron in 2000. Both these two works were chosen because they are examples of publications that have faced contention, particularly surrounding their release, due to the fictional violence they contain. The history of the graphic novel/comic book is a turbulent one, and has continuously demonstrated a combination of humour and violence within the narrative. *American Psycho* has been an area of critical debate when published as a novel, as well as the production of the film, and repeatedly incorporates humour and violence, the humour being even more prominent when the film reaches its highest levels of horror and gore. I want to look at what effect this has on the reader, and explore whether the use of humour in correlation with violence, makes it more justifiable, and less offensive to the reader. In this section I will explore how writers and directors entwine the two concepts together in order to alter or affect the emotions experienced when watching or reading fictional violence, and question whether the two concepts always complement each other. In order to contextualise my research in the first chapter, I will use works produced on humour to establish a history of the connection between humour and violence, largely Paul McGhee's text *Humor: Its Origins and Development*, and other works on humour by Sigmund Freud.

The second chapter will explore the employment of the satire defence. I will use examples where the creators of fiction have justified their usage of extreme fictional violence by satirical objectives. The examples I have chosen for this area of study is the 2008 French horror film *Martyrs*, directed by Pascal Laugier and Bret Easton Ellis' text *Glamorama*, written in 1998. Both these works have been recognised as purporting a satirical motive behind their creation and inclusion of fictional violence. The selection of *Martyrs* came from an interest in French cinema, and the numerous cinematic and literary movements that came from the country. The

movements, which will be explored further in the second chapter, create interesting discussions about the use of, and intention behind, fictional violence. *Martyrs* is a film that stands out for its use of extreme violence to create a social commentary that will be analysed within the chapter. When considering satire, particularly through violence, Bret Easton Ellis is a name that is unavoidable. After using the film adaptation of *American Psycho* in the first chapter, I want to explore a different novel of Ellis' that also created a fusion of satire and extreme violence. After reading *Glamorama*, it was clear that both concepts were so prevalent it is a fitting text to use within this chapter.

After acknowledging how Laugier and Ellis, as well as other critics, have substantiated this defence I will continue to explore the efficacy of this justification, and the weaknesses that surface when such a defence is contested. Other instances in which the satire defence has been problematic will be used to further delve into this matter, particularly forms of artwork that have caused contention due to their transgressive natures. The two examples I have chosen for this are "Emaciated Dog", an exhibit created by Guillermo "Habacuc" Vargas, and a sculpture created by Allen Jones called "Hat Stand, Table and Chair", created in 1969.

The final chapter will investigate how the reception of fictional violence changes when it is presented with elements of realism. I intend to analyse works in which the creators have striven for a realistic representation of fictional violence. To begin this chapter I will explore some photographs that depict real violence in the form of Chinese torture. The photographs came to my attention through philosopher and literary critic Georges Bataille, who has obsessed over the images. Bataille is an interesting figure to explore in this category, as his theories on the act of physically and emotionally enjoying violence connect well to the notion of enjoying fictional creations of violence. He has many postulations on erotic and religious pleasure created by witnessing violence, which will be infused with more recent theories on such enjoyment of violent fiction. His analysis, as well as that of other critics, will form the beginning of this exploration into the amalgamation of realism and fictional violence. Following this I will examine fiction that strives for realism, with the aid of the 2001 American horror film *August Underground*, directed by Fred Vogel. The film depicts an abundance of extremely graphic

murder and torture scenes, which will be dissected for elements of realism. *August Underground* was selected for this section because of the extreme realism that is used to create the fictional violence within the film. There were more well-known choices that could have been chosen in this section, like the notoriously violent *Saw* or *Hostel* sagas, however these general contained more stylised and theatrical violence which did not lend them to this chapter.

The theory of stylised will, however, be explored in this chapter. After looking at the injection of realism into fiction I will also scrutinise responses to works of fiction that present highly stylised depictions of violence. This will be accompanied by Annette Hill's *Shocking Entertainment: Viewer Response to Violent Movies*, a text that explores how viewers react to examples of extreme violence, including an analysis of social thresholds and boundaries when viewing such violence. She analyses people's reactions to viewing violence, and continues to explore why we differentiate between real and fictitious violence for entertainment. Hill's exploration of the social and personal boundaries of violence and horror as well as her scrutiny of the realism in fiction will be dissected and assessed.

There have been multiple debates circling, for many years now, as to whether fictional violence has a detrimental effect on those exposed to it, and whether this causes viewers and readers to become more violent people. It was these kinds of arguments that inspired many parts of this thesis, as it intrigued my interest in how authors and directors are sometimes forced to justify and defend their works in the face of harsh criticism when using fictional violence and aggression. I believe the analysis of fictional violence is a significant area of study that is growing as more criticism arises in modern society. It can be argued that fictional violence is becoming more extreme in recent years, and, consequently, the objections to it have increased as well.

THE HUMOROUS JUSTIFICATION OF FICTIONAL VIOLENCE

Introduction

Within this thesis I will endeavour to explore the various representations of extreme fictional violence, and the subsequent justifications for it. When exploring various presentations of fictional violence it is clear that many violent manifestations are presented with infusions of humour and comedy. Even more important, however, are the multiple motivations and justifications of this which have been suggested by its creators and its critics. The focus in this chapter will be to investigate such amalgamations, specifically exploring how the two themes are combined, how this is explained, and the complications that can arise from this aggregation. In order to achieve this I have chosen to analyse a graphic novel, *The Boys* by Garth Ennis, and the film adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, directed by Mary Harron. To contextualise this exploration I will first present some of the suggestions that have previously been proposed to justify and explain humour's involvement with fictional violence.

When researching the topic of humour, varying reasons for its deployment are frequently encountered. One recurring suggestion is that humour, when combined with negative concepts, can have a positive effect on the person viewing it. One key figure in this area is a pioneer of humour research Paul McGhee, who claims that 'we all have a potential need for the therapeutic properties of humour' (McGhee 227-228). When applying this to the idea of fictional violence, it can be hypothesised that humour can be utilised in coalition with violence in order to alleviate the negative tension that can be created in such works. Another key theorist that often appears when researching this topic is Sigmund Freud. On multiple occasions in McGhee's writings he refers to Sigmund Freud's 'notion that humour can ease psychological pain' (McGhee 228). In his text *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* Freud articulates the view that jokes function in a similar way to dreams, becoming a method through which a viewer can expel negative and forbidden emotions, specifically our unconscious, hidden desires. Because of this

relationship, it can be seen to support the theory that humour is a socially acceptable form of purging aggression through entertainment. When describing the effects of humour, Sharon Lockyer acknowledges the ability of humour in stating that ‘Humour is one of the most pervasive elements of public culture. It occurs across all contemporary media, in most of their different institutional formats, as well as being a central aspect of everyday life and our day-to-day relationships’ (3).

In a later article by Freud, *Humor*, published in 1927, he further explores the role of humour by arguing that ‘the essence of humour is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise’ (Freud 1927). This again expresses the view that humour can replace the negative emotions caused by viewing violence, because we do not react with repulsion, but with laughter. Freud further posited that jokes, like dreams, acted as a form of release for repressed emotions, such as violent and sexual deviances. He defends their ability to satisfy a psychological desire, and argues that this outlet for hidden emotions is healthy for a person’s mind. A notable work on this topic, that maintains Freud’s view, was produced by Simon Critchley, who dedicates an entire chapter of his book, *On Humour*, to the positive effect humour can have in response to fictional presentations of dark situations. He titles the chapter “Why the Super-Ego is Your Amigo: Humour as an Anti-depressant”, and explores the possibilities of humour being ‘therapeutic’. With reference to many of Freud’s writings, Critchley argues that the tension between the ego and superego ‘not only produces the alternating pathologies of melancholia and mania... but also produces humour - dark, sardonic, wicked humour’ (Critchley 101).

It is this connection between humour and fictional violence that I intend to probe within this chapter. In order to do so I will examine examples of the combination, exploring specifically how the two concepts are combined and the resulting justifications of this. I will further investigate the complications that can arise from the infusion of the two contrasting concepts. I will explore the mixture of the two elements in differing circumstances across a variety of forms of writing, specifically the graphic novel, film, and texts.

Humour and Violence in the Graphic Novel

The first example I have chosen to analyse is the graphic novel series *The Boys*, written by Garth Ennis and illustrated by Darick Robertson. I will specifically focus on the first edition called *The Name of the Game*, released in 2007. Ennis' graphic novel follows the story of a black ops team, nicknamed "The Boys", who are enlisted by Billy Butcher and charged with the duty of monitoring the activity of superheroes, ensuring that their behaviour does not become illicit and ostentatious. They find themselves a member short and so attempt to enlist one of the protagonists, Wee Hughie, whose girlfriend was accidentally killed by a superhero at the opening of the text. The storyline follows the employment of the members of "The Boys" team. Alongside this the text also shows the activities of the superheroes, as well as the younger version of the heroes, a group called Teenage Kix, who are often found in violent and sexually deviant situations. The plot also involves the recruitment of a new addition to the superhero community. This female newcomer is forced to engage in sexual activity with some of the existing superheroes as a form of initiation. This novel is a good example to use as, even though humour is present, it has still received opposition because of the fictional violence it contained. In fact, after just six instalments the series was dropped by its original publishers - Wildstorm, due to 'content concerns'. Before delving into the text itself, it is important to first examine the history of the comic book and graphic novel.

When revisiting its history and origins, it is clear that the comic book has repeatedly been met with contention, which is often due to the presentations of extreme sex and violence within its pages. Initially reserved for children, the comic book had to escape this ghetto and establish itself as an important form of literature. It is indisputable that the form has generated numerous of violent productions, including the creation of 'horror comics' in the early 1950s. Roger Sabin describes these comics as containing a 'large amount of gore (dismembered limbs, rotting corpses and so on) which although always integral to the plot and often tongue-in-cheek, was typically presented in a fairly explicit manner' (Sabin 29). The 'tongue-in-cheek' manner that Sabin suggests can be assumed to refer to the comical demeanour in which violence and gore was portrayed. However, when these comics were produced in the 1950s, the form was still

aimed towards a predominantly child-based audience, thus the gore and violence was a large cause for contention. Even when the genre was targeting a child-audience, there are reasons why humour was included in comics. Psychoanalyst and writer Martha Wolfenstein's investigation *Children's Humor: A Psychological Analysis* in 1954 explores how children's humour 'relates to potentially painful, anxiety-arousing, or guilt-inducing topics such as death, violence, destruction, punishment, illness, bodily functions and stupidity' (248) and, following this statement, concludes that humour and violence are combined from a young age to act as a coping mechanism, 'by engaging in the playful fantasy of humor, the child is able to transform a threatening situation into something to be laughed at and enjoyed' (248). This notion echoes McGhee's theory that suggests humour has therapeutic qualities when faced with extreme violence. This can be used to postulate that humour enabled children to be able to be subjected to violence in comics and not be intimidated or scared of it. The claim that comics were inappropriate, and a danger, for children caused the British Government to attempt to 'protect' children from such productions. In 1955 the publication of crime and horror comics was banned under The Children and Young Person's Harmful Publication Act. Its intention was to deal with any works that displayed 'the commission of crimes', 'acts of violence or cruelty', or 'incidents of a repulsive or horrible nature'. It also protested that works containing such things 'would tend to corrupt a child or young person into whose hands it might fall'. Similarly, in America, there was the inauguration of the 'Comics Code' which was a regulation 'proscribing violence, sex and, significantly, anti-establishment messages in comics' (Sabin 31), and such comics could not be produced unless they were given this seal of approval. Many have suggested that the introduction of these sanctions stemmed from a fear of violent fiction being mimicked by young readers. This theory was postulated by American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, who published *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1955, a text that maintained 'such comics could actually lead to juvenile delinquency' (Sabin 30). Within the text, Wertham declared that comics disturbed young people, however a large proportion of his findings have been deemed irrelevant because of claims that he falsified, altered, and excerpted his testimonies and information in order to support his own beliefs. Regardless of such allegations, Wertham's text still influenced and, as some argue, caused the creation of the Comics Code in America. The Comics Code was

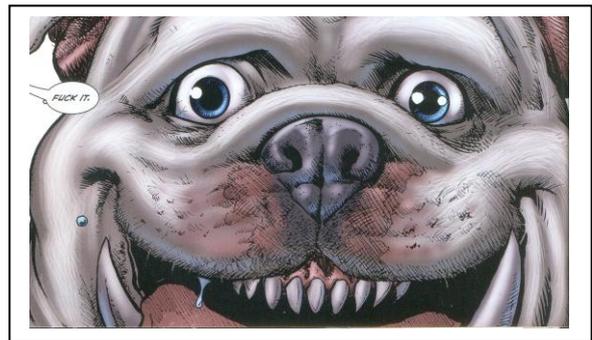
revised repeatedly over the next decades, and was eventually rendered defunct, due to all members abandoning it. The Children and Young Person's Harmful Publication Act is still an active legislation today, however very few people have been prosecuted under it.

The end of the 1960s saw the materialisation of a new form of the comic, the 'underground comic.' This saw an influx of highly graphic scenes of sex and violence in comics. Duncan and Smith's description of the contents of an underground comic ('in just flipping through underground comix, the most obvious aspects of the content are explicit sexuality and graphic violence') accurately depicts the extreme presentations of violence and sexual deviance that work in the genre frequently encapsulated (Duncan 56). This notion is apparent in such extreme publications as *Tales from the Leather Nun* (1973), which was an anthology depicting the violent and sexual exploits of a nun, or the perverse bestial stories that constituted the collection *The Barn of Fear* (1977). The more modern label of the graphic novel was a pre-existing term that was popularised in 1978 by writer Robert Crumb, and the genre has received notable success in years after, such as the commercial success of many novels for instance Art Spiegelman's series *Maus*, in the 1980s. The debate over whether comics have any literary worth is still alive today, however the form has received a lot more respect and appreciation in recent years, rather than receiving as much contention as before. After looking through the origins of the form, and its disputatious history, it appears that violence has always been a staple of the comic book. Furthermore, comments from such critics as Roger Sabin suggest that it is not uncommon for fictional violence to be frequently coupled with elements of humour and comedy.

When an audience or reader is confronted by transgressive imagery or behaviour in fiction, it can cause discomfort and unease in the viewer. I wish to scrutinise the assertion that humour is an element that can reduce and soften the abrasive nature of fictional violence, thus making it easier to watch and digest as a form of entertainment. I will apply these notions to Ennis' graphic novel, in order to conclude whether this is a correct assertion regarding the nature of the combination of humour and fictional violence.

Throughout Ennis' graphic novel, this amalgamation frequently surfaces. Both the plot and the accompanying images often communicate both violence and comedy at the same time, in a variety of different ways. One recurring method Ennis uses to produce humour is contrast. When discussing vulgarism in humour, William Hodgkins speculates that 'the laughter response may be elicited by the contradictory nature of the same idea used in two ways' (Hodgkins 444). Humour is often produced when contradictory elements are combined. Contrast in the context of this chapter employs the two concepts of humour and fictional violence, because of the opposing natures of the two elements. It is this contradiction of themes that causes a lot of the comedy in Ennis' graphic novel. The violent content of *The Name of the Game* is foreshadowed by the first two lines of the text, 'I'm gonna fuckin' have you.- You cunt', and the illustration on the splash page for the chapter which depicts a man's face being crushed by a black boot. After Billy Butcher's initial stream of expletives, a close up is given of the bulldog, tongue lolling and looking innocent, blissfully unaware of his

master's language, or the threat to be deduced from it. The dog's innocent, yet goofy, expression is in such strong contrast to the previous page that it causes humour. This can be seen as reflective of the



'contradictory nature' that Hodgkins refers to as a way to produce humour. This section is not the only part in which the dog acts as a form of visual comic relief for the reader, and as the narrative continues Terror becomes a repeatedly humorous character throughout the text. Terror the bulldog regularly appears in scenes of sex and violence, and he can be seen as a sort of clown for the reader, offering light humour to relieve any tension, and restraining the reader from becoming too offended by the violent and/or sexual nature of the scenes. The contrast between the innocent, comical-looking dog, and the extreme violence, sex and gore portrayed in the illustrations can be considered humorous. The use of this contrast to create humour reduces how violent we perceive the first scene, which is full of foul language and threat, but still communicates an undercurrent of humour. This analysis substantiates the notion postulated by

Freud, McGhee, and Critchley; that humour has the effect that violence is less threatening when coupled with humour.

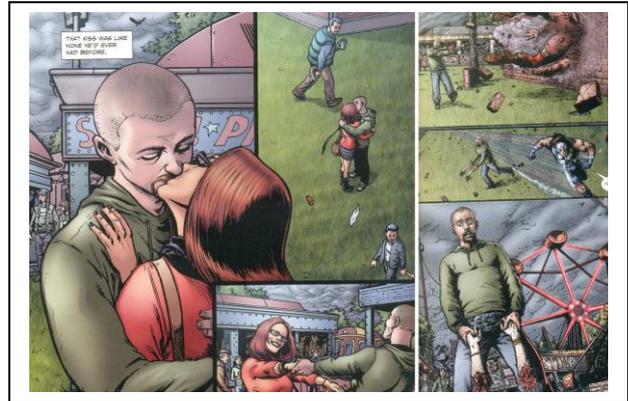
Another area that can be examined for the use of humour in transgressive scenes is in the fourth issue of the series, where the group Teenage Kix (a teenage version of the superhero clan) are in their shared accommodation, and each room contains a member engaging in some sort of taboo. For example, in one panel there is drug use, in another a man being dominated and whipped, another has two male members



engaging in intercourse, and a man about to be penetrated with a gun, all of which are dispersed in between rooms containing various types of sexually deviant intercourse. The description makes this sound quite violent and sexually transgressive, but when coupled with the images in the novel, the comedic twist is much more apparent. On shouting ‘CHANGE’ the Teenage Kix superheroes all swap rooms to engage in a different sex act, or some form of substance abuse. Humour is produced in this scene because it subverts the traditional image that the idea of a superhero encapsulates. The generic persona of a superhero can conjure ideas of a saviour who should represent a good person who strives to help people. However, the heroes in Ennis’ novel are depicted as deviant, immoral characters, constantly engaging in violent and transgressive acts, and often hurting other people rather than helping them. It is the opposite of traditional image of a superhero who, specifically in American comics, is supposed to be ‘brightly-costumed superheroes dispensing two-fisted justice,’ (Sabin 1). This is a contradiction that Ennis intentionally wished to present in his novel. On the subject he argued that ‘you can have comics where people do awful things to each other, like *Preacher*, but you can’t have a comic where super people do awful things to each other,’ (Ennis 2007). This idea is reflected in the scene where Teenage Kix are running around the house, participating in many illicit acts, comedy is provoked through this subversion of the standard reputation of a superhero.

However, the notion that humour always has a positive effect on the reader is not wholly true. There are cases where it can be argued that humour, when combined with fictional violence, can be found to be more threatening, and

increase the suspense in such scenes. In her book analysing the works of director Alfred Hitchcock, Susan Smith uses one of his films that combines humour and violence to demonstrate how ‘in placing the audience in such a state of helpless



laughter it renders them even more susceptible to the attack’ (Smith 49). This is applicable to parts of Ennis’ novel too, through the death of Wee Hughie’s girlfriend near the beginning of the graphic novel. There is a contrast between the two panels depicting her death. In the first panel she and Hughie are expressing their love, holding hands and spinning in a circle, and the next panel the superhero A-Train has accidentally killed Robin, the girlfriend, crushing her against a wall whilst in pursuit of a villain. Wee Hughie is left holding just the remains of her arms. The comic value of the scene is not completely lost as it has been illustrated in a way that expresses the humour accessible in the situation, but it can be seen as very abrupt because of the harsh contrast between the two scenes. Although the panel portraying Hughie standing with just the arms of his girlfriend in his hands should be an emotional scene depicting the loss of a loved one, the use of the sudden contrast between happiness and sadness, coupled with the comic way in which his face is illustrated, has meant that some readers cannot help but be amused by the panels. Although this may be the case, it must be acknowledged that this could be more harrowing for the reader because of the abrupt change in emotional depiction. Smith further posits that interchanging between ‘comic and thriller aspects often contributes substantially to dislodging the security of the viewer’s position’ (Smith 49). This demonstrates how the two principles can be combined with a more sinister outcome, because of the negativity produced.

I am of the opinion that, although some readers may find that humour, when used in scenes of extreme violence, more sinister than funny, the form of the comic book makes the humorous

aspect more prominent. The images and panels are cartoons, and nothing compared to how violent these pages would be if the characters were actors in moving pictures, or vividly described in a book. The splash page depicts a face being stamped on by a boot, which may be gruesome, yet if this were done on an actor's face, with special effects, it would be more disturbing and sickening. The images are a constant reminder that the text is a fictional piece of work, and the animated pictures remove the viewer from the intensity of the violence, and enable their enjoyment of the fiction.

Through this analysis of the graphic novel, it can be substantiated that the mixing of humour and violence is a necessary staple of the form, and thus justifies the deployment of comedy in moments of extreme fictional violence. The combination of the two elements recurs throughout the history of the form, and can be seen as vital in softening the contention surrounding many publications that encapsulate extreme fictional violence. This reflects and maintains the notions discussed at the beginning of the chapter regarding the 'therapeutic properties' of humour, as the humour in the graphic novel is arguably intended to ease the violent nature of comics.

Violence and Comedy in *American Psycho*

The preceding paragraphs present just a few instances of humour being combined with violent scenes within the graphic novel. In the case of this form, it is true that the very nature of the genre encapsulates graphic violent scenes and humour. It can be suggested that humour is a necessary element of the graphic novel, used in order to counterbalance the violence depicted in the panels. I now move on to explore the amalgamation of the two themes in a different form: film. To achieve this I will scrutinise the film adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, published as a text in 1991 and released as a film in 2000, directed by Mary Harron.

The original novel is a text that critic Roger Cohen dubs 'an extremely black comedy,' (Cohen 1991), and the release of which split critics as to the literary worth of the text. Ellis' novel is important to consider as, like the graphic novel, it was initially repudiated as a serious literary text by critics of the time. Publishers Simon & Schuster decided to cancel publication of

American Psycho in the months leading up to its initial release date due to the negative responses the text was receiving, even though they had paid Ellis \$300,000 as an advance. This was regularly attributed to the violence and graphic scenes of sex and murder in the text. There were strong, negative reactions to the text, often from feminists who believed Ellis' text was misogynistic filth that advertised violence against women. Tammy Bruce, President of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organisation for Women released this statement: 'This is not art. Mr Ellis is a confused, sick young man with a deep hatred of women who will do anything for a fast buck' (Cohen 1991). Possibly one of the most extreme detractors of Ellis was feminism activist Tara Baxter. She openly expressed 'there are better ways of taking care of Bret Easton Ellis than just censoring him. I would much prefer to see him skinned alive, a rat put up his rectum, and his genitals cut off and fried in a frying pan, in front of - not only a live audience - but a video camera as well' (Baxter 249-250). Baxter was famously arrested for reading excerpts of Ellis' book aloud in a bookshop as a form of protest against him, and the publication of the novel. As a form of protest, she then visited five different bookshops in San Francisco and poured blood on any copy of *American Psycho* she came across, (Baxter 251). She declared that the extreme violence in Ellis' novel 'trespassed onto women's most basic right to live without the constant threat of hate crimes and femicide' (Baxter 251).

Yet even the critic Roger Rosenblatt, who was so negative about the text, can be interpreted to acknowledge Ellis' infusion of comedy and violence, stating that 'several times, in the middle of some childishly gruesome depiction of torture or dismemberment, I found myself chuckling with revulsion,' (Rosenblatt 1990). This can be explored to recognise the combination of humour and violence, yet Rosenblatt still retains an air of condescension towards Ellis' work by referring to it as 'childish'. The notion of 'chuckling with revulsion' encapsulates an effect of the text, where the reader finds themselves laughing in times of horror and violence. Bret Easton Ellis recognises this in his own work; when interviewed, he stated that he 'used the comedy to get at the absolute banality of the violence of a perverse decade' (Cohen 1991). He continues this thought by claiming that in his novel 'there are dozens more hints that direct the reader toward the realization that for all the book's surface reality, it is still satirical, semi-comic and—

dare I say it?—playful?’ (Cohen 1991). This would argue that the purpose of the combination of humour and violence within Ellis’ works is to create a satirical piece of writing. A prominent theme of most of Ellis’ texts is satire, which is often displayed through extreme scenes of sex and violence. Because of this it can be surmised that the combination of humour and violence is justifiably present in the text, and its film adaptation, because of Ellis’ satirical motives. In *American Psycho*, for instance, when analysing the perpetrator of the torture and murder in the film, Patrick Bateman, Ellis’ satirical objectives can be examined. This investment banker and businessman routinely describes the murders of innocent people with the same, if not less, meticulous detail that he uses when relaying how he spends his mornings, or other people’s choice in clothing. The entire film can be analysed as a criticism of American society, thus creating this satirical message through the text. The often humorous style of satire combined with the extremely violent manner of Ellis’ text fuses the two concepts together in both the novel and the film.

Although Ellis defends his novel by adopting a satirical defence, many have ‘dismissed the argument that there is comical satire in the novel, and seen his portrayal of hideous sexual violence as little more than a cynical attempt to sell books’ (Cohen 1991). This is reiterated by many critics who believe Ellis’ deployment of violence to be gratuitous and only used as a shock-factor to cause contention. Bret Easton Ellis has never understood why his text was received so badly by so many, and questions the self-righteousness of the critics who condemn his novel. In response to his detractors and their criticism he sardonically states that ‘there seems to be a notion that when you are writing about someone killing and torturing people, especially women, you have to do it in a very earnest and politically correct way’ (Cohen 1991). In this statement Ellis acknowledges the inconsistent nature of such criticisms. He questions how torture and murder could only be acceptable depending on the manner in which it is presented, and queries how critics could suggest there is an appropriate way to present such transgressive violence. This desire to demonstrate this oxymoronic notion could be suggested as a motive for his incorporation of humour and violence.

Another example of the amalgamation in the film is when the deaths are accompanied by popular chart songs that do not seem to correspond with the tone of the murder at all. This can be seen, for instance, in the death scene of Paul Allen. The intoxicated Paul Allen sits on a sofa, not paying much attention to Patrick Bateman as he puts on a raincoat and retrieves an axe. He talks the entire time about a popular band called Huey Lewis and the News. He talks about the release of their album, and which songs he prefers, whilst preparing to murder someone. Again, it is the contrast between his demeanour and his actions that makes this scene a humorous amalgamation of comedy and violence. Although he is about to murder his colleague, he dances and strides around the room, which also makes the viewer laugh. His lack of concern for the life he is about to take also makes this scene extremely comical, as he is clearly insane, which is displayed through his ramblings about music, regardless of his imminent action. He is also having a completely one-sided conversation, as Paul Allen is too intoxicated to be interested in Bateman's conversation or topic, yet he continues as if he were talking to someone who had expressed interest in the subject, or was even responding to him. Music is a common source of humour in the film, repeated when he is engaging in a threesome with two girls and, whilst ordering them to perform sexual acts, he discusses the work of Phil Collins. This is similar to a scene later in the film where he is sat next to two girls kissing but is completely engrossed in a monologue about the works of Whitney Houston. This use of visual and audio effects is an advantage that the cinematic genre can have, as it presents humour differently compared to reading it on a page. For some, reading Ellis' monologue about Huey Lewis and the News before killing Paul Allen may not have the same comical effect as when we can hear the music playing in the background and witness Patrick Bateman dancing across the screen in the film adaptation.

On the contrary, it can be argued that the presentation of Bateman's musical monologue and dancing emphasises his psychotic nature, and enhances the suspense in this scene. This contrast between his murderous actions and his comical behaviour could be interpreted to demonstrate his unstable nature, thus creating more fear and tension in this scene. However, as the audience watches this scene, the humorous aspect of Bateman dancing whilst preparing to murder Paul

Allen is can be considered comical. We can tell what is about to happen, but the humour created by the contrast between the character's movements and his end goal, Allen's murder, keeps us entertained, regardless of the fact that we know it will end in Paul Allen's death. In this scene humour it can be construed that the fear and tension is reduced greatly through Harron's humorous depictions. In this scene it is shown that the combination of humour and violence can have diverse effects on the audience, and can both enhance and reduce the tension caused when the two opposing themes are blended.

Another way in which humour has been produced in the film is the brusque way in which Patrick Bateman mentions his murderous tendencies and his repeated openness about his killings. In the first five minutes of the film he attempts to use a drinks coupon at a bar but it gets refused. When the female waitress has her back to him he says 'you're a fucking ugly bitch. I want to stab you to death, and then play around in your blood' (Mary Harron, *American Psycho*). This overtly violent attitude surfaces again when a stranger asks him "What do you do?" to which he replies 'I like to dissect girls. Did you know I'm completely insane?' Later in the film he responds to another character by stating: 'I'm into executions and murders mostly'. When ending his relationship with Evelyn he simply confesses that they cannot be together because, he states, 'I need to engage in homicidal behaviour'. Although his statements are unequivocal and, in the last three examples he is directly speaking to someone, his comments about murder and torture go completely unacknowledged. This can be analysed as a reflection of his insanity, and both the film and the text suggest that his homicidal tendencies are actually fictional, made up by a sufferer of a pressurizing, deadening society. However, when first watched on screen, an audience member would find humour in this. The character is admitting to committing torture and to psychotic inclinations, but no-one seems to react in any way. This can be seen as reflective of humour in the form of contrast, much like the graphic novel.

The Criticisms of the Combination

There are critics that argue that controversial elements such as violence and graphic sexual scenes should not be deployed in any form of entertainment, as it can inspire aggressive behaviour in audiences. One stream of argument is that fiction sensationalises violence and

detracts from the seriousness and ugliness of real violence. Furthermore, when violence has been coupled with humour, it has been accused of trivialising real violence. Roger Sabin, when speaking specifically about comics, recognised that such violent comics ‘sensationalise the sexual and violent content of some titles’ causing critics to ‘brand adult comics generally as ‘perverted’, ‘disgusting’ and ‘beyond the pale’ (Sabin 112). It is through this argument that I intend to dissect the arguments surrounding the incorporation of the two notions of humour and fictional violence. With the purpose of answering this question I will now present varying arguments within this debate and generate a standpoint.

One prominent figure who surfaces in this debate is feminism activist and lawyer Catharine MacKinnon. She is one of the most influential and prominent feminists of contemporary study, who has become a well-established legal scholar. Her attitude and writing consistently strives to promote equality for women, and she maintains a firm anti-pornography stance. MacKinnon has published a variety of works on both of these subjects, and discusses feminism and the legal system in order to vocalise and circulate her position. A text of hers that is appropriate to this discussion is *Only Words*, released in 1993. In the text MacKinnon professes that pornography is a form that promotes and initiates real violence and degradation towards women in everyday society. She further categorises pornography as a form of violence by alleging that it is a violation of human rights and a breach of the American Constitution. Within the text she questions how anyone could ever argue that the use of violence can be justified, asking ‘should it matter if the murder is artistically presented?’ (MacKinnon 22). In her book *Only Words* she expresses the view that when fictional violence is used (MacKinnon uses the example of pornography) it encourages the viewer to act on the transgressive impulses it can create, and can make them believe the behaviour that they watch is acceptable to repeat in real life. MacKinnon’s argument is that, in the case of pornography, the genre encourages the degradation of women through advertising such treatment as enjoyable, through the objectification and abuse of women. MacKinnon denounces pornography as deplorable as it promotes this mistreatment of women through the use of violence and sex, as the acts represented are being enjoyed by the viewer. This view is shared by a fellow radical feminist

who frequently collaborated with MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin. She shared MacKinnon's anger at pornography, supporting the notion that it was linked to rape and various other kinds of abuse towards women. They actively fought against pornography; for example, in 1980, MacKinnon and Dworkin joined forces to aid a female porn-star, Linda Boreman, in her statement about the abuse she claimed to have received at the hands of her ex-husband, Chuck Traynor, accusing him of physical and emotional abuse, rape, and forcing her into the pornography industry. The trio held a public press conference to discuss the accusations against her husband as well as the makers of a particular pornographic film in which she had starred. They intended pursuing legal action, yet could not after realising that the date for the statute of limitations had passed. The inclusion of violence and graphic sexual activity in pornography can also be applied to a variety of creations in literature and film, and it is a combination that many disagree with in entertainment. It is the structure of Dworkin's criticisms that can be applied to the combination of fictional violence and humour. If we consider fiction a form of entertainment, like pornography, then MacKinnon's notions of hate-speech and advertising violence can be transferred to other forms, like text and film.

Defence and Appraisal of the Combination

As with any negative criticism, creators of fictional violence have had to defend and justify their literature and films. A key text that provides a defence of the combination of humour and violence is William Paul's *Laughing, Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror & Comedy*. In the text he explores films that have been condemned by critics as 'evidence of the vulgarity of mass taste', as well as 'demonstrating the mind-numbing decadence of American culture' (3-4). He refers to such films as "gross-out" comedy, which involves films that are 'quite happy to present themselves to the public as spectacles in the worst possible taste' (4). However, Paul does not share this damning opinion of such works that utilisation both violence and horror. He further critiques such views, deeming these responses part of a 'paranoic strain that is a common response to popular culture' (5). Paul himself retains a more positive attitude towards works, specifically films, which infuse elements of humour and violence. In the text he writes: 'I see these films not only as key expressions of their period but also as more fully achieved artistic

expression then has generally been granted' (5). This is similar to the diverse reactions towards comedic, violent works that have been explored in this chapter. There were people who wished to dismiss Bret Easton Ellis as a writer, or, to a more extreme extent, destroy his work altogether. On the contrary, Ellis is still a highly prolific and successful writer, who has flourished regardless of the innumerable negative criticism he received. Within one of his chapters Paul recognises that some audiences who have conceded to this 'paranoic strain' of thought may ask such redundant questions as 'don't these films present something we ought to guard ourselves against?' and 'doesn't the grossness these films present as a value in itself lay siege to all that is best in our culture and even best for the future of our society?' (5). These sorts of questions reflected the concerns of such critics as Dworkin and MacKinnon, who fear the impact of violence in entertainment.

Such defences can be applied to Bret Easton Ellis' fiction, as he was often subjected to personal criticism on account of his fictional writing. It has already been displayed that Ellis faced vast amounts of criticism from his novel *American Psycho*. In response to this disparagement Ellis responded by, claiming that critics should be able to differentiate between the creator and the fiction. He contends that 'Bateman is a misogynist. In fact, he's beyond that, he is just barbarous. But I think most Americans learn in junior high to differentiate between the writer and the character he is writing about. People seem to insist I'm a monster. But Bateman is the monster. I am not on the side of that creep' (Cohen 1991). Ellis professes the importance of separating the creator of fictional violence from the characters who carry out this violence in his text. In this defence it can be argued that the extreme fictional violence is a literary device in Ellis' novel, and is placed to make specific points about American society and culture. This notion is echoed in an essay by Orson Scott Card who argues that it is a person's incapability as a literary analyst that causes claims of gratuitous violence, 'unaccustomed to reading at all, the would-be censor sees a sex act and cannot see what purpose that depiction of evil might serve in the rest of the book' (227). Both these claims draw on the idea of certain readers and critics being too sensitive, and perhaps naive, to be able to properly appreciate his manipulation of

fictional violence. However, many detractors of Ellis' work have disputed the extremity to which his fiction presents, in order to make a satirical comment on society.

It should also be addressed that humour and violence can be, and has been on multiple occasions, deployed in order to create tension and fear. Although McGhee's analysis of the therapeutic qualities of humour is viable, and evident in many pieces of literature and film, it must be recognised that the use of humour is not always relieving and, in some cases, can have the opposite effect. This notion could be substantiated by both Ennis' and Ellis' creations, but can be even more vivid in other productions of fiction. One of the most harrowing combinations of the two concepts that I have witnessed is found in the American horror film *August Underground*, which follows the actions of two murderers, frequently representing the killers torturing their victims and receiving immense pleasure from it. In the first opening scenes we are given an insight into the daily routine of the two murderers. They enter their basement where they have a woman tied to a chair, who has clearly been tortured. They laugh and joke with each other whilst continuing the woman's torture, covering her with her own excrement and cutting off her nipples and feeding them to her. The viewer watches as a woman is helplessly attacked, yet the perpetrators of this crime are laughing as if they are playing a game. In this extreme case, the humour and their laughter are sickening and make the scene more difficult to watch, because of the contrast between their laughter and enjoyment, and the torture they are enjoying. It is difficult for humour to be found in these scenes, because of the repulsion caused from watching two men be so entertained by the sadistic suffering being presented on screen.

Summary

This chapter intended to probe and investigate the debates surrounding the combination of humour and violence in fiction. Through the analysis of Ennis' and Ellis' texts I have found that one of the most frequent ways in which comedy and violence are utilised together is the use of contrast. As seen in nearly all of the examples above, writers and directors contrast the concept of violence with humour in order to make people laugh. This is easily done because the elements are such opposing themes. Violence, which conventionally provokes anger and

disgust, becomes humorous and also provokes enjoyment from the spectator. This is where McGhee's notion of the 'therapeutic properties of humor' can be utilised. After a depiction of fictional violence unnerves and unsettles the reader or audience, laughter can reinstate pleasure and enjoyment, allowing what may originally be perceived as disturbing to become enjoyable. I personally believe that it is possible that one of the main functions of using a combination of violence with humour is to distract and disengage the reader from extremely violent or highly sexual acts, and to allow the writer/director to be able to utilise more violent material.

However, although there is plenty of evidence to suggest that humour can dilute the abrasive effect of fictional violence, I must address the idea that this is not an absolute. There are cases in which humour is utilised for the opposite effect: to intimidate and repulse viewers, instead of comforting them. This, like in the case of *American Psycho*, can have an extremely harrowing effect on the viewer, and dislodge their emotions because of the oxymoronical idea of being entertained, and laughing at, violence.

Although some scholars, such as MacKinnon and Dworkin, consider humour as a branch of violence and hate speech, I myself have difficulty rationalising this view. I feel that many critics, like those who have condemn Ellis' novels, are too quick to attack the use of humour, and should not criticise the use of fictitious violence as entertainment. If a high volume of people who watch fictional violence repeated and acted upon the violence they encountered, then I would be more inclined to agree with them. However, I do not feel that fictional violence has a direct effect on human behaviour, a notion that will be explored in more detail in the final chapter. I am of the opinion that, when humour and fictional violence is combined it is within a form of entertainment, whether film, literature, or a comedy set, and should be viewed as such. This kind of humorous representation of fictional violence can be enjoyed when the viewer does not endorse the offensive beliefs that can be found in such texts and performances.

After exploring the two themes, I would posit that the combination of humour and violence is an acceptable and positive attribute within fictional violence. Even when used in a harrowing manner, I still maintain that it is a successful tool to create tension and fear in a reader or viewer. Humour is an interesting area of study in fiction, particularly when combined with

violence. The varying motivations behind its utilisation should be considered as meaningful as other literary devices, and, I feel, should be a larger area of focus within modern literary criticism.

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THE DEPLOYMENT AND DILEMMA OF THE SATIRE DEFENCE

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, violence is frequently coupled with comedy within literary and cinematic works. Reactions to this are diverse, and the reasons for the combination differ. The use of humour is just one method, among many, that authors and directors deploy in order to soften the use of graphic and explicit violence, particularly in scenes containing morally and sexually deviant acts. Humour is not the only concept that is used to accompany extreme depictions of violence in order to alter the way in which readers and viewers respond to and perceive them. Extreme acts of violence are commonly justified by suggesting there is an ulterior motive for their portrayal. They are defended by stating that there is a literary intention or purpose which validates them. Horror critic Gina Wisker acknowledges that writers and directors frequently use violent images and graphic content in a way that engrosses the viewer, and also that the creators manipulate this entertainment into a form of socio-political commentary. She declares that creators of fictional violence frequently deploy ‘characteristics of the monstrous, vile, violent, dehumanizing elements that the [horror] genre itself uses to entertain and to comment’ (Wisker 5). Her suggestion that violence is used ‘to entertain and to comment’ can be explored to support how fictional violence can be manipulated to encase a literary intention within the text or film. However, this defence can be questioned, and there are many issues that can arise from using this justification. Within this chapter it is my intention to examine such justifications and literary intentions by investigating and scrutinising cases of this in controversial works of literature and film, and analysing the purpose and problems of the satirical defence.

The Justification of Fictional Violence in *Martyrs*

In order to probe the satire defence of polemical works I will first investigate depictions of violence, and subsequent justifications of it, in the 2008 French horror film *Martyrs*, directed by

Pascal Laugier. The film opens with shots of a young girl, Lucie Jurin, who has been beaten, running from an abandoned abattoir, although her captors and other circumstances remain unknown. These frames are followed by various clips showing the early stages in Lucie's life, including her placement in an orphanage and the befriending of another girl, Anna. We are also given an insight into her mental instability, as she is haunted by the figment of a tortured girl, which she experiences as a result of her own childhood torture. The film then travels forward fifteen years and we are presented with a conventional French family, a mother, father, son, and daughter, eating breakfast together, indulging in small talk. This peaceful scenario is shattered when the older Lucie arrives at the door with a shotgun and slaughters the entire family. She calls Anna and tells her what she has done, claiming the parents of the family are the people who held her captive when she was younger. Lucie suffers another psychological attack which results in her killing herself. Anna, who doubted whether Lucie was correct about the identity of the family, discovers a chamber hidden beneath the house where the parents had transferred their torture area after the escape of Lucie. Whilst trying to save a woman found underground who has been tortured and disfigured, Anna is met in the hallway by a group of people, dressed in black, who kill the woman Anna was trying to help. She is then sat down and addressed by the leader of the organisation, a woman referred to only as Mademoiselle, who informs her of the intentions of the secret organisation she runs. The organisation is obsessed with exploring the life after death, and investigates this by torturing women to a point of transcendental pain, where they no longer feel the world around them, yet are still alive, a point defined by a particular look in their eyes. For the remaining thirty minutes of the film Anna is beaten and subjected to horrific physical and emotional torture at the hands of members of the organisation. She finally reaches this state between life and death when she is skinned alive. Mademoiselle asks her what she has seen beyond death, and Anna whispers in her ear, but what she reveals is concealed from the viewers. The film concludes by Mademoiselle shooting herself in the head.

The French film industry has had a monumental influence in the evolution and expansion of cinema. In addition to this it has also produced a variety of innovative theories concerning the criticism and analysis of film, many of which have posited the importance of freedom of

expression and moral or purposeful motives within the medium. One example of this is ‘Auteur Theory’, a term popularised in the United States by American film critic Andrew Sarris, but first introduced in 1954 by film director and critic, François Truffaut. Although it is recognised that auteur theory ‘grew up rather haphazardly’ and ‘was never elaborated in programmatic terms’ (Wollen 77), it is generally accepted that the theory explores the importance of the director’s artistic vision, which is expressed through their film. The theory acknowledges the director as the primary and main creator of the film. Film critic Linda Costanzo Cahir promotes this as more common in contemporary cinema by claiming that ‘the creative function of the director is more pronounced than it was in the early days of movie-making, giving rise to the general perception that the director is the dominant creative force in a film and that the other collaborators on the movie are largely assistants, albeit significant ones’ (Cahir 86). This notion can be considered particularly problematic for the horror film genre, as it includes more collaboration from a variety of contributors, such as make-up artists and special effects teams, than other cinematic genres. Although these associates are instructed by the director, they can have their own distinctive style and input into their specialist field, which can give them some influence in the film’s production. To then restrict artistic expression solely to the director is difficult because of the combined effects of all collaborators involved. While this can be argued to qualify the creative involvement of the director in the genre, Laugier expresses the deep, personal level of engagement he had in all aspects of *Martyrs*’ production. Not only does he refer to the horror genre as a way for him to ‘express personal things’, but he maintains that films are ‘made as a direct expression from the director’ (Turek 2008). Although he does not specifically refer to himself as an ‘auteur’, he acknowledges the intense involvement he had in the production of the film, which is reflected in the fact that he states he cannot watch the film with an audience, as he feels it is ‘too personal’ to himself.

This is similar to another development, explored by French film critic Alexandre Astruc, called the “Camera-Stylo”, literally meaning “camera-pen”. This movement also aimed to advocate the director’s freedom of expression and creativity within their films. He likens this to a writer’s ability to communicate their thoughts in essays and novels, dubbing the film ‘a form in which

an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel' (Astruc 1948). This again conveys the importance of artistic authority and the director's ability to sculpt their films as a device to promote their own purpose. Both these theories are relevant when discussing the deployment of fictional violence, as the freedom of expression can offer motives to why the creator has chosen to use extreme violence in their productions.

Many of the more recent developments in French cinema have concerned the presence of extreme violence, a theme which is increasingly common, and of a more graphic nature, in French horror films. *Martyrs* is a French horror film that many have designated to the category of film known as "New French Extremism", a term that was coined by critic James Quandt to describe a collection of particularly transgressive, violent films made by French directors at the turn of the twenty-first century. The style of "New French Extremism" can be characterised by a contentious and abrasive approach to the depiction and representation of sex and violence, as well as the intention to represent criticisms of social and political issues. Andrew Couzens describes the style as a movement containing 'European films that revel in transgressive depictions of violence and sex (or both at the same time), which takes the superficial aesthetic traits of Torture-Porn and moulds the on-screen horror into something... new' (Couzens 2013). This suggests that violence can be manipulated in ways that change how it is received and interpreted. Quandt offers his own definition of the violent nature of the style, stating that 'Bava as much as Bataille, Sàlo no less than Sade seem the determinants of a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation and defilement,' (Quandt 2004). Quandt uses directors such as Gaspar No , Alexandre Aja, and Bertrand Bonello as examples of contributors to the style of "New French Extremism". Although Quandt did not originally place Laugier's film into this style bracket, many critics have recognised the importance of *Martyrs*, as well as its suitability for the category, due to its high concentration of graphic violence. Tim Palmer recognises the involvement of social and political critique in the "New French Extremism" style by acknowledging that it 'offers incisive

social critiques, portraying contemporary society as isolating, unpredictably horrific and threatening' (Palmer 22). Many critics and readers have used the criteria suggested by Palmer to explore and praise Laugier's use of violence in *Martyrs*, as well as using them to justify the film's placement in the "New French Extremist" style.

Gwendolyn Foster offers the interpretation that *Martyrs* 'strongly suggests, largely through the use of the mundane, that routine torture goes on every day in most homes and families and in the institutions that hold up capital: patriarchy, the church, law, military, and society' (Foster 2012). When applying this to the film itself, evidence can be found to support this analysis. This can be through the symbolic placement of the torture chamber in which Anna and other women are kept. Initially, when Lucie is kept captive as a child, she is seen running from an abandoned abattoir, a building known for slaughter, which seems highly appropriate for the torture she endured. However, Anna discovers the chamber in which she is imprisoned underneath an idyllic house in the French countryside. The house is initially presented as a happy, family home, where the audience witnesses what appears to be an average family enjoying breakfast together. After Lucie has murdered the entire family, Anna expresses that she has doubts about whether Lucie had correctly identified the parents of the family as her captors, as there is no evidence of a violent nature in the house. An audience member, who has witnessed Lucie's psychotic outbreaks and unstable mental disposition, would consider Anna the more reliable party in this case, and is led to believe that she is correct and Lucie was mistaken. However, it is then revealed, through the discovery of the underground chamber, that Lucie had found her torturers. The horror and violence of this room is disguised by the façade of a peaceful home belonging to a traditional family, a prospect which reflects this hidden violence that Foster claims the film represents. The violent organisation is disguised by the happy family living in the home above the torture chamber, which can be interpreted to be symbolic of the 'routine torture' that Foster says occurs in well-known institutions.

Foster maintains this assertion of the violent nature of various institutions by analysing the film's representation of corrupt organisations. She argues that *Martyrs* intended to 'expose how institutions of power corrupt basic human desires. This corruption destroys the meaning of life,

living and the pursuits of pleasure and replaces it with a death trip, a meaningless quest for power, money, and life after death' (Foster 2012). The destructive power of organisations in society can be reflected in statements made by Laugier, who admits that he uses horror in his films as a way to depict complications in human relationships and criticise the way that our society is created and organized. This notion is applicable to the film, for example the idea of the organisation representing the corruption that destroys multiple women's lives, causing them to suffer in order to pursue the organisation's desperation to uncover truths regarding the afterlife. Some have argued that the film focuses on the torture of women in order to draw upon issues involving feminism and the suffering of women, for example Jerrold E. Hogle, who proposes that the film focuses on women because it 'highlights the many cultural woundings of women by men, families, and whole cultures, sometimes including brutal suppressions of same-sex love' (Hogle 74). The violence is so extreme in order to demonstrate the amount of, and the severity of, suffering women endure at the hands of the organisation, which reflects the suffering and discontent that repressive institutions, for example religion and government, can inflict on a society.

Responses to *Martyrs* were diverse when the film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2008. Reactions to the film included astonishment, anger, and crying (Turek 2008). Laugier recognised that viewers 'found it both offensive and relieving' (Turek 2008); however he fully understands the negative reviews he received as he acknowledges that 'horror is not a genre that's designed to please everybody'. Laugier himself admits that he is not sure whether he would have enjoyed the movie, had he been in the position of the audience, 'I'm not sure as a member of the audience that I would love the film. I'm not sure at all. It's not a very likeable movie, it's an exploration' (White 2009). The last few words of this quote suggest that the film should not be judged on the violence and gore it presents, but the themes and topics it purports to explore. This notion that the film should be perceived as 'an exploration' can be difficult to accept, due to the high saturation, and extremity, of violence that is included.

Laugier has previously offered explanations regarding why he feels people have reacted badly to his film. He claims that the reason people had objections was not due to the blood and

violence, but the film's involvement with religion that gained the film such a negative reaction from a lot of critics. Laugier states that the criticisms 'had nothing to do with the gore. It had more to do with the fact that the film is so serious and about themes that offended these very religious people' (Carnevale 2009). This declaration can be refuted by acknowledging that the negative responses were not restricted to pious people, nor did the negativity only criticise the anti-religious aspects of the film. Because of this it is difficult to fully accept Laugier's defence as it ignores the criticisms the film received that did not include religion. In fact, during my research I have found it difficult to locate this abundance of religious criticism that Laugier alleges to exist. Laugier focuses on religious criticism, which does not account for all the negative responses to the film. However, there are those who praise Laugier's deployment of violence, and many who appreciate the film as an important work of socio-political commentary. Many of these viewers have recognised and praised Laugier's various intentions behind his use of violence, for example film reviewer Lee Griffiths referred to the film as 'deeply disturbing, profoundly moving and somehow, eerily beautiful' (Griffiths 2009), and John White, who has commended how Laugier's deployment of violence in the film is original, claiming it has been successful in 'refreshing tired tales' (White 2009) of the genre, and produced a unique addition to the horror market. Laugier refutes the claims that the violence in *Martyrs* is gratuitously portrayed, and defends his film by arguing that the violent depictions in his film have a purpose, 'torture is not the point of *Martyrs*. The film deals with human pain, the meaning of it, which is something completely different' (Turek 2008). Through this quotation, it is understood that Laugier's way of justifying his use of violence is to disregard the brutality of it, and focus on the meaning and intention behind it. This would support the idea that violence can be utilised as a vessel for commentary within fiction, and is not necessarily included as a gratuitous shock-tactic. Laugier continues to describe his intentions behind his representations of violence by stating: 'I would say that the film is a way for me to speak about the times we are living in right now. I have a feeling, like a sad intuition, that our occidental urban societies are filled with despair and brutality' (Turek 2008). When exploring some of Laugier's statements, it can be problematic to find substance in his declarations. This statement, for example, that mentions the 'despair and brutality' in Western society is difficult to contextualise. France had

been an area of conflict in the years prior to the release of the film, for example the civil unrest during October and November, 2005, which resulted in riots including the burning of cars and buildings. However, when compared to conflicts in other areas, for example the Syrian Civil War, that has been ongoing since 2011 and claimed the lives of over 190,000 people, Laugier's experience of 'despair and brutality' seems relatively minor. Although Laugier's statement could be considered an exaggeration, he still insists that his exploitation of violence was not intended for the sole purpose of shocking or dismaying the reader, but aims to comment upon various issues that he endeavours to address, and Laugier uses his film and violence as a vessel to do this. Laugier himself argues that 'to disgust audiences has never been my [Laugier's] motivation' (Sélavy 2009). He continues to acknowledge the presence of violence, but refutes claims that it was gratuitously deployed, 'I was interested in using the imagery of torture porn and turning it into something different' (Foster 2012). When faced with this defence many could retaliate by questioning why, if the film is not intended to focus on violence, is the film so highly saturated with violent and gruesome depictions of torture? Regardless of this, other critics have concurred with this defence of the manipulation of violence. Moira Fradinger, for example, acknowledges the useful perceptions that the analysis of horror can offer, arguing that the analysis of such violence can 'offer us insights into the violent fabric of autonomous political life and its inextricable relation to the travails of imagination; imagination, in its turn, bears the imprint of violence' (Fradinger 3).

Although it can be argued that anti-religious undertones are not the only reason why the film received negative criticism, it is an extremely prominent symbol related to the depictions of violence. One way in which this can be substantiated is through the title of the film, as it can be perceived in an ironic manner. *The Collins Dictionary* defines a martyr as a person who dies for or because of their religious belief. However, in the case of the film *Martyrs*, women are being tortured for the advantage and the religious beliefs of others, the members of the organisation. It can be deduced that Laugier wants to express the repressive nature of religion, as young women are being exploited in order to gain knowledge about religion and the afterlife. This can be explored as a demonstration of religious hypocrisy in the film, concerning the nature of the

violence, as the members wish to discover knowledge of the afterlife, yet the methods with which they attempt to achieve this are violent and sacrilegious. Instead of any members suffering to gain knowledge of life after death, pain is only administered to the unwilling captives.

The film circulates around the organisation's desire to learn about the afterlife. These representations throughout the film can be investigated to depict the antireligious undertones that have been recognised by critics and viewers. Gwendolyn Foster concludes that 'even though Laugier allows for some ambiguity, in the end, it seems clear to me that there is no afterlife, no union with God, and no ascendance into the heaven for the final victim in *Martyrs*, even as it conjures iconic images of female martyrdom' (Foster 2012). The antireligious features can be explored by looking at the film's engagement with the concepts of the afterlife and transcendental pain. The amount of pain that Anna endures throughout her ordeal is in the name of knowledge regarding the afterlife. Anna reaches the point where she is meant to witness the afterlife, and relays that information to Mademoiselle. This is followed by the scene of Mademoiselle shooting herself in the head. Although the information is hidden from the viewer, many have formulated their own interpretations of this ending. One possible interpretation, connected to the antireligious interpretations of the film, claims that Anna tells Mademoiselle there is no afterlife, nothing after death, which results in Mademoiselle killing herself out of shame for her failure, and the pointless torture she has inflicted on women for nothing. This would offend religious viewers, as it rejects notions of a peaceful afterlife, and transcendence to a better place. Furthermore, the religious people within the film are portrayed as violent torturing villains, as opposed to the holy, righteous beings they should be, which again would provoke critical responses. It also enforces the idea that if religious people invest so much in being holy, in order to gain access to a religious afterlife, they are faced with bitter disappointment. This is reiterated in the final words of Mademoiselle, who tells her servant to 'keep dreaming' of life after death. The film ends on a gunshot, and the screen goes black, reflective of the idea of nothingness after death.

Other images of a religious nature can be found within graphic scenes of horror, for example at the end of the film, where Anna has been skinned alive. She is skinned and then chained, on her knees, with her arms held out to the sides, in a cruciform position. This position could be likened to a supplicant in prayer. This imagery would be particularly poignant because a supplicant in prayer is attempting to contact God, which is the same achievement that the Organisation is striving for. At her point of supposed transcendental pain the position she is in can also be seen as symbolic of Jesus on the cross, being sacrificed for his beliefs. By coupling these two ideas together, the way in which the film criticises religion can be analysed. Some maintain that Jesus was put into this position for his beliefs, like a martyr, yet Anna is forced into this position for the beliefs of other people. There seems to be a contradiction between the holy sacrifice of Jesus in this state, and the viewer's knowledge of the extreme torture that Anna has experienced to be placed in this position. This can be explored as a criticism of the imposition of beliefs onto other people, and how some religious groups unfairly attempt to force other people into their mode of thought.

Not only can the film be said to criticise religious groups, but it can be interpreted to completely reject the idea of life after death in any form whatsoever. Critic Andrew Couzens explores this notion in the film and suggests that the organisation has no belief in any form of a higher power, and suggests that the only way to retrieve knowledge of the afterlife is pain. He states that 'the organisation believes that the essential ingredient is pain and suffering, and martyrdom is completely divorced from religion' (Couzens 2013). Instead of suggesting the organisation are curious to know about a religious afterlife, it disregards any concept of religion at all, exploring the theory that the organisation wants to gain knowledge about the unknown.

It can be substantiated that the socio-political and religious critiques are not the only issues that Laugier wanted to highlight in French culture. There is evidence to suggest that Laugier intended to create an exploration of horror, and the incoherences he considers present in that genre. Gwendolyn Foster recognises that Laugier's choice of settings frequently contradicts the genre's conventions, for example the generic French home that the family live in before being murdered is described by her as 'brightly lit and flatly designed' (Foster 2012), which subverts

expectations of the usual settings which are considered symbolic of the horror genre. Foster supports this analysis by stating that Laugier's choice in setting is a 'stark contrast to the more conventional cinematic tropes of gothic castles, darkened attics, and standard issue locations of terror and violence in traditional horror films' (Foster 2012). Whilst further exploring the connection with the horror genre in Laugier's work, Foster praises how '*Martyrs* openly challenges such films and simplistic genre films and supersedes them by using fresh narrative techniques and exposing the roots of Capitalism, misogyny and horror film tropes' (Foster 2012). Not only does Laugier attempt to contradict the generic horror tropes, but his film, and the extreme violence it projects, can also be interpreted as a criticism of how modern films are portraying the horror genre.

Laugier asserts that the 'horror film should be a space of freedom, a territory for experimentation' (Sélavy 2009), yet he has been criticised for including violence, which he would protect as a method of 'experimentation'. This reverts back to the theories of 'Camera-Stylo' and 'Auteur Theory', as Laugier expresses the importance of creative freedom of expression. He continues to discuss the genre, and does praise past productions of the horror genre, yet appears less content with more modern manifestations of films that claim to be part of it. He deprecates the way the genre has changed, stating that 'the genre had become politically correct, as safe as any other genre, whereas its origin lies in fact in transgression' (Sélavy 2009). He dubs horror the freest genre that exists yet feels it has become restricted by political correctness and an aversion to the transgression of boundaries. The notion can be analysed as an explanation for the extreme violence that Laugier deploys in his film. Through his statement it can be suggested that he feels the genre, which should consist of violence and horror, has become too soft, and the horror film is becoming as light and innocent as other genres of film. The graphic depictions of violence, then, can be explored as a defiant stand against making a film so innocent. It appears that Laugier is suggesting he is making the film so graphic because that is the nature of a horror film, or how he feels products of the genre should be. He did not want to create a film that does not represent the transgressive genre it belongs to, an idea which can be used to explain why Laugier subverts the traditional horror setting. When questioned, in

an interview, about violence in the horror genre Laugier insisted that ‘horror, in my view, shouldn’t be a unifying genre. It must divide, shock, make cracks in the certainties of the audience and their propensity to a certain conformism. Horror is inherently subversive. Otherwise, I don’t see the point’ (Sélavy 2009). When exploring this, the first complication of the satire defence surfaces. His suggestion that the horror genre is a genre of experimentation and expression, and his intuition that this has somehow been lost, can be connected back to the theories and notions of ‘Auteur Theory’ that were discussed in the beginning of this chapter. Both these factors suggest an intention that the violence is used as a tool in itself as a device to revolt against a genre that Laugier feels has become too tame and restricted. From one perspective, Laugier claims that his deployment of violence has a satirical purpose within his work, and is not utilised in a gratuitous manner. However, the notion that he is striving for such gruesome and extreme violence with the intention to shock and offend would remove the satirical defence of the piece. This conflict can be problematical when exploring the authenticity of Laugier’s defence.

The Satire Defence in Bret Easton Ellis’ *Glamorama*

This notion regarding the utilisation of fictional violence to make a statement about wider society is the first argument that I wish to address when exploring my next fictional work: Bret Easton Ellis’ *Glamorama*. When contemplating the topic of extreme fictitious violence it is difficult not to consider this American novelist as one of the most prominent and controversial writers of the twenty-first century. He began writing at a young age, and was acknowledged as a successful writer from his first publication, *Less Than Zero*, in 1985, at the age of twenty-one. Although this publication was a success, Ellis is most well-known for his third novel *American Psycho*, and its film adaptation directed by Mary Harron in 2000, which was dissected in the previous chapter. Now, after a writing career spanning twenty-eight years, Ellis has published six novels, as well as a collection of short stories, and has collaborated with other writers and producers on screen plays. Ellis is widely known for the controversy caused by the publication of *American Psycho*, something that began with content disputes that arose prior to the book’s release. As mentioned in the previous chapter the book was dropped by publishing company

Simon & Schuster before being released because of the graphic and violent content of the novel, which sparked interest and intrigue about reading it. Ellis received a lot of negative responses from the publication of his novel, which was eventually published by Knopf, and critics were outraged that the violent content had been allowed to be published, and angered further when the book sold well. Naomi Mandel recognises the backlash Ellis received because ‘the publication of *American Psycho* by Knopf elicited outcry from activists who argued that the book’s violence against women reinforces long-standing problems of assault and abuse’ (Mandel 9). Ellis maintains that the controversy surrounding the content of the novel can be attributed to the contention around the original publication, even though he personally feels the violence manifests in just a small part of the novel. Many have acknowledged that this scandal ‘catapulted Ellis to the center of a media storm and elicited debates about violence, aesthetics, censorship, and ethics that echo to this day’ (Mandel 2). After the turbulent publication of the novel many have begun to believe that ‘*American Psycho* is easily one of the most controversial novels of the twentieth century’ (Mandel 1). The dispute over this novel often overshadows his other works, and leads critics and readers to make assumptions about Ellis’ writing without having read it. However, even after the rejection of Ellis’ work, many critics believe that there has recently been a ‘critical reevaluation’ of it, for example Naomi Mandel, who frequently praises Ellis’ work, believes critics and readers are beginning to appreciate his literature more (Mandel 2). The textual focus in this section is Ellis’ fourth novel, *Glamorama*, published in 1998. The text, alongside Ellis’ other texts like *American Psycho* and *Lunar Park*, has a diverse reputation, and all ‘have been violently reviled and vehemently acclaimed’ (Mandel 3).

The novel that I am consulting, *Glamorama*, focuses on the model and fashion industry, specifically following the male model Victor Ward, who is the current ‘IT boy’. The first half of the book explores Victor’s life, the parties he attends, celebrities he meets, his relationships, and displays his lifestyle to the reader. Victor then meets a character in a café, named Palakon, who offers him three hundred thousand dollars to travel to London and find an ex-girlfriend of his, Jamie Fields, and return her to New York. His relationship has broken down after a compromising photograph of him and his boss’ girlfriend was published in a magazine. His

girlfriend had left him and he has been fired from his job because of the photograph. After his life begins to fall apart in New York he agrees to find her. He boards the QE2 cruise ship to travel to Southampton, and on the boat meets a woman named Marina Gibson, whom he has a sexual encounter with, during which it is insinuated that she could be a transvestite. She subsequently disappears, and Victor finds a tooth and a pool of blood in the room she was staying in, but the ship's clerk has no record of her travelling with them. He arrives in London and quickly finds Jamie Fields, and becomes acquainted with her friends, Bobby, Bruce, Bentley, and Tammy, all of whom are models. Bobby, who instantly presents himself as the leader of the group, asks Victor to collect another model, Sam Ho, and bring him to their house. Victor does, but later discovers Sam Ho being killed by the group, in a particularly graphic torture scene. Together, the group induce Victor into a drugged stupor for a few weeks, during which Victor can only report the actions of the group. This goes unexplained until Jamie elaborates on the group of which he is now a part. She reveals they are in fact a terrorist organisation, working against another Japanese group, and Victor is blackmailed into joining them through incriminating sexual photos of him and the murdered Sam Ho. It is also revealed that the organisation had murdered Marina Gibson, whom he had met aboard the cruise ship, and the sexual encounter they shared had in fact been Bobby dressed in drag. Victor is then met by Palakon, who has come to find him after losing contact, and Victor begs him for help. Palakon declares he will help him, but needs time to do so, leaving Victor to remain in the group. It is finally revealed that Palakon had used finding Jamie Fields as a ruse to get Victor out of the country because his father wants to run for the presidency in America. The rest, Palakon assures him, was merely an accident, and now Bobby wants to use him as a bargaining chip against the Japanese, who want to see Victor's father win the presidency. There is a violent fight in which Victor eventually kills Bobby whilst trying to intercept a bomb on an aeroplane that Bobby has planted. Victor feels he has successfully achieved this, but realises it was a fake, and the bomb detonates the aircraft in the air, which is depicted in an extremely graphic way. The final pages are rather vague and uncertain and can be interpreted to suggest that either Victor has gone home to New York, gone back to school, and is living his own life again as the president's son, or he is trapped in Milan, unable to get home and surrounded by death, still

being hunted down by unknown threats. In a novel so concentrated on the masking of identity, it is possible that these are both the case, and that whoever is living as Victor Ward in New York is an imposter.

There is a specific kind of stigma attached to a work published by Bret Easton Ellis, that it will be unnecessarily violent and gruesome, a reputation gained from the turbulent release of his third novel *American Psycho*. Henrik Skov Nielsen appreciates the importance of Ellis' depictions of violence, arguing that 'in its graphic depictions of violence, in its evocation of a society dominated by popular culture and in its blurring of the distinction between reality and fiction... *Glamorama* displays many characteristics of the contemporary extreme' (Skov Nielsen 20). Nielsen expresses the viewpoint that Ellis' deployment of violence is not gratuitous, but actually portrays an intention to discuss social and political issues, and recognises its place as an important piece of work in contemporary literature. Although I can appreciate that Ellis' works are true to their notoriously violent and gruesome reputations, I am of the opinion that his utilisations of violence are some of the most significant and accurate in contemporary literature and film.

Critic James Annesley recognises a purpose in Ellis' utilisation of graphic violence because nearly all of his works 'employ images of the brutalised body to develop a wider perspective on dehumanisation, objectification and reification' (Annesley 37). When applying this idea to the novel *Glamorama*, evidence can be found to substantiate Mandel's interpretations, for example in the murder of Sam Ho. Ellis launches into a graphic description of Sam Ho being tortured: 'a mannequin made from wax covered in either oil or Vaseline, slathered with it, lies twisted on its back in some kind of horrible position on a steel examination table, naked, both legs spread open and chained to stirrups, its scrotum and anus completely exposed' (283). The body is being electrocuted by the model-terrorist organisation being run by the people Victor has befriended in London. A comment that appears to be particularly relevant to this section is again from Annesley who states that it is common for Ellis to 'use the image of the brutalised body as a metaphor for a society that is being mortified and carved up' (Annesley 22). The symbolic nature of this, and its application to American society, concerns the people who are doing the

torturing. Sam Ho is being electrocuted by an organisation run by supermodels, and is suffering at the hands of people who are generic symbols of beauty and fame. This can be explored as an analogy of what damage such a strong dependence on beauty and image can have on society and culture. Before Sam-Ho's torture Victor goes to collect him and he becomes giddy and excited, he starts shouting 'where? Where is he? Is he here?' (277). He becomes almost childlike with anticipation to see the leader of the group who summoned him, and is described as 'shivering uncontrollably and hugging himself, a beatific smile softening the angle of his face' (278). This desperation to see the model can be seen as the type of adoration society has for people who are models, famous, or beautiful, yet the end result in Sam-Ho's case is graphic torture. Again this can be interpreted as Ellis creating an analogy for society's adulation of famous people, and he uses the violence to reflect the overwhelming power that beauty has over people, as well as the harsh reality that is perhaps masked behind faces of beauty. The person Sam-Ho is insanely excited to see and be around is the person who organises and aids in his torture and death. This can be understood as a metaphor for the idolisation of beauty and fame having detrimental effects on a person. In an extreme fashion, the violence portrayed is meant to be an allegorical representation of how such adoration can destroy a person, and in this case it can be argued that this is what Ellis wants to reflect through this violence.

This idea of demonstrating the ugliness behind the world of beauty can be found when looking at how the terrorist bombs are referred to in the novel. Instead of ever naming the bombs as what they are, they are only ever acknowledged by the brand name of the bag they are in. In each instance of an explosion Victor names the multiple bombs only as the 'Vuitton box', 'Prada backpack', 'Gucci tote bag', and 'Louis Vuitton tote bag' (295, 303, 353, 318). As previously mentioned, this can also be explored as a criticism of society's focus on fashion and image. The bombs are not referred to as the entities of destruction that they are, but instead defined by the expensive brand name that encases them, turning them into desirable bags instead of deadly weapons. Furthermore, a tote bag is described as a bag of essentials that a model carries for their job, whereas in this case, it holds a bomb. This can be analysed again as a metaphor for the destruction that an emphasis on the degrading effect that an obsession and

fascination can have on a person, whether the models themselves or the society and people around them.

In the previous analysis of Laugier's film *Martyrs* I explored his deployment of violence as a device utilised to question the changing nature of the horror genre. It was shown that Laugier used extreme violence in symbolic ways, but also to make a wider statement about horror and violence in society. This wider intention behind violence is something that can also be recognised in Ellis' novel. In an interview in 1999, conducted by Allan Gregg, Bret Easton Ellis made a statement concerning the attitude of American society and culture towards violence. He stated there was:

‘a casualty about dealing with brutality, that seems very suggestive to me, I mean, when you read magazines now and when you do hear about horrible events in the world and people being tortured and murdered it is often within advertising. For example you pick up a magazine you see atrocity photos next to perfume ads. You watch horrible footage of violence on CNN and immediately a commercial for baby wipes comes on, I mean, the juxtaposition of our culture for witnessing violent things...’ (Ellis 1999).

By unpacking this quote we can explore another criticism that Ellis is offering to explain his use of violence. Ellis offers a critique of our society's way of responding to violence, which he describes as too casual and nonchalant. Ellis criticises the way in which he feels American society has a more relaxed attitude to representations of violence in the media. This criticism is then reflected in his portrayal of violence, which is often in a deadpan, flat manner, with a lack of any moral compass or concern.

Reflections of this casual attitude towards violence can also be dissected in Ellis' novel. This can be found in the passage where Victor is describing the terrorist actions of the organisation he has become a part of. In one paragraph he describes the scene after an explosion from one of their terrorist bombs: ‘fifty-one injured. Four people will never walk again. Three others are severely brain-damaged. Along with the driver of a BMW, thirteen are dead, including an older man who dies, blocks away’ (296). Ellis proceeds to begin very next sentence: ‘And later that night at a very cool, sexy dinner in an upstairs room at the Hôtel Crillon, past a door flanked by dark-haired, handsome guards, Tammy mingles with Amber Valetta’ (296). The horrific scene

of a violent bomb explosion is casually disregarded by Victor when he abruptly changes topic to discuss a dinner party he attended, which he describes with the same attentiveness as the preceding traumatic, bloody paragraph. Whilst reading the novel, it is quite easy to move past this disaster, and the shift in topic, and it is only on reflection that a reader may realise the abrupt change in subject matter. These sentences are so paradoxical that they can be used to explore the incoherence of the attitude of American society towards violence that Ellis criticised in his previous interview. This exhibits Ellis' notion that, as a society, we have an indifferent attitude towards the representation of death, and only focus on what is in front of us. In these two paragraphs Ellis attempts to display the inconsistent emphasis on what appears to be important in society, with death and explosion being given an equal amount of focus and description as a dinner at a fancy hotel, mingling with famous people.

We can recognise this in our own culture even today, when we witness graphic campaigns on television, for example upsetting images of poverty in third world countries, which may distress us, yet we are distracted by the next advert, whatever it may be, and soon forget the upset of the previous advert. Furthermore, this could also explain why Ellis' depictions of violence are so extreme, because he does want to provoke a reaction when people are confronted with his violent novels, to contrast the lax attitude he feels society has towards portrayals of real violence.

Complications in the Satire Defence

Satire is one of the most commonly analysed aspects of Ellis' work, as he frequently deploys social commentary in his literature. His focus on political and social issues is a popular area of analysis of his work. His use of satire is regularly coupled with his depictions of violence, and this moral intention is repeatedly used to excuse and justify the graphic descriptions of violence he produces. However, some critics have begun to question whether a defence of satirical purpose is enough to excuse extremely shocking productions in culture. There have been incidents where this defence has been treated as an excuse to shock and offend, and also avoid criticism. This attitude was demonstrated in an article published in the *London Evening*

Standard by Richard Godwin. The article, published in the 23rd January 2014 edition of the newspaper, was titled “It’s Art But Beware the Satire”. It regarded a recent photograph posted on the fashion website Buro 24/7 of fashion designer and art dealer Dasha Zhukova sat on a piece of artwork in an exhibit by Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard. The piece she is sat on is a sculpture of a black woman on her back, with her legs in the air, dressed in a skimpy bondage outfit, to be used as a chair. The piece is a tribute to the original chair which was made by British artist Allen Jones, as part of the set “Hat Stand, Table and Chair”. The piece is an example of forniphilia, also known as “Human Furniture”, a form in which bondage and sexual objectification is applied to the human body to create furniture. Jones’ original set consisted of three fibreglass pieces, a hat stand, table and chair, all of which were blasted by critics when first released on display in 1969. At the time *The Guardian* suggested Jones and his works should be restricted from being displayed, and banned from exhibitions. He was also met by a ‘storm of feminist protest’ (Sladen 1995) with feminists declaring the piece as a symbol of misogyny. The set was part of exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1986, only to be defaced during an attack by feminist radicals in which stink bombs were launched at the exhibit.

The original artist deployed the satire defence, reasoning that the aim of the piece was to expose the sexual way in which women’s clothing was becoming increasingly more revealing, reducing them to sexual objects. After the barrage of negative criticism, Jones attempted to vindicate his work by arguing that:

‘Every Saturday on the King’s Road you went out and skirts were shorter, the body was being displayed in some new way. And you knew that the following week somebody would up the ante... I was reflecting on and commenting on exactly the same situation that was the source of the feminist movement. It was unfortunate for me that I produced the perfect image for them to show women were being objectified.’ Allen Jones (Gayford 2007).

He was adamant that his work was intended as a social observation of the sexual objectification of women, and he presented it in this controversial manner in order to expose his satirical purpose. The piece which featured in the article is not Jones’ original piece, but a tribute created

by Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard. The difference between the pieces was that Melgaard's tribute displayed black women. Once again the work received a storm of criticism, many concerning accusations of misogyny as well as racism. This outrage was rekindled when pictures of Dasha Zhukova posed on the chair were published on the fashion website. The photos were quickly removed after the controversy it created. Although Melgaard has not apologised for the offense his tribute has caused, Zhukova has expressed an apologetic attitude. In an interview she dubs the piece 'an artwork intended specifically as a commentary on gender and racial politics' (Saul 2014), thus justifying it as purposefully offensive in order to express the social and cultural issues of gender and race.

It is this attachment to the satire defence that Richard Godwin wants to address and criticise in his article. He purports that the 'satire defence' is an excuse to offend nowadays, without having any purpose other than to become famous for being shocking (Godwin 2014). The article raises the question of how easily the satire defence can be, and has been, deployed in response to criticism. His concerns regarding Jones' work relate to the trail of the satire defence, that began with Jones' justifications, and was then rehashed by other people who were not involved in the creation of the piece. This provokes the question of whether Zhukova can justify the photograph due to a satirical purpose, or whether this was purely because she received criticism for her photographs. It seems as if, in many cases, a claim of satire is deployed as a reaction against criticism and does not hold much value as a genuine explanation for extreme violence or transgression. Jones' and Melgaard's pieces, as well as Zhukova's controversial photos are a clear example of how the satire defence can be gratuitously deployed in order to explain what others have criticised. It is hard to decide who is correctly using a satirical defence for their work when the defence has been deployed so frequently. The repetitious utilisation of this defence leads to suggestions that the satire defence is so easily used, and in such a nonchalant manner, that it has begun to lose its reliability as a truthful reflection on the creator's work.

In many similar cases, the satire defence is frequently exercised when the creator is confronted with negative criticism. An interesting illustration of this occurred in 2007 when artist Guillermo "Habacuc" Vargas created an exhibition in the Codice Gallery in Nicaragua titled

“Emaciated Dog”. It consisted of a live, seriously malnourished dog chained to a wall, with dog biscuits glued to the wall. When photographs of the exhibition were released outrage ensued because of the suffering of the dog. Millions signed a petition to have Vargas banned from future exhibitions. There is some speculation around the treatment of the animal, some commentators stating that it escaped, others saying it was well cared for by Vargas himself, who refused to comment on the exhibition. Conversely, the director of the gallery, Juanita Bermudez, defends the choice to present Vargas’ display by excusing the work as ‘conceptual art and a work that leaves a social message’. The difficulty here is that, although Bermudez has defended the piece of art as a criticism of animal cruelty, the creator himself refused to comment on the exhibit at all. Even if we were to accept Bermudez’ excuse for Vargas, the artist’s silence on the subject diminishes the claims of a satirical intent. If Vargas was attempting to criticise animal cruelty, not just shock and offend viewers for publicity, then his refusal to comment on the piece could be perceived as an attempt to ignite more controversy over his piece. His silence further displays that he is not attempting to be a spokesperson for the ending of animal cruelty, as he has refused to confirm that he has not committed the offence himself through his art.

Ellis’ works are frequently referred to as great satires, and evidence can be produced to demonstrate that he intends to present a social and political commentary in his novels and writings. This satirical purpose manifests itself again when looking at the way in which Victor is criticised throughout the novel. One member of the organisation suggests that Victor is a good accomplice ‘because you [Victor] think the Gaza Strip is a particularly lascivious move an erotic dancer makes... you think the PLO recorded the singles ‘Don’t Bring Me Down’ and ‘Evil Woman’ (315). Not only this, but, at one point in the novel, Victor is told a bodyguard ‘used to work at the Israeli embassy’ to which he replies ‘is that a club?’ (279). This explores the humorous aspect of satire, as Victor’s simple-minded nature is displayed through his knowledge of sex and pop culture, as opposed to political issues outside of the supermodel industry. Ellis is satirising society’s obsession with models and famous people, when there are so many different, more important, social and political issues occurring in the world, to which many people are oblivious.

Because of the power of literary and cinematic interpretation, it can be argued that, once a book or film is released, it is then out of the creator's hands to decide on how the piece should be interpreted. This was experienced by another American author, Chuck Palahniuk, when he released *Fight Club* in 1996. The novel is based around illegal fight clubs which members of society go to in order to release anger and frustration in fist fights. In the afterword of the book he commented on the freedom to interpret by acknowledging how others have made their own conclusions about his text that he did not intend. As an example he states that one man had a theory that 'the book wasn't really about fighting at all. He insisted it was really about gay men watching one another fuck in public steambaths' (Palahniuk 217). This is never explicitly said in the text, but is an interpretation that can be substantiated through the means of textual interpretation, and can also be supported with evidence from the novel. This is not to say that any interpretation can be postulated, without consideration or textual support. In many texts and films diverse varieties of interpretations have been created, which causes a problem with the satire defence. Although an author or director may profess their own intentions in relation to their art, the power of interpretation removes the singularity of meaning in their productions.

This ambiguity in meaning, combined with the power of interpretation, problematizes the analysis of fictional violence. This interpretation of fictional violence has connections to French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes, specifically his 1967 essay "Death of the Author". Within this piece Barthes separates the author from the writing, arguing that, once a piece is published, it should be analysed without the influence of its writer, because this can impose limitations on such a text. This can be warranted as a correct notion, especially when considering such transgressive authors as Bret Easton Ellis. As mentioned earlier, when a reader comes across a text written by Bret Easton Ellis, prejudgements can be made on the content of the book before reading it because of the controversy caused by *American Psycho*. Similarly, Ellis' reputation as a writer who indulges in satire and extreme and excessive violence can affect how scenes of his books are interpreted. A reader may search for satire and socio-political commentary in his texts due to his reputation, as opposed to finding the satirical elements based on the text alone.

Summary

Through this chapter it has become clear that the incorporation of a satirical intention to defend works that deploy extreme fictional violence can have a variety of effects on its reception and criticism. In the cases of both Laugier and Ellis, a satirical purpose can be justified behind their use of extreme violence. Ellis is arguably one of the most well-known, and controversial, satirical writers of our time. They use the deployment of fictional violence to make a powerful statement about injustices in society, which they feel need to be addressed. However, although there is evidence to support the satirical motive in both these cases, as well as critics who praise these examples, it is apparent that the utilisation of this defence can be challenged. In the case of Laugier's *Martyrs*, many of the director's explanations for his use of violence are difficult to accept, for example his reactions to criticisms of his film. Similarly, Ellis has been the centre of contention when it comes to his publications. Advocates of his work have praised his use of satire, whereas detractors have rejected this claim and branded his texts as gratuitous excuses that only sell due to their shock-factor.

The satire defence causes problems because of the diverse reactions and interpretations viewers and critics can have on a piece of fiction. What may be mindless, nonsensical violence to one person, may be an in depth exploration of political tension to another. When investigating this further it can be questioned whether a defence must be retained in creations of fiction. The developments in French cinema that were discussed at the beginning of this chapter posited the need for freedom of creative expression in fiction. It can be argued that, if creators of fiction are permitted freedom of expression, they should not be forced to defend their work, or even have a strict intention behind their fiction. Violence is a recurring element found in a variety of films, and can even be explored as a genre on its own. It is clearly a factor of fiction that many people enjoy and find entertaining. The reasons behind this enjoyment shall be scrutinised in the final chapter, nonetheless in this section it is relevant to acknowledge that fiction, as a form of entertainment, does not always need a purpose or intention in order to make it a valued piece of work. Because of the contentious nature of violence, many people may search for an ulterior motive in order to validate their enjoyment of it, but this is not necessary.

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THE EFFECT OF REALITY ON FICTION

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the presentation of violence, specifically the ways in which the deployment of realism, when used in coalition with violence, can alter the way a text or film is received. This will lead to a discussion of why this is done. Manifestations of extreme violence are frequently utilised in the horror genre of entertainment in both literature and film. This horror genre is a particularly interesting field to explore due to the paradoxical nature of the notion of violence and gore being presented as a form of entertainment. The contradiction between the repulsion that horror should provoke and the enjoyment of entertainment is an intriguing element of the topic that should be addressed. Many researchers and critics have attempted to discover why human beings enjoy being subjected to fictional violence, however, as of yet, a definitive explanation has not been produced. Film scholar Noël Carroll reiterates this question in his studies of the horror genre by asking ‘if horror necessarily has something repulsive about it, how can audiences be attracted to it?’ (Carroll 158). Answers have spanned from the existence of an internal thrill-seeking personality in human beings, a theory posited by Professor Marvin Zuckermann, to other suggestions for the enjoyment such as David J Skal’s proposition that we are attracted to fictional violence because it generally incorporates a common societal fear at the time of production.

Some of the earliest suggestions to explain our enjoyment of horror can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who hypothesized that humans had an attraction to scary stories and violent plays because of a process within the human psyche he termed “catharsis”, which is defined as the purgation of negative emotions through art. Aristotle argues that, because horror is a violation of the normal behaviour within society, it releases a certain amount of repression in a person, thus praising the cathartic properties of fictional violence. Through the act of watching violence, the viewer feels a release of aggressive, suppressed emotion, which is channelled in a healthy manner. Clark McCauley recognises this idea by arguing that people

believe ‘horror films can draw out negative emotions, such as fear, rage, and disgust, to render the mind more healthy and to protect the social order by providing a safe outlet for “unsafe” emotions’ (McCauley 147). This release of pent-up aggressive emotions is also commonly referred to in studies by Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis. It is suggested that the horror genre involves the process of the human psyche attempting to deal with the id, which is suppressed by the civilised ego. The theory proposes that our repressed desires and feelings, specifically negative and aggressive emotions, are able to be released in a licit manner through violence in fiction.

However, many critics have denounced this theory, as scientific studies have been unable to prove that watching horror increases or decreases aggressive emotion. Nonetheless, it has been claimed that exposure to violence in literature, film and other forms of entertainment and media amplify the violent nature of the viewer, for example blaming video games for violence in youths. This insinuation, that violent entertainment provokes real violence, has been taken very seriously by some, to the extent that the American horror novelist Stephen King retracted one of his books from print, *Rage* (1977), because it was found in the possession of four separate teenagers who committed school shootings in America, actions that were mirrored in the novel itself, which centred around a teenage school-shooter. Regardless of these objections, the concern for the effect of fictional violence is still a staple of many contemporary productions in both literature and film. Violence is patent in many genres, in texts and media, and the deployment of which is successful in captivating and intriguing audiences to purchase, and enjoy, such works.

Whatever the cause may be, it is obvious that fictional violence is a staple of contemporary literature and film. A more intriguing question is how we perceive creations of violence, and how the deployment of intense, graphic violence is defended and justified.

When exploring this notion of enjoying fictional violence, the idea of realism is a concept that repeatedly surfaces in discussion. One frequent justification for the enjoyment of violence is that it is acceptable to be entertained by manifestations of fictional violence because they are

fictitious. In this chapter I want to consider what effect elements of reality have on the reception and handling of fictional violence. Violence is an element of fiction that for some is enjoyable, but for others is unpleasant. Perceptions of violence can differ when taking into account the context in which it is viewed. For example, even non-fictional violence which viewers find abhorrent to watch can be easier to digest when observed through a television screen or in the form of a book as opposed to being subjected to viewing violence in real life. In order to begin this exploration I want to look at an example of real violence that has been explored in literary works, as well as its interpretation and reception. The prominent literary figure I would like to investigate in more detail is the French essayist and novelist, Georges Bataille. Of his works I would like to explore the photographs of Chinese torture that he analyses in his text *Tears Of Eros*, published in 1961.

The Reception of Reality

Bataille was a philosopher, literary critic, and writer of erotic fiction, who published work from 1922 to 1961, as well as three works published posthumously in 1966, '67, and '73. In his early years he converted first to Catholicism and then to Marxism. He was also known for having an interest in psychoanalysis and mysticism, as well as being on the fringes of the surrealist movement through his founding of the review *Documents*, which was known for publishing the works of some of the prominent surrealist writers of the time. He has a reputation for being 'a writer of excess; disturbing, shocking, perhaps even mad' (Noys 1), which is largely credited to his fascination with violence, eroticism and death. Over his lifetime he produced various controversial publications, spanning from literary criticism to heterogeneous fictional texts, for which he is frequently 'lauded as the prophet of transgression' (Noys 1). Furthermore, he was fascinated by sacrifice and ritual killing, and also had a 'fascination with the subversive image' (Noys 7), which is apparent in his literature. When reading Bataille's writings and opinions, one can initially be offended and shocked by the nature of his suggestions as to why we enjoy horror and violence, especially his writings that posit the strong sexual attraction of violence. In order to explain this he declares 'the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation' (Bataille *Eroticism* 16).

It is through Bataille's works that I intend to explore an area of non-fictional violence. One particular area of Bataille's writings that I want to examine in more detail is his meditation upon some pictures depicting Chinese torture. The pictures I am referring to were supposedly taken in China in April 1905 by Adrien Borel and Georges Dumas. The photographs are said to depict the torture of a Chinese man, Fou-Tchou-Li, who is being punished for the murder of Prince Ao-Han-Ouan. The form of torture is called Leng-Tch'e, meaning 'the cutting into pieces', also referred to in other texts as "The Torture of a Hundred Pieces". The pictures were taken by Borel and later appeared in Dumas' work *Treatise of Psychology* in 1923. It was the French psychoanalyst Borel who gave the photographs to Bataille in 1925. Bataille confirms the powerful impact that the photographs have had on his life by declaring that 'I have never stopped being obsessed by this image' (Bataille *Tears* 206). The photographs have repeatedly surfaced in Bataille's writings, which emphasises the effect they have had on him, as he refers to them in his texts *Inner Experience* and *Guilty*, as well as *Tears of Eros* (1961).

When Bataille explores the photograph he describes it as an 'image of pain, at once ecstatic (?) and intolerable' (Bataille *Tears* 206). He acknowledges that the ecstasy could be due to the victim being administered opium prior to the torture, which is done to prolong their suffering. The effects of opium could have caused the equivocal expression on the victim's face, however Bataille offers an alternative explanation for this. He explores the photographs from a variety of angles, for example, he discusses the possibility of the photograph illustrating 'a fundamental connection between religious ecstasy and eroticism - and in particular sadism' (Bataille *Tears* 206). He also emphasises that violence has an inextricable connection to sexual ecstasy and eroticism. He further refers to the image as 'the identity of these perfect contraries, divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror' (Bataille *Tears* 207). Within this discussion Bataille highlights a link between horror and religion, similar to the ideas that are prevalent in Laugier's film *Martyrs*, found in the second chapter. He argues that violence is at the heart of religion, in particular sacrifice: 'religion in its entirety was founded upon sacrifice' (Bataille *Tears* 207).

Although he is an established literary thinker, a variety of other critics have retained a sceptical outlook on his commentary, and many have debunked and refuted his claims about the nature of

the photographs. Benjamin Noys has his own reservations about the ambiguous nature of the photographs, declaring that 'Bataille cannot be certain that it is the image of ecstatic death that he desires' (Noys 25), because of the indistinct expression on the man's face. Noys claims that one is 'forced to interpret the image' because 'the image is not unequivocal' (Noys 25). He further argues that it is difficult to differentiate between a look of ecstasy and a look of pain within the image, arguing that 'there is an undecidable moment where the grin is indistinguishable from a grimace' (Noys 25). He claims that this equivocal nature destabilises Bataille's argument that the photograph depicts a connection between religion and extreme horror. He claims that the indefinable appearance, and alternative interpretations of the victim's expression, 'undoes Bataille's claim for a direct access to the 'sacred horror' of eroticism' (Noys 25).

When responding to Bataille's notions regarding the photographs, literary analyst Michael Surya similarly acknowledges the ambiguous nature of the photograph. Like Noys, Surya recognises that the photograph can be digested in a variety of ways, and an unequivocal meaning cannot be established. Surya specifically comments that, when describing the expression on the tortured victim's face in the photograph, 'what one can see on his face is an indefinable expression' (Surya 94). He surmises that the ambiguity surrounding the expression in the image raises the question of whether it reflects 'a pain so great we are unable to recognise anything we have ever seen in a human face before? Or is it joy, a demented, ecstatic joy?' (Surya 94). This assertion acknowledges the ambiguity of the expression within the picture, and does not share Bataille's decisiveness on the analysis of the photograph. He further questions how he can be so definite on the emotions depicted by the images.

Surya and Noys agree that the nature of the expression on the torture victim's face is ambiguous and cannot be refined into Bataille's definitive description. However there are some critics that completely chastise and contest Bataille's evaluation of the photographs. Three examples of such contenders are Gregory Blue, Jerome Bourgon, and Timothy Brook, who collectively wrote the analytical book *Death by a Thousand Cuts* (2008). The text investigates the method of Chinese torture depicted in the photographs, used as punishment in mid- and late- Imperial

China since the tenth century until its abolition in 1905. The three writers are overtly critical of Bataille's work, dedicating an entire chapter to condemning Bataille's use and analysis of the photographs. The trio openly criticise *Tears of Eros*, dubbing the book 'an obnoxious work executed in bad taste' (Blue et al. 228). They posit multiple reasons why they disagree with and dislike Bataille's analysis of the photographs, one of which is because the three critics collectively do not agree with Bataille's identification of the person in the photograph. The authors believe the man in the photograph is actually a multiple murderer, Wang Weiqin, being killed in Beijing in 1904, whereas Bataille identifies the man as Fou-Tchou-Li, who is being tortured for the murder of Prince Ao-Han-Ouan. The critics even refuse to believe that Bataille encountered the pictures in the manner that he claimed. In *Tears of Eros*, Bataille claims that he obtained a copy of the photographs from French psychoanalyst Dr. Adrien Borel in 1925. The trio argue that even this is incorrect, and declare that 'Bataille most probably discovered the Chinese torture photographs by accident in 1934' (Blue et al. 233). It would appear that the three critics do not hold Bataille's analysis in high regard, even questioning whether the authorship is truly his after raising 'doubts as to the authenticity of the book, or at least of this part' (Blue et al. 228). The three critics also disapprove of the way Bataille engages with the photographs and how he discusses the person depicted. They state that 'as historians, however, we prefer to know who we are talking about and to understand how the issue of personal identity could be so ignored' (Blue et al. 226). By saying this they firmly assert that Bataille disregards the reality of the photograph and the real human being depicted within. They further state this opinion by declaring that he displays 'this remarkable blindness, this incapacity to look at or truly see these images and the people in them' (Blue et al. 226). They criticise the way Bataille tackles the real human suffering of the man depicted within the photographs and question 'how appropriate Bataille thought it was to publish certain pictures and comment on them' (Blue et al. 223). The critics argue that Bataille disregards the fact that the photograph is not fictional, and that it truly depicts the suffering and pain of a human being.

Such disagreements can be used when exploring reasons why works that consist of fictional violence can be contested. As seen in the first chapter, feminist MacKinnon is against

pornography because she feels it encourages violence towards women in real life. This argument can be supplemented by suggestions that it detracts from the seriousness of violence in reality when it is presented in such a way. If there is a scene where a woman is mistreated, but this is still enjoyed by the viewer, and portrayed to be enjoyed in the scene, then it could be argued to trivialise violence in the real world. Furthermore, when returning to the first chapter's notion of humour and violence in fiction, it could be argued that this undermines the seriousness of real violence, as such fictions manipulate it into something to be laughed at.

Whilst researching the image, and other people's responses to the image, a word that repeatedly surfaced was 'anguish', and many critics have concentrated on this idea of mental suffering. When contemplating the image, Surya explores the abrasive nature of presenting such extreme violence in the photograph and Bataille's analysis. As a comparison Surya uses the Crucifixion of Jesus as an example to demonstrate the way a viewer operates when being faced with anguish. He argues that the brutality of the Crucifixion is easier to digest because of the ways a person can rationalise and substantiate the suffering involved. Surya comments that the suffering is easier to assimilate because 'God and redemption gave it its two meanings' (Surya 94-95). It is difficult to create a comparison between these two examples, as the Chinese torture is visible in the photographs, whereas there is no photographic evidence of the Crucifixion. However the underlying theory can still be applied. When comparing this notion to the image Bataille depicts, he argues that the photograph of torture shows the exposed nature of violence, a violence that is presented without any redemptive qualities. Some may argue that the photograph depicts the punishment for murder, but it is difficult to consider this a redemptive quality in this photograph. The redemptive qualities that Surya references can relate back to the second chapter, and use of the satire defence to justify and explain extreme violence, as both are searching for a motivation behind violence, both real and fictional.

While pursuing an investigation into this notion, Surya makes an interesting statement that can be applied to both real and fictional violence. He states that 'horror is only horror when it is laid bare' (Surya 95). The statement itself suggests that, when the redemptive quality is removed, or if it is lacking the quality completely, the photograph presents an image of pure horror. This can

be likened to the horror that authors and directors, such as Laugier, strive for. It is this notion that can be dissected and explored when applying the idea of reality to fiction. I want to investigate what effect elements of reality can have on the perception and reception of fictional works. This includes depictions, in fiction, of real events, as well as authors and directors of works that strive to incorporate realism in their pieces.

Applying Elements of Reality to Fiction

Within the first chapter I explored how the deployment of humour in moments of fictional violence can dislodge the security of the viewer, and the position they are in when being exposed to extreme fictional violence. This is an effect that is even more prevalent in when using elements of reality in fiction. One of the ways in which fictional violence can be easier to digest is through the reminder that it is merely fiction, and not really happening. However, with the insertion of reality when handling and presenting fictional violence, the viewer's distance to a text or film is displaced and can become more disturbing.

In order to investigate this notion I intend to further my exploration through the analysis of the *August Underground* trilogy of extreme horror films, created by film director Fred Vogel and the horror production studio ToeTag Pictures. The first film, which was released in 2001, follows two serial killers, 'Peter' and an unseen accomplice, as they execute a homicidal rampage. The film opens with the murderous pair entering their basement and filming a couple they have previously kidnapped and tortured. The male counterpart of the couple is already dead and the character Peter begins to mock and torture their female victim. During the seventy minute film the audience witness the sick and twisted routines of the two main characters as they torture multiple people, as well as the more mundane activities of the pair, such as visiting a cemetery and going on a guided tour of a slaughterhouse. Though these activities still have elements of violence, the audience see the murderous pair engaging with the public without their illicit behaviour being discovered. The twosome torture and kill a multitude of people, and the film concludes with the violent pair taking drugs and being sexually active with prostitutes. The unseen cameraman goes into the basement to find Peter and finds him having intercourse

with one prostitute whilst beating her with a hammer. The other female then runs out of the house, being pursued by Peter and the cameraman, and then the credits roll. The low-budget film is shot in the *cinéma vérité* style and graphically documents the torture the pair inflict. This extreme torture horror film was followed by two sequels: *August Underground Mordum* in 2003, and *August Underground Penance* in 2007. The two sequels are filmed in the same home-video style, documenting further heinous murders and torture that the pair commits, as well as the introduction of two new killers to their group, Peter's girlfriend, Crusty, and her brother Maggot. The homicidal rampage continues, each killing being graphically depicted and recorded by the unseen cameraman.

There is a common consensus that the trilogy 'has a reputation for being brutal, graphic, [and] absolutely not for the squeamish' (Daily Grindhouse 2011). The extreme horror and violence that the films depict have earned the films a reputation of being 'some of the most controversial and disturbing films on the planet' (Daily Grindhouse 2011). Vogel's achievement of realism in his horror provokes feelings of shock and disgust. It has been said that the production company, ToeTag Pictures, 'is known for their amazing practical effects, for the blood and gore looking stomach-churningly real' (Daily Grindhouse 2011). Some film critics have attempted to suggest some kind of literary intention in the extreme madness that constructs the trilogy, for example one critic argues that the films can be seen as 'a metaphor for modern society's fascination with capturing EVERYTHING on camera or video or even Twitter' (Ours n.d).

The injection of reality within this film can be found in how it is produced. The film is created as if it were all filmed on a hand-held video recorder, in a documentary-style led by the two serial killers. This method of filming and production rejects any of the stylised cinematic portrayals of violence that many other modern horrors employ. Furthermore, this documentation of the duo's sadistic torture of people is interspersed by other, more mundane, activities such as attending a concert and visiting a cemetery. These commonplace trips that the twosome go on are a reminder to the audience that these twisted serial killers can function in, and even blend into, a normal society. This makes the film more terrifying, as it shows how these people could be someone we pass on the street. In certain horrors there are certain creatures, for example

zombies or monsters, perpetrating the murders. Such overtly fictional depictions can create the distance between reality and fictional that some viewers can find security in. Conversely, in *August Underground*, the two murderers, when presented scenes in public, are able to behave like normal people. This can make these characters more terrifying for the viewer, as the murderous entity is more real than an animated or CGI demon or monster. The characters of such a story would be highlighted through the use of animation, as it portrays a figure that the audience can identify as fictitious. On the contrary, the film's use of two men who are able to mingle and interact, and have present a façade that is acceptable in society, without people recognising their deviant illicit behaviour, causes more fear around the characters. Also, by having the cameraman's identity unknown, he could be anyone to the audience as he is an unrecognisable character, reinforcing the fear of a killer who can camouflage into society. It enforces the idea that killers could be anywhere, and people could interact with them without knowing the deplorable activities they indulge in.

Scrutiny of *August Underground* can be linked back to the previous notions raised in the analysis of the Chinese torture photographs. Returning to the discussion regarding the Chinese torture photographs that Bataille analyses, one statement that should be highlighted is this: 'horror is only horror when it is laid bare'. When unpacking this statement, I would surmise that Surya wants to express the raw intensity that violence can have when it is presented in a way that does not stylise or aestheticize it. Surya expresses this view as he is highlighting that one of the reasons the photographs are so startling, violent, and important, is that there are not any redemptive or rational qualities to the photographs, they simply depict an act of violence and accurately reflect the brutal, illogical nature of the torture being inflicted. When discussing his opinion of the extreme fictional violence that occurs in the films, Vogel defends his incorporation of the concept through a similar logic. In a parallel argument to the one that Laugier adopts in defence of *Martyrs*, Vogel condemns the nature of the horror genre by criticising that American horror 'is just so watered down and butchered', and claims he prefers to project horror that is 'mean and nasty' (Daily Grindhouse 2011). In the face of claims of deploying fictional violence in a gratuitous and sensation-seeking manner Vogel professes that

he is 'not going out there to make the sickest fucking movies. My movies are sick because they need to be' (Daily Grindhouse 2011). Through this quotation one can immediately question the coherence of Vogel's defence. He initially states that he is not attempting to make the sickest movies, yet then posits the importance of them being sick. This would suggest that he is trying to create the sickest movies, as he claims that the violence is necessarily graphic. Similarities can be seen in the notions projected by Surya and Vogel: the importance of violence in a way that is accurate and which correctly reflects the brutal nature of violence.

However, Vogel's defence of his use of violence does not come without problems. Vogel frequently posits that he intends to portray violence in the most real depictions he can. In the face of criticisms claiming his work is gratuitously violent, Vogel has always readily defended his work, and whole-heartedly refutes the claims that he uses his extreme violence for the singular intention to shock his audience. When questioned about this in an interview he retorts that he has 'never put violence in [his] my movies just to shock, it's there for a reason. Violence is nasty, and violence is real, and that is why I think *ToeTag* works so well is because we don't skimp on the violence, we try to make it as real as possible' (Ours n.d). He posits that the violence is 'there for a reason', which is to depict violence in as real a way as possible. Although Vogel may argue this, his defence can be explored as contradictory. If he argues that he wanted to create sick horror violence to reflect the horror of violence, then it can be argued that he is intending to shock and offend viewers, because this would be the expected reaction when someone is presented with such sickening violence that has been dealt with in such a way that it reflects reality. This endeavour for realism is one of the most intriguing ways to approach Vogel's distribution of extreme fictional violence.

The Effect and Criticism of Stylised Violence

When a film or text lacks a sense of reality it can appear to present fictional violence in a stylised and sensationalised manner. In the collection of essays *Ethics, Literature, Theory: An Introductory Reader*, collated by Stephen K. George, a particularly noteworthy essay written by Orson Scott Card posits that 'he who writes about happy people being happy in a happy world

ain't gonna last long as a writer. Nobody cares about that happy stuff. Evil is intrinsically more interesting. More entertaining. Evil sells' (Card 225). This statement is reinforced further when exploring violence in literature and film. It is supported by critics Weaver and Carter who criticise the 'media's use of increasingly explicit and sensational violence to sustain ratings and increase revenue' (Carter, Weaver 2). Extreme depictions of violence have become a selling point of the horror genre, for example Fred Vogel's horror film *August Underground* brands its DVD cover with the words 'the sickest film ever made'. Similarly, Robert Bloch's *Psycho* publishes reviews on its back cover praising the novel's disturbing nature as 'bloodcurdling', from the *New York Herald*, and 'icily terrifying', from *The New York Times*. In both instances these reviews, which emphasise the horrifying nature of the pieces, are emblazoned in an attempt to trigger the viewer's curiosity and make them want to see what is so disturbing in the book or film. As Orson Scott Card says 'evil sells' and these examples of violent productions use this to sell their title.

A comparison can be made between the way Pascal Laugier and Fred Vogel criticise contemporary films, particularly in the horror genre. In the second chapter I referred to a statement by Laugier that chastised contemporary additions to the horror genre, claiming that the genre has become 'safe' and restricted by political correctness. This perception is reflected by Vogel, who similarly reprimands the genre for being 'watered down and butchered'. This can be explored as one of the reasons for why the two directors have implemented some of the most extreme depictions of horror imaginable within their fiction. However, this notion can be extended by looking at other ways in which Vogel criticises the genre. Vogel vocally criticises films that glamorize violence by presenting it as a stylised theme in fictional representations of violence. Earlier I referred to a comment made by Vogel that stated he made his films so graphically violent out of necessity, because of his desire to represent the true nature of violence. He posits that his intention has always been to present the abhorrent nature of violence, instead of portraying it as desirable or glamorous, 'in all my movies I show violence how it really is, and try not to glamorize it' (Hill 2005).

One of the most important studies of the representation of and reaction towards violence was published by Annette Hill in 1997. The study, presented in the book titled *Shocking Entertainment: Viewer Response to Violent Movies*, explored the ways in which violence in deployed in films, as well as exploring how a viewer reacts when presented with such violence. She achieved this by collecting a group of participants and questioning them about violence, real and fictional, as well as many other topics and debates surrounding the subject, then collated and studied their answers. She used these results to support judgments concerning representations of violence. In one chapter of her book she particularly explores the concept of limitations when reacting to violence. She labels emotional boundaries regarding violence as a person's 'threshold', which she continues to define as 'different types and contexts of violence which participants find personally disturbing' (Hill 51). When a participant reaches their 'threshold' they undertake a method Hill expresses as 'self-censorship', which she refers as the 'methods of choice in relation to watching/not watching violent movies' (Hill 51). This can involve not watching scenes of films, particular images, and entire films. Hill maintains the importance of such censorship and thresholds, declaring that 'the reactive mechanisms of thresholds and self-censorship prove to be central to the process of viewing violence' (Hill 51). She further refines this notion by separating the topic into two subtypes: personal and social thresholds. Social thresholds refer to aspects of violence that the vast majority find abhorrent, for example the deaths of children, or the torture of animals. It is not possible to apply social thresholds to everyone, because of the differences in some people's human nature, but, when speaking in general terms, there are topics that are rejected by most viewers. Personal thresholds, on the other hand, are an individual's boundaries concerning the violence they are able to withstand. This is usually based on a unique experience or feeling to them that means they have a particular aversion to certain topics. One part of Hill's study that was particularly interesting to explore was the investigation into varying receptions of violence, depending on the context in which it was experienced. When asked about the difference between real and fictional violence, many participants acknowledge that there was something more raw in real violence than that which we observe on a screen, and that the knowledge that what they witness is 'just a film' is somewhat comforting to them. Yet, when asked about violence in the media,

many stated that they felt ‘desensitized to mediated images of real violence’, declaring that they often recognise a ‘film-like quality of mediated images of violence’. This can be explored to support the notion suggested by Bret Easton Ellis in the previous chapter that claims society has adopted a lax attitude towards depictions of violence that commonly appear on television and in magazines, which has been caused by our over-exposure to images of violence and horror. This is echoed by Hill who believes that ‘graphic images of violence on the news have become commonplace, and knowing about such graphic violence, watching the effects every day, prepares the participant for viewing fictional violence’.

Horror, crime, and murder are all popular forms in both literature and film, yet Hill wants to question the role of disturbing violence as entertainment. Many films and books are justified as entertainment because of an unrealistic tone to the pieces, as well as many other stylistic devices used to comfort the viewer. One film that was highlighted as an example of this aestheticization of violence was *Pulp Fiction*. Participants of the study suggested that *Pulp Fiction* was ‘entertaining because it is fictional and distanced from real violence by its stylistic representation’. The participants of the study used the film’s theatrical and, in parts, comedic, approach to fictional violence causes the fictional violence to be digested more easily. The violence is portrayed in such a highly stylised and comical manner that the violence does not retain the seriousness it usually causes. This is common for many films that stylise the behaviour of violent characters, such as gangsters and criminals. This is related to themes in the first chapter, where I explored how humour is another device that can be used to a similar effect. Humour is used to alleviate the abrasive nature of violence, and reduce the traumatic effect it can have on the viewer subjected to it. In a similar manner, when violence is stylised and presented in a particularly entertaining way, it can reduce the seriousness and fear produced by it. It removes the viewer from being scared or threatened by the violence, and creates a comforting distance between real and fictional violence.

While Vogel claims to present such extreme fictional violence in order to portray the true nature of real violence, it can be argued that such graphic portrayals of fictional violence are the result of a modern society whose repeated exposure to stylised violence has desensitised our reactions

towards violence both real and fictional. In Weaver and Carter's exploration of stylised violence, they continue to state that fictional and mediated violence 'is desensitizing audiences' abilities to empathize with others when real violence occurs' (2), and express their worrying concern for 'the mediation of violence in which the boundaries between factual and fictional media formats have become increasingly blurred' (3). Opponents of this theory argue that 'audiences are very capable of differentiating between fictional and factual portrayals of violence and appropriately responding to real incidents of violence when they occur' (2). I do not wish to argue that viewers could be made unresponsive to real violence, as I do believe being confronted with real violence is completely different to being shown fictional violence, yet I do believe that our repeated exposure to fictional, stylised violence has caused a need for modern portrayals of fictional violence to be more graphic and extreme than those previously made. It is as if there is a kind of one-upmanship when it comes to the representation of fictional violence, in which current producers and writers intend to create something more disturbing and raw than their predecessors.

Summary

As explored in the first chapter, humour has the potential be used to alleviate the abrasive effect fictional violence can have on the viewer. After exploring Hill's investigation it appears that a 'reality effect' has the opposite effect in fictional violence. It can be seen as a paradoxical notion to 'enjoy' violence within films and texts, and a common defence of this enjoyment is that it is not real. The viewer can remind themselves that the horror and violence they are witnessing or reading is fictional, which comforts them. However, the effort to make fiction indistinguishable from reality makes this assurance more difficult to embrace. This pursuit of extremity can be achieved through aspects of realism as previously discussed, as some argue that 'those films which underscore the non-fictional dimension... and have a specifically realistic representation of violence are less entertaining because participants do not feel safe whilst viewing such films' (Hill 85). I disagree that realistic representations of violence are less entertaining, as many films that depict stylised violence do entertain audiences and viewers, and can be extremely successful. However, I would argue that the insertion of elements of reality

can change the reception of the piece. Realism can impose a serious undertone to fictional violence and, although it is still entertaining, it can make the audience view the work from a more serious frame of mind. It is true that viewers of fictional violence can find a film or book more harrowing when it is based on real events, yet many books and films market this as a feature of their work. Examples of this can be found in popular works that contain extreme depictions of violence, like the bloody horror film *Hostel* which has the words ‘inspired by true events’ emblazoned on the cover, or the horror novel *Girl Next Door* (1989) by Jack Ketchum, a text that is based on the real torture and murder of teenager Sylvia Likens, which boldly prints the words ‘inspired by actual events’ on its cover. This idea of fiction being entwined with reality obscures the boundary between real and fictional violence, which can disturb the viewer intensely. The safety that is created from the idea of something ‘not being real’ is replaced by a fear of real-life violence. There is an argument that images of stylised violence are making audiences less susceptible to the horror of real violence. This returns to the idea of a oneness between creators of fictional violence, who are striving to encompass the most graphic and extreme portrayals of fictional violence, and transgress the boundaries that can be found even within the horror genre.

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CONCLUSION

Overview

Throughout this thesis my intention has been to explore the concept of fictional violence in a variety of different ways. Within the first chapter I wanted to explore how comedy and fictional violence combines in literary and cinematic work. The first text I tackled was Garth Ennis' series of graphic novels *The Boys*, particularly the edition titled *The Name of the Game*. It was apparent that, when looking through the text, there were multiple occasions where Ennis had used his text, as well as the illustrations created by Darick Robertson, in order to present the fictional violence with elements of humour. After exploring the text it could be concluded that the elements of humour are vital in the genre of the graphic novel. Throughout the origins of the form it is clear that the concepts of humour and violence are both staples of the genre, even though it has caused contention. Following this, the film adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* was examined. This example, though depicting the combination of violence and humour, demonstrated how the amalgamation of the two elements can enhance tension and suspension in a work of fiction, and cause such scenes to be more harrowing for the viewer. This chapter demonstrated how the combination does not always have the therapeutic effect that Paul McGhee suggests humour enables. The two examples, particularly Harron's film, exhibits how the combination of the two themes can create an unstable, tense atmosphere, which can be attributed to the oxymoronical nature of infusing violence with humour.

The second chapter delved into the deployment of a satire defence in fiction. After demonstrating how the satire defence has been used in Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* and Bret Easton Ellis' *Glamorama*, the weaknesses in the defence became apparent. The article by Richard Godwin articulates how the employment of a satire defence has been adopted in an excessive manner by those who wish to avoid criticism. The research into a writer or director's motivation for using fictional violence leads to the question of whether it is vital for a work of fiction to serve an ulterior purpose than to be enjoyed by the reader or viewer. Although some

viewers may search for a satirical motivation behind sections of fictional violence, it is still possible for such works to be enjoyed without searching for a satirical intention. Not everyone who watches a film like *Martyrs* would come away with a criticism of social- and political structure in their minds. One of the main reasons for fiction, I believe, is to enjoy and be entertained by it, which does not always require underlying messages or metaphorical intentions.

The final chapter explored the effect of presenting fictional violence with realism. The first area of research that was addressed was into the Chinese torture photographs that Bataille obsessed over. Through analysis of his commentary, as well as the critics, there were familiarities between the representations of violence. Vogel's depictions of violence can be argued to demonstrate the raw presentation of violence that Surya describes by stating horror is horror when it is laid bare. This abrasive portrayal of violence is something that Vogel strives for, and is often achieved through the elements of realism that he includes in his film production and style. Vogel achieves his target of creating a raw piece of film through the harrowing realism he incorporates into the production. After looking at the aspects of stylised violence it can be postulated that realism increases tension and fear when coupled with fictional violence, whereas stylised violence appears to create safety and security for the viewer. I believe this to be because of the distance stylised violence causes between reality and fiction. When being subjected to highly-stylised violence a reader or viewer can find comfort in the knowledge that they are not witnessing real violence. Although this is still possible in *August Underground*, and other similar films, the intensity and tension is increased through the realistic depictions.

Summary

One of the aims of this thesis was to present my exploratory research in the topic of fictional violence, in the three sub-sections I chose. I feel that my thesis has been successful in contributing to the previously existing research on the topic, and provides further insight into the individual sub-topics, as well as the texts and films that I have chosen to study. It is clear that fictional violence is an intricate element that can be deployed and manipulated by both writers and directors to fulfil a purpose in their works. It is a topic that, due to its controversial

nature, divides critics in their analysis and causes varying reactions from the readers and audiences of such works. Works that present extreme depictions of violence have been defended as works of satire after the creators were criticised for their use of violence. However, it is reasonable to question whether writers and directors should have to defend their works. Texts, films, and other forms of literature are published in order to entertain and captivate their target audiences and it is undeniable that violence is a staple of contemporary work. Although it is not for everyone, one cannot refute the fact that particularly violent works, which often surface in the horror genre, are extremely popular with readers and audiences. For many writers and directors their work is a vessel of expression and freedom, for them to create a work with their own purpose and intention, and when the product is avidly consumed by their target audiences, we can begin to question whether the defence of such work is necessary. It is rare for work in the humour genre to be asked ‘why is it so funny?’, or a work in piece of the romance genre to question ‘why is there so much romance?’ Fictional violence receives the attention, both negative and positive, because of the nature of violence itself. It divides people’s opinions, and can remove spectators from their comfort zone, and thus negative reactions can occur. The enjoyment of fictional violence can be, in part, attributed to the fact it does remove us from our comfort zone, and many readers and audiences enjoy this emotion of feeling scared. When a concept as abrasive as violence confronts audiences it can produce diverse opinions of the work. I believe this can be attributed to how the concept transfers into reality. Other genres can transgress the boundaries between reality and fiction with more ease, for example romance in both reality and fiction can have a similar effect on a person, whereas violence in reality produces emotions of abhorrence and fear, but in fiction it is entertaining and enjoyed. The security of fiction allows us to enjoy the fear of violence, but with the knowledge that is fiction and ultimately not real.

Fictional violence is a concept that has featured in multiple genres, and is repeatedly deployed as an entertaining feature within a text or film. It can be used as a significant literary and cinematic device that can be manipulated in multiple ways, but also it is a feature that intrigues and captivates the audience, causing excitement and tension in plots. The use of fictional

violence has been a feature of copious texts and films, and, because of its captivating and horrifying nature, will be a recurring feature, and important area of study, in many future works to come.