

VIOLENCE AND THE SCAPEGOAT
IN AMERICAN FILM: 1967-1999

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

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December 2002

For Michael J. Wilson
Who asked to read this

“There is word in the caravans of a great one who was driven out of Egypt.”

—Sephora, *The Ten Commandments*

Acknowledgements

Writing this dissertation has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I have had the pleasure to work with and lean on many admirable people, whose assistance and encouragements have been invaluable these five years. For financial support, work experience and general help, I owe many thanks to the Graduate Committee and Department of English at Louisiana State University, Professor Sarah Liggett, Professor Carol Mattingly, Professor Irvin Peckham, Deborah Normand, Renee Major, Lillie T. Johnston, Terri Guidry, Jeanine Conant, and all the staff of the English Department, not to mention the fine people at Interlibrary Borrowing and Professor Leonard N. Moore of the History Department.

Among my colleagues, many of the most friendly and helpful have been Elizabeth Beard, R. Nichole Rougeau, Bill Scalia, Daniel McNamara, Samuel Anderson, Sarah Uzelac, Richard Houser, Erica Daigle, and Robert Beuka. These people constitute a support group, whose camaraderie and friendship are invaluable to any kind of sustained academic endeavor.

The professors I have worked with serve as model educators and facilitators, whose guidance and support are appreciated. They have done more than enough to enrich my academic experience at LSU and provide a professional yet friendly environment in which to learn the craft of scholarship. My sincerest thanks belong to Professor Carl Freedman, Professor Joseph Kronick, Professor Malcolm Richardson, Professor William W. Demastes, and my dissertation director, Professor John R. May, whose exemplary editorial skill is exceeded only by his boundless patience.

Finally, my family's support and good will have shined through when things were not so easy. For their love and concern, I thank my parents Paul and Barbara, my sister Gretchen, my grandparents, aunts and uncles. And if it had not been for the loving and gentle encouragements

of my favorite scholar and very best friend, Jessica McKelvie, this work may never have been completed. Her good humor and enduring patience have been nothing less than inspirational.

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Abstract

This study addresses the proliferation of cinematic violence since the demise of the MPAA's Production Code in 1966. *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* were films that projected violence to comment on the civil fervor caused by the Vietnam War. Yet the floodgates these films opened allowed for virtually unlimited and graphic displays of bloodshed to redden big screens for the next three decades. Using the theories of René Girard, namely the scapegoating motif, this study proposes readings of film that, through cinematic ambiguity, contain humanitarian statements *against* violence by examining the consequences of using force to cause pain. *The Godfather* serves as a virtual contemplation of the cruelty inherent in causing bloodshed. Coppola uses both unedited long takes and fast, contrapuntal editing to expose and underscore his protagonist's hypocrisy. Toward the end of the seventies, *Taxi Driver* is the next major film to enact compassion in bloodshed, as it both joins and deconstructs the cynical line of films it belongs to. Scorsese manifests an exceptional ability to take the viewer inside the brutality so that he vicariously lives through the event. The chapters that deal with the films above demonstrate that expertly rendered camerawork creates a scapegoating process for the audience to consider. In the eighties with *Fatal Attraction*, however, the audience has to rely on future criticism inspired by the film to initiate vindication of the immolated scapegoat, because of the enormous resistance she offers the dominant culture. And in the nineties, the surrogate victim at the end of *American History X* dies, symbolically lamenting the mimetic rivalry contained in both the troubled inner city and the film industry itself. Together these films constitute positive, artistic, and edifying contributions of cinematic violence that resist the ordinary depiction of bloodshed for the sake of exploitative entertainment.

Introduction

Violence, Girard, and American Cinema

The American film industry is a powerful apparatus. Critics have asserted for decades now that movies promote homogenization in our culture by repeatedly promulgating manipulative subject matter and instilling it into the collective unconscious. The industry's streamlining of ideas draws hundreds of thousands of people to the box offices on a weekly basis, generating staggering sums of money for filmmakers. Their films often appeal to single-issue concerns and our most basic, visceral emotions in an effort to gain mass approval and agreement. An excellent example to consider would be the patriotic blockbusters of the Reagan era that harnessed anti-Communist sensibilities and older ideas, creating a distinctly eighties style of filmmaking. Obviously, however, counterexamples pervaded the decade, and one need not ponder the issue for too long before invoking the memory of Warren Beatty's *Reds*, for instance. Still, looking back over the decade, recalling and examining the most easily remembered films and drawing conclusions about them can be very instructive about an entire people's beliefs and attitudes during a given time period. Oddities, countertrends and subversive films aside, movie producers and directors know the audiences they are dealing with, and they seek to please that audience. Their efforts result in heavily enhancing and efficiently simplifying already held beliefs and cultural concerns.

This is at least one reason why filmic violence has been a controversial subject since the earliest days of the motion picture industry. Parents, moralists, government officials, even self-reflective filmmakers continue to rail out against the undue influence of bloodshed on the big screen. This point of view is understandable, considering that every depiction of blood and gore imaginable has been accomplished through special effects and innovative, pseudo-magical

editing. In the second half of the twentieth century alone, we have seen blood squirting from people's heads, monsters getting chopped to pieces in household appliances, as well as endless forms of beating, mutilation, shooting, and brutality. As for their effects on the general public, there is no longer any need to debate on whether or not these powerful images cause people to act accordingly from time to time. Studies have long shown that humans like to imitate what they see; children act out movie violence when they play with each other and, on occasion, deranged individuals commit heinous crimes, often misinterpreting the meaning of what they see on the screen.

Yet a quick review of films released in the 1990s would show that superfluous bloodshed is on the rise and gaining in popularity. Why does it continue? Why is it that cinematic violence fits so prominently into the American film ethos, despite the realization that it is often distressing and negatively influential? The first answer is as old as the industry itself: violence draws box office dollars because it appeals to the audiences' most visceral instincts. The second answer, which is pertinent to this treatise, is that many of the more thought-provoking violent films attempt to imitate the troubles of American life. Although simply an entertaining ploy for many filmmakers, violence for more socially conscious directors is an artistic element of their films, like lighting, costumes, or cinematography, by which they express commentary on the world around them. And once they exerted pressure on the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America), it was not long before the industry was able to produce hundreds of bloody pictures that were very lucrative, suggesting, of course, that they appealed to a large number of Americans.

The story of the public's interaction with the filmmakers' and directors' insinuations that movies be more "realistic" provides the groundwork for understanding how movies like *Bonnie*

and Clyde and *The Wild Bunch* came onto the scene, allowing for cinematic bloodshed to appear in movie scenes thereafter. The origin of the Production Code and its failure serves as the introduction to our understanding of filmic violence, especially since my essay deals with how films mirror society. The first known instance of movie censorship involved the closing of New York City nickelodeons on Christmas Eve in 1908. Policemen and the mayor simply responded to public pressure as an indicator of how the community felt about the dangers of filmic influences. Among the earliest of the film industry's antagonists, using public pressure as their most effective strategy was the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The WCTU published anti-movie tracts in its journal, *The Union Signal*, citing the moral fragility of children as their main concern. They also detested the depiction of alcoholic indulgence, childbirth, and juvenile delinquency (Couvares 139; Parker 74-75).

Throughout the 1910s and '20s various organizations continued to insist upon the careful showing or complete erasure of all subject matter containing even the slightest innuendoes of alcoholism, crime, sexuality or profanity. The industry reacted to the dizzying number of complaints, closures, and censorings by enacting what was primarily a public relations stunt: they established the MPPDA (Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association) as a self-imposed entity designed to mitigate the perceived need for federal regulations. Hired to improve the industry's standing and oversee the upgrading of morals in the movies, Presbyterian Elder Will Hays became the first president of the MPPDA in 1922. His job amounted to a constant balancing act that required his careful oscillation between the issues of public concern and filmmakers' attitudes about what they considered art. He found himself often trying to appease a barrage of activist groups, including the National Committee for Better Films, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, Federal Motion Picture Council in America, Daughters of the

American Revolution, Campfire Girls, Mothers of Minnesota, and the International Longshoremen Association (Couvares 132, 138; Parker 82-85; Lewis 127).

The most important of these activist groups would prove to be the powerful Catholic organization, known as the Legion of Decency. Widely distributed Church newspapers and the fact that Catholics were densely concentrated in the big cities provided for enormous clout and good reason for Hays to cater to the Legion. The often-present threat of a Catholic boycott could severely damage a film's first-run revenue by up to sixty percent. Despite this potential disaster, however, Hays found an unlikely ally in the Catholic organization that he could not find in the others. Disfavoring federal regulations, the Legion agreed with Hays that the film industry should continue to be its own watchdog. Thus, through a series of meetings and negotiations, the MPPDA's president and representatives of the Church drafted a revised version of 1930's *A Code to Maintain Social Community Values in the Production of Silent, Synchronized and Talking Motion Pictures*. The result was the 1934 Production Code, which remained mostly intact until 1966 (Maltby 105, 115; Lewis 100; Parker 88; Couvares 150).

Hays hired Joseph Breen to head the newly invigorated struggle for decency in the movies. Breen was in charge of the PCA (Production Code Administration), and he was determined to be a committed adherent to the Code's old and new guidelines. Along with the long list of limitations on sexual content and profanity, the Code called for revenge and brutality to be treated very carefully, and it mandated that murder "be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation." It also listed specific prohibitions on electrocution, gruesomeness, and cruelty to animals in a section that stipulated "the careful limits of good taste" (Vaughn 241).

In 1953 and '54, however, things would begin to change. Because of the period of prosperity following World War II and the now-waning homogeneity in films dealing with that

War, better-educated, adult audiences began to show more interest in mature-content films. Around this same time, writers and directors started complaining more and more about their compromised artistic values and their dissatisfaction with meeting the demands of the PCA. United Artists became so embittered over their dealings with the Breen office that they defied the Administration and released Otto Preminger's *The Man in Blue* without the Code seal of approval. Howard Hughes then followed suit with his production of *The French Line* (Simmons 79).

If the floodgates were starting to crack open at the time, Breen's subsequent retirement helped open them wider. His 1954 replacement, Geoffrey Shurlock, faced a series of tough challenges as soon as he stepped into the office. Based on a special clause that had been written into the Code in 1939 to allow *Gone with the Wind* to use the word *damn*, he permitted Marlon Brando's saying the words *damn* and *hell* in *On the Waterfront*. The argument that he acquiesced to was that the movie's context called for realistic language, and the dialogue would not have the same force without the two important words. Catching onto the slow erosion of the Code's usefulness, writers began inserting *damn* and *hell* all throughout their scripts, hoping to acquire permission to use the words more often. The PCA became inundated with bickering over which situations called for the words and which ones did not. Studios developed jealousies and exacerbated existing rivalries by complaining about and haggling over what seemed to be arbitrary delineations for proper contexts of *damn* and *hell*.

Responding to these ever-increasing annoyances, Shurlock drafted a new version of the Production Code, which was released in 1956. But that this was a bandage for a larger problem was made apparent as early as 1961 when Robert Rossen refused to remove *damn*, *hell*, *son-of-a*, *shove it*, and *bastard* from the script of his movie *The Hustler*. Then, in 1966, with the release of

the film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the PCA, for all intents and purposes, accepted the Code's demise as an outdated and woefully ineffective brand of censorship (Simmons 81-82; Lewis 112; Jowett 273).

The new president of what was now called the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America), Jack Valenti, believed that grown-ups going to see adult-content movies should be able to do so without risking their children's moral corruption. A much better way to censor the pictures, therefore, would be to make strong recommendations that suggested appropriateness for certain age groups. His first attempt at doing so was the SMA (Suggested for Mature Audiences) label. Then, in 1968 he published a complete list of age-based ratings, which would eventually develop into G, PG, R and X labels. Finally, 1986 would see the addition of the PG-13 rating in response to the violence in *Gremlins* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, a testament to the influence of Stephen Spielberg's films alone (Lewis 135; Smetak 5).

That the fall of the Code in 1966 came with the rising tide of filmmakers' defiance was not a surprise. More so than before, movies were conscious responses to changing times that were motivated by domestic hostilities, namely the bitter disagreements over the Vietnam War. In a society where street violence and occasional campus deaths were becoming the norm, where policemen were beating protestors for not wanting their brothers and sisters to be killed overseas, filmmakers' and Code officials' quibbling over special allowances for *damn* and *hell* seemed ludicrous. Any kind of commentary on real-life events would require more radical changes. And the civil unrest, instigated on a daily basis, reached a fever pitch during the years from 1966 to 1968. Stephen Prince, whose knowledge of cinematic ultraviolence is considerable, comments on the issue, claiming:

By the end of 1967, the Vietnam War was at its height. American troop levels had reached four hundred sixty thousand (thirteen thousand had already died), and mass protests against the war were drawing crowds of one hundred thousand at demonstrations in New York and Washington D.C. Riots during the first nine months of 1967 erupted in 127 cities. Nearly fourteen thousand people were arrested in just 22 of these cities. (“The Hemorrhaging” 128-29)

Writing to make a similar point, Steven Alan Carr states:

Bonnie and Clyde appeared in a year, 1967, marked by unprecedented civil fervor, involving both race relations and opposition to the Vietnam War. . . . By July, the crisis had peaked in Newark and Detroit. After the police arrested and beat a black man following a traffic violation on July 12, 1967, widespread protests shook Newark. . . . The year 1967 also marked a turning point in civic support for the Vietnam War. By February, civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had publicly denounced the war. A month later, he referred to the United States as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world,” encouraged draft evasion, and called for stronger ties between the civil rights movement and antiwar protests. (78)

Parallels between filmic artistry and real life were becoming the norm, and Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) gained recognition as a testament to the necessary violence of such a union.

The film was renowned for disparaging the times it mimicked, as its baseline was social upheaval and the potential change that comes with those phenomena.

Bonnie and Clyde portrays the “Barrow Gang’s” fight against authority as a gallant last stand, which sends a message to the banks and big businessmen across the country, indicting capitalism and the old ways; it also heralds the voices of youth and their growing dissatisfaction with the status quo. Stephen Prince sees the film, along with many critics, as a mirror of the late 1960s. As well, he cites the future benefits of films like *Bonnie and Clyde* and their manipulation of violence:

The violence that concludes *Bonnie and Clyde* is a seminal moment in American cinema. . . . In the late sixties social critics like directors Penn and Peckinpah began using explicit gore in their films to comment on the social violence of the era, and thus a case can be made for the progressive or beneficial value of their movies’ graphic violence. In the films of Penn and Peckinpah, the violence is

generally an index of social oppression or corruption, and therefore a form of social criticism. (“The Hemorrhaging” 139-140)

The movie’s famous, culminating scene concludes the title couple’s story by destroying all that they represent and sounding the death knell for the would-be youth-culture revolution.

Exploding squibs, writhing bodies, popping holes in the car: these things are all intercut in slow and normal motion, filmed with four cameras at four different speeds to convey the noise, confusion, and, for some, the satisfaction of the unrelenting execution (137). The victims’ spastic movements are presented as painful yet near-graceful conclusions of lives that were

meant only for a short time on earth. Bonnie’s scream is short and scratchy; we see her go back in the seat, just as we see Clyde go down on the ground when the first few bullets begin to hit.

The scene shows Bonnie writhing, then Clyde convulsing. The pair’s slow-then-fast convulsions, especially Bonnie’s dramatic fall, halfway out of the side of the car, make us feel the pain and suddenness of the life coming right out of them. Once the scene begins to quiet down, we hear the gentle ruffling of Clyde’s clothing as he rolls over one last time in slow motion. These last sounds, cutting through the near total silence, bear with them a quieting finality. The last swing of Bonnie’s arm accompanies Clyde’s roll as his dead lover settles in a slump. One of the most haunting yet exciting execution scenes of the American cinema has come to a close.

This scene snuffs out any and all beliefs or aspirations the couple has. Its literal commotion and sharpness contain the energy required to avenge all the wrong these two have committed. It is as if the director has made the decision that people with so much energy must be eliminated with a force of equal strength. More importantly, though, Bonnie’s smile of pure love and the hail of bullets undercut and underscore each other to produce a final, lasting, and memorable dichotomy that infuses the last scene with rhapsodic tragedy. Neither Bonnie and Clyde’s love, nor the final ambush can have so strong an effect without the other. The pair’s

personal collapse and departure from a world where they do not belong can only be defined by this last violent gesture, because its main thrust lies in the fact that it effectively shuts down the outlaws' resistance. The movie received its recognition, its congratulations, and its lambasting because of the final scene, the one people remember the most.

Virtually the same can be said for Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Just two years after Penn made filmic ultraviolence into poignant social commentary, Peckinpah took his cue and rendered it with tragic flair and unprecedented pathos. Although, in *Savage Cinema*, Stephen Prince positions *The Wild Bunch* within Peckinpah's entire body of work as an exception, the film's influence on the American movie industry and the bloodshed it showcases will forever be remembered as a watershed event. *The Wild Bunch* is a Western that tells a much different story than *Bonnie and Clyde* on the surface, but mirrors its theme by tracing the last rampage of a group of rebels in a world that has grown too modern and practical for them. Peckinpah portrays his thieves as fun-loving hooligans who only kill when they have to. But they are running out of time. The big business of the railroad, the law, and even the Mexicans are closing in on them, and their little rebellion is doomed to fail.

Having just witnessed the Mexican generalissimo, Mapache (Emilio Fernandez), slitting their friend's throat, the thieves shoot and kill him. Then, there is a series of shots in which the camera zooms in on several characters' faces before they expire. These shots are silent and numerous, and they help to build a drawn-out tension just prior to the film's apocalyptic shootout. When the shooting finally begins, it is fast; there are numerous, explosive gun firings, and Mapache's little community breaks down into loud and terrible confusion. Squibs explode every couple of seconds, some in slow motion, some in normal time; stunt men are falling and jumping in all directions, and people are dying. One of Pike's (William Holden) men gets hold

of a machine gun and opens fire on as many Mexicans as he can kill, squibs exploding all over the scene, in every camera angle, almost in every shot, no matter how quick the intercutting is. One man gets most of his forehead blown off, as the camera cuts to Pike deciding whether or not to kill a woman. After she shoots him in the back, Pike blows a hole in her chest at close range.

When the carnage reaches its conclusion, we see Dutch (Ernest Borgnine) yelling for Pike as they both fall to the ground. Peckinpah does all this in slow motion to emphasize the of their last stand, and even the subtle sounds of Pike's clothing lightly sliding and moving against the ground lend extra misery to his fall. Clearly, as in *Bonnie and Clyde*, this is the bittersweet demise of rebellion and the true freedom of the American spirit, as it dies in an increasingly capitalistic society.

The onslaught of violence in the film industry that followed for the next thirty years easily surpassed what had come before. That is not to say that bloodshed did not already make its debut. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* included several battle scenes before the Code was ever created, and *Psycho* resounded with graphically audible off-screen stabbings, followed by blood flowing into a drain, nearly thirty years after the Code was written. But its demise left an entire realm of future cinematic effects virtually untapped. And if the dropping of the Code had paved the way for Penn and Peckinpah, then those two directors would set the precedent for Coppola, Kubrick, Scorsese, DePalma and a myriad of others, who benefited tenfold from the events leading into the 1970s. My study focuses on what these changes mean for the overall import of popular American films since the release of *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967. That movies were allowed so much more bloodshed and that directors found many reasons and means to insert it into their films are obvious. But the question of what artistic purposes it serves and how well it achieves those ends is one I believe still needs to be addressed. Surprisingly, there have

been few sustained scholarly examinations of violence in American film following the demise of the Production Code. Ever since the birth of the medium, controversies over moral corruption and the troubles of depicting graphic violence on screen have occupied several social forums: newspapers, religious radio and television shows, popular books, scientific articles, and sociological studies. As a result, numerous scholarly studies of the Code and other forms of censorship have issued from the presses for many years. Some illuminate the controversies stimulating the creation of the PCA, while others castigate certain organizations, and still others simply enumerate the facts, creating a vivid narrative of the profound effects movies had and still have on the public.¹ But efforts in the humanities to provide appraisals of graphic bloodshed as part of the larger set of artistic endeavors of film have been surprisingly scarce. Treatises of violence in film have most often been elicited as secondary factors in several different kinds of approaches (Slocum 1-2).² Most common among them, of course, are movie reviews. Whether writing in short columns for the newspaper or elucidating entire essays on particularly powerful films, reviewers have limited their comments on violence as a criterion for deciding whether or not to recommend a picture to their reading audiences. Pauline Kael's work, some of it collected in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*,³ is an exception because she heralded violence as a major factor in the countermovement against the staleness of Hollywood formulas (11).

Another category of examinations on violence is the entire book written on a director's body of work. Several books, scholarly and biographical, exist on all the auteurs, whose films routinely make edifying use of violent imagery. Among the best in this group, Robert Kolker has written three editions of *A Cinema of Loneliness*, in which he closely examines the work of Scorsese, Altman, Kubrick, Coppola, Penn, and Spielberg. Often brutality figures into his discussions as part and parcel of his examinations on editing and thematic content. A serious

scholar of cinematic viciousness, Stephen Prince has written a book on Peckinpah, as well as compiled a set of essays on the director's work. Discussed in more detail below, Prince's book elaborates a theory on Peckinpah's violence as an index of human compassion; it is one of the clearest and most enlightening treatments on the aesthetics of ultraviolence available. Others who have elucidated sustained criticism on directors' work, while commenting on violence from time to time, include Jeffrey Chown, Lawrence S. Friedman, Michael Bliss, Marshall Fine, Les Keyser, Peter Cowie, and Mary Pat Kelly (26).⁴

Historically organized examinations of film, highlighting symbols, trends, imagery, and narratives that expose ideological patterns and deal with sociological occurrences constitute another type of commentary, which touches on violence as a secondary factor. Among the most widely known and cited of this type is Robert B. Ray's *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*. His treatment of trends in the mainstream of American films spans from the '30s to 1980, tracing the paradigm of the American Western and how it comes to be reiterated in movies like *Casablanca*, *The Godfather*, and *Taxi Driver*. However, the most thorough and inclusive look at this topic, as rendered through popular culture, though not examining texts germane to my treatise, is Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence*, in which he critiques "the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more 'primitive' or natural state, and *regeneration through violence*" (12). Also worthy of mention is Jake Horsley's *The Blood Poets: A Cinema of Savagery*, a very ambitious two-volume overview in which he offers cursory analyses of a myriad of violent films, while using a combination of approaches and incorporating a wealth of peripheral information (30). For an informative consideration of consumerism and

the film industry as business, with a concentration on monster movies, readers will be interested in James B. Twitchell's *Preposterous Violence*.⁵

An interesting subcategory in this group of books involves those that examine the so-called American Renaissance period of film history. From roughly 1967 to 1978, radical and refreshing changes resulted from the breaking up of the big studios, the civil chaos generated by the Vietnam War, and postmodern influences from the European film industry (Man 2). Books illustrating the spirit of the 1970s through their examinations of film include Glenn Man's *Radical Visions*, Peter Lev's *American Films of the '70s*, and Diane Jacobs's *Hollywood Renaissance*,⁶ all of which include some ruminations on violence, because it quickly became a key element in the fabric of seventies cinema. As an eighties counterpart to this group, Stephen Prince's *Visions of Empire* elaborates upon Cold War ideology in several action-adventure films from the Reagan years.

Finally, the fourth category consists of journal articles and edited collections of essays on violent film. Thomas Atkins's small collection comments on the immense popularity of films in the first few years since the dropping of the Code (11). Nick Browne's compilation on *The Godfather* trilogy includes a wide variety of essays that offer various interpretations concerning the entire saga: Glenn Man's contribution deals with the series as gangster genre and critique of capitalism. Stephen Prince's *Screening Violence* is a thorough overview of filmic savagery, consisting of three broad areas, the first of which positions cinematic carnage in historical context. The second elaborates various authors' opinions on what filmic atrocity does and what it should do in relation to artistic value. And the third measures media influence upon people's actions. J. David Slocum's collection called *Violence and American Cinema* contains several enlightening and in-depth scholarly commentaries, which often elucidate complex readings on

recent filmic gore with some emphasis on theory. Like Prince's collection, Slocum's is divided into convenient sections, the first of which consists of general opinions on violent films as they are positioned in history. The second group focuses on genres, such as horror, action and Western. And the third is a serious study of cultural politics and barbarous imagery. One essay deals with African-American films, while another deals with torture, and yet another explores filmic depictions of the Holocaust. Finally, expounding upon the idea of apocalypse, Christopher Sharrett's *Crisis Cinema* includes an illuminating look at *Taxi Driver* as an amalgamation of generic forms.⁷

Feminist readings vary widely in their range of topics and levels of sophistication. Throughout this dissertation, I cite several works that offer readings of violent imagery without ever becoming very detailed. For the most part, this group consists of several polemical interpretations of the movie *Fatal Attraction*. These treatments range from assertions about the woman's place in society to sophisticated uses of feminist theory for the purpose of exalting the film's villain. One particular collection of note is the *Journal of Popular Culture*'s twenty-sixth volume, as well as Harvey Keith Grant's thorough collection of essays in *The Dread of Difference* and Martha McCaughey and Neal King's *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*.⁸

One theorist whose work many of the authors above invoke for explanatory purposes is René Girard. This is understandable, considering that the vast majority of his writings expound upon a grand social, mythological, and literary theory, whereby the French intellectual develops a cultural paradigm for the existence of violence in society. Especially because of his insistence on the memory of a sacrificial event preserved in myth, some thinkers have employed his ideas to enlighten their discussions on violence in film. Developing his theories over several decades,

Girard has sought to demonstrate how societies have had a sacrificially violent event in their past. From orally transmitting tales of the violent happening, myths are created, rituals develop, and religions are born. Yet affirming assumptions or making judgments about the state of religion in this country is far from the purpose of this dissertation. Because Girard cites developed nations, with religious philosophy ranked low among their priorities, as civilizations in sacrificial crises (explained below), especially during the current period, his assertions about bloodshed and myth are apt for examining American violence after 1966, especially with regard to the movies I have chosen. My reading of violent films will involve most of his writing on violence and the nature of sacrifice. Also instructive about Girard's work is his constant reference to ambivalence and ambiguity, which I believe are important factors empowering the most interesting and meaningful violent films. The four most important works for understanding Girard's paradigm are *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, *Violence and the Sacred*, *The Scapegoat*, and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*; the central motif at the heart of these books' theses is a historically real and also mythological icon Girard calls the *scapegoat* or *surrogate victim*.

The motivational component of the scapegoating model depends upon the functioning of what Girard calls *mimesis*. Although the term could entail simple imitative behaviors, such as gestures, speech patterns, and subtle nuances, the most important, Girard insists, is appropriation. People imitate admired models (or mediators) and eventually strive to possess the very same objects that their models possess. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard explains the phenomenon with an example from *Don Quixote*. Sancho Panza dreams romantically of an island he would like to possess and inhabit as its sovereign. But his desire does not at first take the island as its object. Rather, Sancho conceives of all his romantic ideals, his hopes and

dreams through the numerous ruminations of his mentor, Don Quixote. The three together—the island, Sancho, and Don Quixote—form a triangular relationship as object, subject, and mediator, respectively. All of Sancho's actions, reactions, and desires are mimetic, whether he knows it or not. His activities lack originality, as they would not exist without his admired companion. This tripartite relationship lies at the core of most behavior, and it is responsible for the linear events of human relations that in time lead to all scapegoating mechanisms. It is also the main reason why Girard encourages his readers to rethink the term *desire*, endowing it with a broader range of characteristics that take it beyond its sexual connotations assigned by the Freudians. Desire, for Girard, is a general mode of want or need, as well as an activity (*Deceit, Desire* 3-6; *Things Hidden* 8-9).

Precisely because mimetic desire underlies human behavior, the dynamics of triangular relationships always change. An example of the most prevalent alteration occurs when the mediator realizes that he is being modeled. He reaffirms his possessions by blocking access to them and trying to appear that he is still the one in power. As a response, the imitating subject strives even more vehemently for coveted items while trying to impress the mediator. The subject discovers that he simultaneously admires, despises and envies his model, while disdaining himself because of the ever-present possibility of his own failure and lack of originality (*Deceit, Desire* 7-11).

Having a reciprocal component, mimetic desire develops into rivalry in which the mediator and subject exchange manifestations of desire and blocking techniques to prevent the other from obtaining coveted items. Mimesis and desire become overpowering, and the two rivals, who were once model and subject, exchange insults and finally violent blows. They curse and strike out at each other in a series of reciprocal, violent acts that feel at once logical and

contagious, even though neither is actually the case. When this kind of exchange occurs on a grand scale, the participants' behaviors can inspire and infect the entire the community until it is completely consumed by rage and chaos (*Violence* 148; *The Scapegoat* 13).

People in this situation believe themselves to be attacking others because they are very different from one another. They may express familial, racial, ideological hatred, envy, jealousy or greed, while the violence engulfing the community leads them to believe that intense and radical disagreements are taking place. But Girard argues that the mimesis in which they have so aggressively engaged has made them very much the same. By imitating one another, the participants destroy their social differences and remove perceived order from their society. No longer will they regard the police, the mayor, military officers, CEOs, pillars of the community, or the very rich to have any power over them. Their panic and tumult continues because they have lost the bearing by which they define themselves. Therefore, by hating their rivals, they simply hate the darker side of themselves. Girard calls this phenomenon *undifferentiation*, and he attributes it to the panic and chaos associated with communal crises. (*Violence* 49-54, 78-79; *The Scapegoat* 12-15).

Eventually the crowd arbitrarily selects one victim, who seems conspicuous for whatever reason; he may draw the crowd's persecution because he has uttered the wrong words at the wrong time; he may have a physical defect; he may appear to be vulnerable in some other way. Whichever the case, the fervor against him builds until the whole community agrees on his guilt and his being responsible for the uproar. This person always comes from within the community, because he must bear the burdens of all the people involved; yet the reasons he has been singled out make him a marginalized target. Although he is neither guilty nor innocent of his society's problems, the mob's concurrence is so strong that the victim's actual orientation becomes

immaterial to them, and they seek to destroy or exile him without fear of retribution, in a purifying act of *unanimous violence*. In the victim's absence, the crowd rejoices, and the uproar subsides because the people believe that their scapegoat has taken all of their wrongdoings and current crises with him (*Violence* 4-13, 39, 81-87; *The Scapegoat* 26, 31-32, 42).

In order to validate these claims, Girard continuously cites examples from ethnographers, historians and other intellectuals. Although he disagrees, by and large, with their methods or conclusions, he often finds their raw data to be compelling evidence of “founding” sacrificial violence. Girard asserts that hundreds of surrogate-victim examples from myth, observed rituals, history and literature can be compared on a long timeline and across cultures to reveal four common components he calls “stereotypes” of persecution. While conceding that some stereotypes are missing from stories, others are hidden deep within their subject matter, and still others appear in bastardized versions, he maintains that, on average, most models of surrogate victimization exhibit:

1. crisis
2. crimes common to the crisis
3. signs or marks of the victim
4. mob violence (*The Scapegoat* 24-28, 35-36, 61)

Problems with this paradigm arise within communities that render perverse permutations of the scapegoating mechanism. In short, this means that they can suffer the four stereotypes and the effacement of differences without restoring peace to their communities, thereby remaining in a cycle of crisis. A society that destroys a victim from *outside*, not inside, the community, for example, would not restore the peace. Their victim could not fulfill scapegoating “requirements” because a shared sin, symbolizing the guilt of all, would not be present. The people would continue to imitate one another's panic and reproduce the chaos in the form of vendettas and revenge. In the case of the outsider victim, his death would bring down the wrath of rivals from

his hometown, and the contagion of violence would perpetuate a continuous cycle of revenge.

Another example would involve a lack of serious communal and spiritual commitment to surrogate victimage as a sacred event. Girard explains it this way:

When the religious framework of a society starts to totter, it is not exclusively or immediately the physical security of the society that is threatened; rather, the whole cultural foundation of the society is put in jeopardy. The institutions lose their vitality; the proactive façade of the society gives way; social values are rapidly eroded, and the whole cultural structure seems on the verge of collapse. (*Violence* 49)

Girard refers to this process gone wrong as the *sacrificial crisis* or *reciprocal violence* (*Violence* 40-49). Representing mimetic rivalry in the extreme, these crises have prompted most societies, past and present, to develop taboos of incest, parricide, and fratricide, because these ultimate crimes of undifferentiation are harbingers of mass bloodshed. Some tribal groups even resort to killing or banishing one of two twins, because they feel physical doubles to be unnatural reproductions, which exacerbate their fears of undifferentiation (*Violence* 58-59, 74-79).

As noted, Girard appeals to the frequency and universality of surrogate-victim processes in order to validate his claims. Further, he argues that scapegoating narratives of a given society are transferred and inscribed into cultural fabrics through the passing down of mythological stories. His examples include many readings of stories from several cultures to reveal victimage plotlines in various stages of development and historical change. Myths, he maintains, are long-term attempts to keep the memory of a sacrificial victim alive. Depending on which stage of development a mythological story is in, it may explicitly reveal all aspects of a scapegoating narrative, or it may conceal them all, and the reader's job to parse out the details becomes considerable (*Violence* 92-96). Oral passage follows a pattern, "the history of mythology," in which the seminal moment is committed to memory in factual detail, designating it as a real historical event at first. But its progression through time yields a number of variations, so that

the plot devices and character actions eventually become exaggerated and often simplified, allowing for the crimes of evil characters to become more heinous and the crimes of gods or heroes to become less offensive. A fully altered myth might, for instance, involve a hero killing a monster, who personifies a variety of immoral actions. Although these derivations might seem to dispel scapegoating theories, Girard insists that they confirm his work all the more, because the changes attest to the adherents' vehemence in believing them and preserving their culture accordingly (*The Scapegoat* 49-50, 67-75).

Eventually the retelling of myths evolves into a set of guidelines or rules by which societies commemorate surrogate-victim events in order to continue avoiding crises, because they believe the historical victim brought peace in times past. Thus, the historical scapegoat, who was once ostracized by his community, becomes a hero or savior through time. Memories of the surrogate victim include fondness where there was once hatred as his iconography passes farther into legend. Vestiges of rituals, containing violent reenactments, remain today in the form of religious rites, sacraments, festivals, carnivals, feast days and sporting events as well. This state of communal ambivalence, for Girard, is mirrored in daily uses of language, which characterize deconstructions of meaning, to the point that some signifiers have referred equivocally to several signifieds. Thus, he points out that the term *pharmakon*, associated with the purging of a community's troubles, has been used to mean both *poison* and *remedy*—a subject for which he turns to Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" for assistance (*The Scapegoat* 49, 55-56; *Violence* 93, 252-55, 303).

These last precepts involving ambivalence call to mind Girard's notion that violence is contagious, that as a "sacred" force it attracts and repels at the same time. If there is any conclusion about American screen violence that critics, casual filmgoers, movie buffs, and

serious scholars can probably agree upon, it is that blood and gore attract and repel at the same time. American films make much of their money from dazzling audiences with bloodshed; as a visceral reaction, audiences wince when Jake LaMotta receives a crushing blow in the rink, or when a hole opens in Travis Bickle's neck. These factors have proven easy to observe, consistent, and unyielding since the first days of motion pictures. And for Stephen Prince, the greatest manipulation of these phenomena is the exceptional directing ability of Sam Peckinpah. Prince's extensive and lucid expostulations on the auteur's work are instructive to this discussion because they serve as a viable supplement to Girard's conclusions about violence and the state of ambivalence. They also mark a point of departure for examining the artistic import of filmic gore, because Peckinpah's work, along with Penn's, is almost unanimously agreed upon as the precedent-setting breakthrough for showing ultraviolence on screen after the Code. In *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*, Stephen Prince often exalts Peckinpah's work by saying that he appealed to audiences' appetites for violence, while denouncing the inhumanity and cruelty of inflicting pain by force. He wanted to evoke a strong sense of ambivalence in voyeuristic pleasures associated with the killing and maiming of individuals. Peckinpah intended to portray ultraviolence honestly and ridicule viewers' pleasure by realistically capturing the unpleasant effects of violent activity (221). The politically conscious director found little value in violence that was portrayed as quick and entertaining; he preferred to show death as the slow and horrible consequence of violence, refusing to remove physical pain from its emotionally stressful counterpart. Prince explains the conclusions that can be drawn from examining Peckinpah's work: "[T]he physical and emotional pain that Peckinpah placed on screen have their basis in a compassionate and empathetic response toward the tragedy

of human violence and the loss of life it entails. This pain is a clear index of his humanistic orientation” (222).

Prince’s judgments constitute a high standard that requires humanitarian concerns to be projected by violent imagery. The real challenge, implied in the final pages of his book, for would-be followers of Peckinpah’s style, is that they not take advantage of their station as messengers by creating sensational slaughter simply to generate ticket sales. Prince rejects the idea that filmic legatees associated with Peckinpah include Quentin Tarantino and John Woo just because their movies project stylistic ultraviolence. A true descendent of the gifted director would have to concentrate on the consequences of violence.

These criteria, combined with Girardian application, constitute the methodology for this essay. How and why violence in films comment upon American life in its own artistic ways are the main concerns of this study. I will undertake an inductive examination of films, organized by decade, beginning with the 1970s and ending in 1999, highlighting some of the most popular violent productions. My discussions will show that many barbarous films reflect upon a society in mimetic crisis, to the point that the principal characters act out reciprocal violence intended for revenge or reprisal. Yet these observations alone do not constitute a thorough and sustained analysis of violence. Perhaps an even more important element, contained in the forthcoming discussion, will be the detailed and sustained interpretation of violence as an artistic unit of the entire filmic apparatus. I plan to move the discussion well beyond what has already been achieved by focusing on several details in bloody scenes, because I want to enact a reading of the redemptive and/or morally instructive qualities of on-screen gore. In the same vein as Stephen Prince, I will offer commentary upon the ambiguous elements of bloody imagery by reflecting upon the pain and suffering they contain, as they also succeed in creating thrilling and visceral

moments that continue to make us want to attend the movies. Special effects, of course, are partially responsible for eliciting desired reactions in audience members. But much more important, I believe, are editing and camerawork, which function very effectively in creating the boundaries between what we see and do not see, how close up or far away the filmed subject is, and how mobile or still the sequence appears. In addition, I will demonstrate how bloody episodes inform, underscore, or punctuate their films' thematic concepts, implying how they comment upon concurrent cultural events.

No Girardian analysis can be undertaken, however, without looking into the significance of filmic ambivalence. Most viewers know from the first few moments of the recent film *Training Day* that Detective Alonzo (Denzel Washington) is a despicable character, so that when he kills someone, we see his action as an evil deed. Consequently, when he dies at the end of the film, audiences feel that his death is justified because he “got what he deserved.” Yet with *Taxi Driver*, we have a more difficult time condemning Travis Bickle for his heinous actions. Although what he accomplishes should and does draw the harshest derision, the initial difficulty lies in our sympathies for a man who has been slowly but consistently alienated from his fellow human beings and by his misguided affection for a young runaway. The result is that the viewer has to think, has to *go through* a process of understanding by being placed *inside* the carnage, so that his final thoughts about the film result from an indexing of his moral faculties; he has been asked by the film to make a decision. *Then*, his feelings about Travis Bickle and his insidious action can be the result of a vicarious process. The ambivalence produced by such participation should induce a sense of indecision or moral shift from seeing a decently rendered violent scene.⁹ My readings, therefore, deal with the often-ambiguous scapegoating effect of many of the films

under scrutiny, because the movies that successfully project it issue a call for the return to community.

The films being examined here yield trends and overarching patterns that reflect the darker side of beliefs, hopes, and dreams of the general public since the dropping of the Production Code in 1966. Emphasizing our violent society, these films vary in which aspects of our country's experience they elaborate upon, but an essential and uniquely American element that underlies all of them is the American Dream. Although I do not often headline explicit discussions of the Dream, it is worth examining for a moment in order to place the forthcoming arguments in general context. Beginning with the agrarian lifestyle of the earliest Puritan settlers, the Dream was based primarily on the ideas embodied in the Protestant work ethic. Because Calvinist thought dominated their religious philosophy, the Puritans equated hard work with inner virtue. They reasoned that God's chosen few would properly live out his plan, making the most out of the bountiful land he provided for them. Writers like John Smith and Jean de Crèvecoeur, 150 years after him, echoed these beliefs simply by having faith in the common good of humankind (Barsky 194; Edington 63-64).

In the 1770s Thomas Jefferson also championed the labor-intensive lifestyle, maintaining that it was beneficial to financial and intellectual fulfillment. But he rejected the idea that good will towards others necessarily implied closeness to God or predestination. Jefferson's reasoning was that because people were endowed with a moral sense, they did not have to adhere to any specific religious upbringing. His Enlightenment-inspired attitudes and commitment to the separation of church and state became the backbone of American egalitarian philosophy, which emphasized education, not religion, as the key to virtuous behavior and success. Jefferson's life

and writings helped to foster a movement towards the belief in every person's rights to pursue happiness through prosperity (Morman 23-27).

But the onset of the Industrial Revolution and westward expansion would slowly introduce the reality of capitalist influence and the possibility of rapid change into those beliefs. Mass production and the rapid pace at which it seemed to influence social thinking and business ethics became a point of contention for many intellectuals who believed that the unique identity of the individual was at stake. To chase the Dream, one had to be willing to discard his heritage, his background, his personal views, modes of expression and his regard for his fellow human beings along the way.

These forces run counter, of course, to Thomas Jefferson's hopes for equality in education, because in latter-day society the poor and disenfranchised, even with the benefits of education, are most likely to stay as such, as long as there is greed and intense competition. Caught in a struggle for money and power, always seeming to be pitted against those who already have it, the poor are more likely to see the very concept of the Dream devolve into a simple endeavor to survive. The American Dream would seem more like an every-man-for-himself melee instead of a healthy dose of laissez-faire competition. Critics of the fifties, sixties, and seventies recognized these underlying issues and feared that fierce competition and mechanized routine would encourage people not to work honestly and exude virtue; rather, it would present manipulation through money and power as another avenue to opportunities. Mechanization would also promote self-indulgence rather than self-fulfillment (Long 10). Writing about this topic in 1966, Randall Stewart explains that easy access to education does not make a person better. The good character to understand our natural tendencies toward sin and to resist that weakness improves a person's standing in life. Thus, Stewart concludes, "Nobody in

his right mind believes in the American Dream anymore. The farther we go, the less attainable it becomes. But it was unattainable from the start, the natural man being prone to evil, not good” (4). Opposite Thomas Jefferson’s optimism, this conclusion represents a complete lack of faith in the individual to navigate the twists and turns of a growing society that is no longer comfortable with its own novelty as a new nation.

Thus, filmmakers who examine the Dream are certainly prone to generate nightmarish permutations of it, which are the ones important to this dissertation. Anyone who has striven repeatedly to achieve success against obstacles of class, race, big business, taxation, and general malaise might readily relate. The films of the first two chapters demonstrate that the intense atmosphere of disillusionment and the threat of loss, associated with trying to live the American Dream, render the scapegoating mechanism incomplete. In the society they depict, the spiritual precepts that Girard stipulates must be in place to quell a community’s violence do not exist. In short, the people have to believe in something, and the pessimism of seventies cinema consistently intimates that they rarely do. Thus, the audience must rely on the directors’ cameras to complete the mechanism for them. I will seek to educe morally regenerative readings of these films from which to extract the hope recent violent American movies seem to have left behind with Penn and Peckinpah.

Chapter One functions as an extension of this Introduction, examining the first two *Godfather* films, independent of any context other than the matrix of the American Dream and cinematic ultraviolence. *The Godfather* films serve as the ideal texts with which to begin the practical application of my methodology, because along with expostulations of the Dream, the films also convey some of the most beautifully and morally edifying viciousness ever represented on the American screen. I show how the suffering and the human compassion that

must be evoked from motion pictures help to implicate Michael Corleone and expose his collapse into selfishness, despite the tone of moral relativity the movie adumbrates.

Chapter Two places the most popular violent movies of the 1970s in their proper historical context, showing how the society they mirrored seems to have entered a state of spiritual, moral, communal despair, despite (or maybe because of) the counterculture's peaceful intentions. *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle represents the disillusioned white male, whose prior position as quintessential American has suddenly been vanquished by a changing society. Not conscious of his own refusal to accept alterations in the cultural fabric, the antihero lashes out in a situation where there has been enough strife already. Scapegoating Travis's actions in a sick world, where its denizens believe him to have performed admirably, Scorsese renders the most visceral, sensual, and explosive violence since *The Godfather's* release four years earlier. I argue that, through the play of alterity in the mirror scene and the bloodlust at the end, *Taxi Driver's* message imitates and undercuts all the films in its line through the wonderfully orchestrated camerawork that serves to lament, not glorify.

The films of Chapter Three function as an exception to the type of movies that have been selected for discussion in other chapters. The general and bendable rule I try to follow throughout this discussion is to treat films of the "street" or big-city variety because they have the best chance of seriously and pseudo-realistically dealing with real-life, contemporary issues. They operate by formulating microcosms of American life within which to play out their stories. But if I were to adhere strictly to that rule, Chapter Three would reveal nothing considerably important, compelling, or interesting about the 1980s. The "street" films fell from favor and repeated the themes that their seventies ancestors dealt with. For the eighties, the truly popular brands of violence were found in blockbuster genres that reflected the mythical Reaganizing of

our culture. True to Girard's proclamations about a society with increasingly vehement beliefs in its mythos, films of that decade showcased preternatural heroes taking on ominous enemies in simplified storylines, incorporating cartoonish explosions of violence. Therefore, Chapter Three examines the socio-political climate of the 1980s by critiquing several violent genres that have one thing in common: they include closed and unequivocal endings which "eclipse" their ostensibly open and ambiguous beginnings with explosive and bloody culminations. This propensity develops throughout the decade and emerges in a near fever pitch in the family-oriented thriller *Fatal Attraction*, where the reconfiguring of the masculine antihero of the seventies yields the Reaganite family hero of the eighties. No victimage process explained in this essay works as well as the one elaborated here because of the overwhelming, ideological underpinning of the decade in question. Yet I argue that its most meaningful completion lies in the scholarly commentary which scrutinizes and often undercuts the intended reading of the film.

Turning again to the big city in Chapter Four, I explain how elements of popular culture, mostly television, percolate into and consume the film industry, making its violence little more than a series of exploitative entertainments, typified by *Pulp Fiction*, *Natural Born Killers*, and the like. The various exceptions dwell in the concurrent strand of race-oriented films of the 1990s whose bloodshed reflects a fractured society in turmoil—a melee of vengeance that seems impossible to prevent—especially for racial minorities. Still, implied in much of their imagery, the directors reveal their despair without letting go of the longing for redemption and reparation. This chapter's feature film, *American History X*, projects a slow display of pathos-evoking death in order to lament the woes of a society (and film industry) in the throes of mimesis.

The films at the end of each chapter represent the exceptional ability of directors to tap into the American mythos and plumb the depths of the American Dream without letting go of the

belief that it is somehow, some way achievable for all. As I shall suggest, immolation of the scapegoat holds the promise of a return to community, and it serves to expel the evils of a decadent society. What follows is an exaltation of some films' use of bloodshed for that purpose because they represent salient attempts to re-think our nation's myths.

Notes

¹See also Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) and Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in the American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999).

²Slocum's introduction to his collection, *Violence and American Cinema*, is one of the most useful and informative tools for studying violence in the movies. His bibliographic approach serves as the model for my survey of past works, as well as the means by which I have discovered some of the writings that are listed in my own introduction. I have cited the page numbers from his essay in situations where I used his summaries to assist my own. In other situations, I have listed works in the bibliography.

³Pauline Kael, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968). See also *Deeper into Movies* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1978).

⁴Stephen Prince, *Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999); Jeffrey Chown, *Hollywood Auteur: Francis Coppola* (New York: Praeger, 1988); Mary Pat Kelly, *Scorsese: A Journey* (New York: Thunder's Mouth P, 1991); Marie Kathryn Connelly, *Martin Scorsese* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1993); Peter Cowie, *Coppola: A Biography* (New York: DaCapo P, 1994); Lawrence S. Friedman, *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese* (New York: Continuum, 1997); Michael Bliss, *Justified Lives: Morality and Narrative in the Films of Sam Peckinpah* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1993); Marshall Fine, *Bloody Sam: The Life and Films of Sam Peckinpah* (New York: Primus, 1991).

⁵Jake Horsley, *The Blood Poets: A Cinema of Savagery, 1958-1999* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow P, 1999); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence* (Boston: U of New England P, 1973); see also Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992); James B. Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989)

⁶Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance* (London: The Tantivy P, 1977).

⁷Thomas Atkins, ed. *Graphic Violence on Screen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976); Nick Browne, *Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather Trilogy* (New York: Cambridge

UP, 2000); Christopher Sharrett, ed. *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film* (Washington D.C.: Maisonneuve P, 1993).

⁸Barry Keith Grant, ed. *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1996); Martha McCaughey and Neal King, eds. *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women and the Movies* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2001).

⁹This idea will be drawn out in detail when I address Devin McKinney's essay, "Violence: The Strong and the Weak," in the first chapter. His commentary serves to complement Stephen Prince's writing in *Savage Cinema*.

Chapter 1

Scapegoating the American Dreamer: Coppola's Violence in *The Godfather* Films

In an essay discussing the popular cinematic conceptions of scapegoats, Ronald Austin demonstrates that many rebellious or downtrodden characters were assigned to the victimage process in the earlier days of Hollywood production. Their truly ambiguous positions as both dregs of society and audience favorites afforded them compliance with Girard's model. As Girard stipulates in all of his books, the surrogate victim must come from the margins of his community bearing neither guilt nor innocence in the troubles of his people. And as his story proceeds through history, it changes slowly from persecution to veneration. But Austin explains that, as history progressed, the big-screen "heavy" soon replaced the loveable tramp. And the sixties and seventies saw the most cynical iterations of the heavies, whose evil drew audiences' scorn and derision. Hating these modern scapegoats allowed viewers catharsis whereby they blamed the heavies for all society's wrongdoings and felt a sense of closure when the villain was punished at the end of the film. Austin's complaint is that this brand of surrogate victimage amounts to a cheap understanding of contemporary films. He says of *Good Will Hunting*, for example:

Without the convenience of this character [the villain, scapegoat] to cure the young man of his infection of mimetic rivalry, what might the story have revealed? As is often the case, an otherwise good film offers the audience a facile ending, providing relief and satisfaction but at the cost of what could have been more perceptive and challenging characterizations. (25)

In the case of violent films, the villain's immolation very often leads to easy satisfaction and fascination with his wildly and spectacularly violent death. Since the period of cynicism spawned by America's own breakdown over the Vietnam War, violence of this brand has carried little sacral quality and has increased in order to appease communal needs to see it. It affords the

audience with no sense of deep meaning, no sense of irony, no sense of concern for those around them. Cinematically speaking, modern movies' pastiches of visual tumult "constitute the chief symptoms of what Girard defines as 'mimetic crisis'" (27). As a result, Austin mourns the loss of ambiguity on the part of the scapegoat and the increase in superficial violence that seems to have taken its place. His new prescription for contemporary cinema is simple: "[Movies] can lessen [the mimetic crisis's] infectious nature by depicting violence in a moral context that does not demonize or dehumanize" (28).

Austin is right to situate the beginning of the crisis in the contemporary period, because the spiritual breakdown and air of disillusionment, depicted by seventies movies, do not allow for complete manifestations of the surrogate-victim model. This chapter's subject, *The Godfather* (Francis Coppola, 1972), projects Michael Corleone as a false scapegoat who falls victim to the same thing he professes to hate in the film's beginning, the Mafia. As critics have widely agreed, the film is a scathing indictment of capitalist competition and accumulation. As such, the social milieu it positions the Corleones within, as immigrants chasing the American Dream, affords them with the ambiguity they require to appear as true scapegoats for a time. Coppola's brilliant directing forces audience ambivalence by indicting our own sensibilities of the Dream, appealing to our sense of family, and creating a subjective point of view through masterful camerawork. As far as the film's plot is concerned, one can watch Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) rise to power by killing a mobster and a corrupt policeman. The ensuing gang war serves as the communal discord Girard discusses very often as the seat of mimetic crisis in which Michael participates by becoming a syndicate member himself. Like a textbook scapegoat, Michael draws exultation from his family (and possibly the audience) and revulsion from several rival mobsters who ultimately hope for his immolation. Yet his demonic lapse back into the

mimetic tumult, by acquiescing to bloodshed's contagion, condemns him once and for all as anything but a true surrogate victim.

The real victimage process is not in the film's plot; it dwells, rather, in Coppola's camerawork. Once the director turns the camera *on* Michael Corleone, engendering a departure from the point of view he shares with his audience, the primary viewpoint implied is for harsh judgment, stripping viewers of their ambivalent or sympathetic outlook. For Michael's fixation on power consolidation and revenge yields only the bloodiest of sacrificial crises. Thus, he attracts the blame and derision that Robert Austin prefers to remain cautious of. But the purpose of this chapter is to affirm Coppola's scapegoating mechanism by showing how *The Godfather's* violence imparts a moral viewpoint and enacts compassion in bloodshed by concentrating on physical and mental anguish as well as spiritual collapse. *The Godfather* does not delight in its violent scenes, yet it does prod viewers forcefully, inciting us to think about the consequences. Sharply and poignantly presented, Coppola's ultraviolence repulses us several times with scenes of incredibly and artistically rendered bloodlettings so that we may finally condemn the Corleones once and for all. No matter how far into the warmth of familial matters Coppola's subjective point of view pulls the audience, the end of the film will see Michael as an isolated, bastardized scapegoat as he slips into his own selfish contemplations. But no consideration of those horrific moments can be complete without first glossing the warmer filmic technique that draws us in.

We begin with the Corleones as American Dreamers. For good reason, no serious consideration of *The Godfather* can neglect Coppola's strong allusions to the excesses of a laissez-faire system. For instance, in an early review for *Sight and Sound*, Stephen Farber notes:

Until the last few years, most businessmen assumed that there was no correlation between what a man is personally and what he may be forced to do in his work.

One could be a good family man and also a ruthless businessman, trading the Judeo-Christian ethic for jungle ethics when the dollar was at stake. That was an accepted part of American life. (218)

These remarks prefigure thirty years of commentary on the subject, as critics struggle with Coppola's coexisting aspects of family and business. Since then, critics have dealt with the perceived moral relativity engendered by the subject. Some critiques most sympathetic to the Corleones as real people regard the family's role in the film to be a highly symbolic depiction of faceless political and corporate greed. William J. Palmer, for example, refers directly to real-life corporate accumulation in his commentary:

In the late sixties and seventies, that [American] society provided, besides Vietnam and Watergate, more than enough spectacular models of corporate villainy: the big oil companies tampering with the American and world economy; huge agribusiness conglomerates disenfranchising a whole new generation of Tom Joads; the tremendous irresponsibility of public utilities and private industry which allowed Three-Mile Island, Love Canal and the Silkwood affair to happen; the computer explosion which made corporate life possible by replacing individual identities with numbers. (32)

He continues by creating a corporate analogy for the film's five New York families. Tattaglia, Barzini and the others appear as nothing more than big companies trying to consolidate their power and enacting a "communalizing impulse in society" (66). Responding with appropriate savvy, Michael Corleone simply reacts with his business's best interest in mind. Says Palmer, "In the final scenes of *The Godfather*, each of the Executive Officers of the families which have incorporated receive *very* pink slips as Michael completes his own version of a corporate takeover" (66). Of course, Palmer's analysis refuses Michael and others their three-dimensional qualities as characters and unnecessarily reduces the film to one symbolic gesture.

Others afford Michael and his clan more discernable personalities but still cannot avoid pitting them sympathetically against a corporate backdrop. Discussing what he considers some of the most thoughtful films of the seventies, Glenn Man posits that Michael Corleone does not

share with traditional Hollywood gangsters a marginalized, ruffian personality: “In other words, the Corleone family is like any other family striving to attain the American dream of material success. Conformist in their attitude, the Corleones fit into the mainstream of middle-class America and its capitalist values” (133). In *A Cinema of Loneliness*, where Robert Kolker discusses the filming styles of the great seventies auteurs, he studies the same phenomenon. He asserts, “The Don is far removed from those stupid little men of the early gangster films who pushed their way to the top by brute force and then fell when the police or a rival gang discovered their characterological or emotional flaw” (167). In addition, Kolker believes, the softness conveyed by the film’s familial demeanor contributes to those differences:

Rather, there is a large family business, rigidly codified, but genial nonetheless; dark and powerful, but warm and protective. . . . As strong as the family is, it is vulnerable, and that vulnerability is an endearing quality, mitigating the fears that would otherwise occur if the Corleones were presented as insuperable. The result, again, is an extraordinary balance of insularity, strength, vulnerability, and weakness played out within the film and upon us, the points of view we assume and the sympathies we offer. (168)

This balance of ruthless volition and familial vulnerability infuses the film’s examination of prosperity as it shows the darker side of progress.

Electric toaster ovens, mass-produced automobiles, ever-enlarging television screens, and suburban bliss are not all there is to the American experience. *The Godfather’s* opening scene is a compelling and multi-layered montage that, as it unfolds, sets the tone for addressing all the themes of the American Dream, serving as a metonym of the whole picture, through a complicated and artful array of images, dialogue, and camera shots. The first sentence in the film, spoken by the humble Bonasera (Savatore Corsitto), is “I believe in America.” Isolated in an extreme closeup, his face is the only thing visible, surrounded by a deep, black background.

He speaks the heartfelt words of a recent immigrant who has come to the United States to prosper for his family:

America has made my fortune. And I raised my daughter in American fashion. I gave her freedom but I taught her never to dishonor family. She found a boyfriend, not an Italian. She went to the movies with him. She stayed out late. I didn't protest. Two months ago he took her for a drive with another boyfriend. They made her drink whiskey. Then they tried to take advantage of her. She resisted. She kept her honor. So they beat her like an animal.

While Bonasera is pleading, the camera is pulling back, slowly letting in more light and revealing two doors in the background. Most light and all the focus, however, remain on him, underscoring his isolation as he tells the story of his daughter's pain and how it makes him feel. His mental agony and plea to the Godfather (Marlon Brando) for help are a direct result of a legal system that has failed faithful and dutiful Americans, perhaps because of their immigrant status. "The judge sentenced them to three years and suspended their sentence," Bonasera continues, "Suspended sentence! They went free that very day. I stood in the courtroom like a fool, and those two bastards—they smiled at me. Then I said to my wife, 'For justice, we must go to Don Corleone.'" By this time the camera has pulled back behind the Godfather, creating an over-the-shoulder shot. In the left side of the screen, Don Vito Corleone sits in mid-frame; there are papers on the desk, a fancy lamp in the background, and even a comforting assistant presenting Bonasera with a drink. He no longer pleads in a contextual vacuum. Strangely now he sits in the neat and stately office of a dangerous Mafia boss. Bonasera's request is so sinister that he feels he has to whisper in the Don's ear to make his point. Still he insists on the word "justice" as the reason for his request.

Don Corleone's agrees to administer justice but immediately couches his support for Bonasera in the language of family and respect. He also shows reason and restraint as he

convinces his humble guest that murder is too harsh a punishment for the men who harmed his daughter. The Don explains:

If you'd come to me in friendship, then this scum that ruined your daughter would be suffering this very day. And if, by chance, an honest man like yourself should make enemies, then they would become my enemies, and they will fear you. . . . Some day, and that day may never come, I'll call upon you to do a service for me. But, uh, until that day, accept this justice as a gift on my daughter's wedding day.

They walk about the office, surrounded by well-dressed men, as they discuss matters of revenge. Don Corleone minces the language of friendship and family with that of even exchange. Not only has he the sound mind to render the brand of justice appropriate for Bonasera's plight, but he also explains what the payment will be. When he closes the matter, he does so referring to his daughter's nuptials, bonding the agreement with the custom that no Sicilian man can refuse to perform a favor on his daughter's wedding day. Vito Corleone proves to be a success as a family man and a shrewd business leader.

This conflation of family and business is addressed aggressively with a sense of moral relativism and familial love in *Part II* (1974). This second film in *The Godfather* series succeeds in better justifying Vito Corleone's actions. Each of that movie's retrospectives upon the life of the young Vito (Robert DeNiro) and his involvement with organized crime centers around a simple causative event, one that always contains emotional appeals to the audience and their sense of family. A virtual student of violence in turn-of-the-century Sicily, young Vito witnesses the murders of his older brother and mother. After escaping his own immanent death in his homeland, the young man finds himself trying to survive the rough streets of New York City. He witnesses cruelty, fear tactics, and extortion in the person of a local Mafioso known as Don Fanucci (Gastone Moschin). In the process of his extorting ventures, Fanucci causes Vito to lose

his job and upsets the owner of the grocery store where Vito has been employed. To mitigate his losses, young Corleone takes to the streets, earning a living for his family.

As time goes on and as the retrospective episodes begin to reveal more about the young Vito's life, he again faces the bullying tactics of Fanucci, who demands a cash payoff for working in his neighborhood. Young Vito, careful to restrain his anger and to consider the concerns of his young partners, Tessio and Clemenza, discusses plans on how to deal with Fanucci. For his gang's petty-thief operation, the young Vito wishes to pay only a part of the money Fanucci demands. A scene at the dinner table and later in a café depicts young Vito as a master of negotiation and compromise. He manages to appease Fanucci without paying the full amount.

The retrospectives continue this way, juxtaposing Vito's and Michael's lives, gradually revealing that the father's values and powers of keen decision-making are what set him apart from his tragically flawed son. When considering both movies and their chronology of events, one can observe the two men's lives develop, as their paths diverge. Vito is able to juggle familial relations and business ventures with relative ease. He almost never falls victim to one, thereby risking his competency in the other. His son, on the other hand, fares much worse, and he isolates and destroys himself by the end of *Part II*. Each retrospective segment, depicting Vito Corleone's life, shows his charitable nature and morally relative position with regard to killing, as if to mitigate his actions. Perhaps more brilliant and compelling, however, is the actual placement of these episodes. With the exception of the first retrospective, each of the others follows an episode of present-day Michael Corleone's life. He slowly loses control of his family while trying to preserve and maintain it. Each time Michael makes a mistake, the scene dissolves to an episode of his father's past, putting the two men side by side for a moment.

Viewers are meant to see them operate in a violent and corrupt world and judge them as they perform. One dissolve shows Michael at a hotel in Nevada asking Tom Hagen (Robert Duvall) about the location of his wife and brother. He even has to inquire as to what his son's Christmas present is, so it will appear he has purchased it. The scene then fades to the young Mama Corleone and a nurse in New York City, treating the infant Fredo for pneumonia, as the young Vito looks on watching every detail, feeling his son's pain.

The most effective and compelling changeover, however, is the one following the assassination attempt at the Corleone compound in Lake Tahoe. The endeavor to kill Michael signifies the extent to which Mafia business has encroached upon his domestic life. It is revealed later that his brother Fredo is critical to the attack, as an insider, making it possible for shots to be fired into the bedroom where Michael and his wife sleep. Michael has not negotiated family and business successfully, and he has allowed the two to collapse together, as he hides sheltered from the world in his compound. Opposite what his father would do, Michael decides not to remain at the compound—the one time he actually should—to provide support for his family. “Why do you have to go?” says his son, Anthony. “Cause I have to do business,” he responds, and a moment later the scene dissolves to his father, tending to his first-born Santino (Sonny) with pride and care. In a picturesque moment, the frame contains young Vito standing behind the crib and cuddling his son, with his wife looking on beside him. During the changeover, the two Corleone men are again side-by-side on the screen. Father and son here are made to look as different as possible. Vito is a man whose mistakes and criminal activity are well intentioned; Michael is a man whose mistakes result from flaws of hubris and the desire for revenge. *Part II* depicts a lonely and defeated Michael who has lost a battle with himself at the end of a tragedy about the collapse of his family.

As if to emphasize these two points—Vito’s moral superiority and his ability to extract positive dividends from a criminal life—one of the retrospective episodes depicts Vito’s ascendancy into organized crime as serendipity. He does not appear to harbor criminal thoughts or perpetuate criminal behavior, but one night a bag of guns simply arrives through the window. It is Clemenza who throws them in and Clemenza who takes Vito to an affluent neighborhood to steal a rug; it is also Clemenza who tells him that his “friend” forgot to leave him the key to the house where the rug lies. By this time, the audience has been inundated with emotional appeals to a sense of family, a sense of necessity, and the strong impression that immigrants like the Corleones have very little. The movie continues to harness pathos by returning Clemenza and Vito immediately back to Mama Corleone and little Santino, where they play with him on the new rug. After all, the rug’s owners are infinitely more well off than the Corleones and could easily afford another one.

Another strong familial appeal occurs after Vito murders Fanucci brutally. He is shown quickly returning to his wife and children, and the touching scene that follows has the effect of softening his image. A medium shot of a New York stoop outside an apartment building shows Vito taking a seat on the steps to the far right of the screen. On the far left is the young, motherly Mama Corleone. She holds baby Fredo; Santino, the oldest son, sits in the middle, and the infant Michael Corleone lies cradled in his father’s arms. Santino plays with a miniature American flag, and the mother assists Fredo in waving yet another little flag. The shot, taking place just moments after a brutal murder, is quasi-patriotic and, therefore, embodies a contradiction, which seems necessary to American life. This neatly arranged shot looks like a solemn yet happy painting of a young family that typifies and accepts the Italian immigrant experience. Like its predecessor, *The Godfather, Part II*, in this scene, draws together all its themes into one succinct

moment: in an instant, viewers are asked to ponder the conflation of family and the necessary preservation of its finances. All the imagery and language here serve to buffer the ill effects of Vito's illegal activities.

Michael's murderous endeavors are not afforded the same convenient buffers that accompany his father's wrongdoings. His actions seem to indicate a heavier emphasis on resentment and revenge, and they indict him as the more malevolent of the two dons. In trying to maintain control, Michael manages to lie to Kay, deny his faith, betray his sister, leave his son, abandon his wife, and order the killing of his own brother. What we see in him is the total inability to maintain a balance of business and family. The forces of commerce move too quickly for Michael, and they prove to overwhelm and destroy him. As the only member of his family adamant about refusing to join the Mafia, Michael finds himself suddenly engulfed by it. His resolve to survive and stay ahead is contradictory because it preserves his physical life yet destroys his spiritual one. Nowhere in the film are these assertions more apparent than in the terrible scenes of bloodletting. Despite couching them in a struggle for survival in the brutalities of capitalist competition, Coppola's directing and artistic control assist in condemning Michael *and* his father, if we really pay attention, by conveying the sheer evil of their actions. The violent force that both men utilize to eradicate their problems are some of the most aesthetically rewarding scenes of bloodshed in American film.

First, a word about aesthetics. In the Introduction, I pointed out that Stephen Prince reveres Sam Peckinpah's techniques and philosophy of depicting cinematic bloodshed, because he exudes compassion by showing the consequences of inflicting harm. As if to expound upon that subject, Devin McKinney has written a lucid essay, "Violence: The Strong and the Weak," amounting to an entire theoretical outlook on cinematic brutality. Like Prince, he rejects the

“weak” brutality of so many modern films as a simple and juvenile device for them to compete against each other in the marketplace. Watching people get shot down and fall below the sight of the camera is a convenient way for the audience to move on without actually considering the seriousness of what they just viewed. McKinney castigates several recent films for their flashy and meaningless bloodshed, as he shows how it engenders an artistic void. *Reservoir Dogs*, for example, is an aggressively sadistic film that enjoys violence for violence’s sake, while becoming the pop cultural pastiche of meaninglessness it readily yet humorously acknowledges itself to be. *Basic Instinct* is a movie that closes off any insight into the human soul that it might have to offer by exhibiting a sensational brand of bloodshed (104-05). The weakest exponents of this variety do not allow for identification with the victim or victimizer. For the most part, they render the components of atrocity with neutrality and “hot, stylized air” (102). In cases of especially weak examples, the story serves the violence, rather than allowing the violence to serve the story. Filmic brutality of the weak variety does not force audience contemplation: it “simply doesn’t last; it gets left on the floor with the candy wrappers” (103-05).

McKinney’s preference, on the other hand, is for scenes that invite contemplation of the pain in violence, “which demands the commitments of those still living.” “Strong” violence, McKinney says, “has subtext, carries the weight of fear and mystery, and is piercing enough to shoot past the crap violence we all drink like beer. . . . As much as anything, it is the grasp of consequence that distinguishes strong violence from the weak” (100-01). This more edifying brand of violence situates the audience in the victim’s or victimizer’s point of view; “it enables shifts in one’s moral positioning”; it enacts paradoxes that are “rich and mazelike.” McKinney finalizes his call for depth in the depiction of violence with this challenge:

If a film makes the decision to be violent, it shouldn’t go about its business timidly: no art ever came of a hedged bet. But most of the violent pictures that

cross the screen these days, however dangerous they appear, are as conservative at the heart as a Disney fable. These films hedge their bets on the level of audience involvement by refusing a full commitment to their own content: they want to look at horror, but they don't want to feel it, smell it, take the chance of getting sick from it. By insuring itself in this way, a violent film can't help but resist a viewer's emotional investment, which, frustrated, displaces itself onto an academic admiration of style. (108)

McKinney's standards echo Stephen Prince's because of a yearning to see "good" come from movie bloodshed. They have in common a preference for the depiction of suffering so that violent scenes not look frivolous, and audiences receive something more than voyeuristic thrills from their moviegoing experiences. Also implied in McKinney's call for "shifts in one's moral positioning" is the Girardian ambiguity inherent in the scapegoating process. If a violent scene truly depicts the horrors of inflicting pain, viewers may first see them as cathartic releases for feelings of revenge, but, second, they may vicariously feel the pain and reconsider. In short, *The Godfather* has been the first major motion picture to answer this call sharply and thoroughly since Peckinpah's making of *The Wild Bunch*.

The sight of the horse's head in Jack Woltz's (John Marley) bed is one such example of Coppola's skill at rendering violence well. The real power of the scene, I find, is its ability to break with what could have been a more predictable Mafia hit and leave the audience time to ponder. It occupies the screen, almost unedited for a full forty seconds, from the first sight of the horse's blood to the wide shot of the head itself, Woltz's terrible screams spanning much of the time. The length of the scene is an artful rendering of and meditation on death. As the sun rises over his house, Woltz sleeps peacefully into the early morning. The camera moves in a slow tracking shot from the foot of the bed to a much closer view just behind Woltz's head and shoulders. As he slowly uncovers himself to reveal more and more blood, the musical score adds to the scene's development. Once the gruesome horse's head is revealed, Woltz's utter shock is

considerable, as he sits, drenched completely in blood, looking at the head. His wailings are the very essence of deep, primal fear.

Sporting a severed horse's head, *The Godfather* flouts gangster conventions by depicting a non-human killing. The shock for Woltz is reflective of our own shock as we view the gruesome and unexpected. No matter how merciless, the brutal killings of the movie's gangsters can be expected in a film about revenge and the lure of easy money. Yet nothing can prepare us for the sight of a severed horse's head lying at the foot of a bed. The scene promulgates elements of the horror genre, rather than drama, and it extracts from the audience a genuine thrill of surprise. The head was jarring to a theater full of mainstream moviegoers, and it certainly made for a lasting impression. When people recall the scene, they must necessarily recall the merciless deeds of the Corleone clan. Just like anyone else now, Woltz, the major movie producer, who has verbally abused a high-ranking mobster (Tom Hagen), is reduced to a frightened old man. Furthermore, by fulfilling Devin McKinney's requirements for "good" violence, the scene forces contemplation on the consequences of inflicting pain.

Like this slow-moving, tension-building scene, there are several other lengthy death scenes that invite a wealth of contemplation and warrant some discussion. Fanucci, Brasi, Sollozzo and McCluskey's demises also help constitute Coppola's contribution to screen violence. All these murders have, by today's standards, exceptionally long screen times in common. These scenes typically involve blood, excessive, enduring pain, and closeup camera shots. If the horse's head cannot strip Vito Corleone of his warm demeanor and false superiority that *The Godfather* films assign to him, then his elimination of Fanucci must be revisited. Using a towel as a silencer, he shoots Fanucci once in the chest and once in the face. The bullet to the face is shocking and painful to watch; Vito Corleone shows little mercy. The old man clutches

the doorframe, struggling to survive and stand tall. He appears to be refusing to die. But his fall comes quickly as he slumps suddenly to the floor. As thorough as he is cool-headed, Vito ensures his own triumph by putting the gun to Fanucci's mouth and firing again. The cruelty of this act compromises the assumption that Vito only does what he absolutely has to for his family.

Another graphically brutal scene, Luca Brasi's (Lenny Montana) strangulation mirrors the older Mafia's total annihilation by younger generations who prefer to move with commerce's tide and invest in heroin. As suffocation suggests, Luca Brasi is depicted as a man drowning under the weight of mob pressures. He is fat, old, and loyal. It is no accident, therefore, that his loyalty and dedication to Don Corleone seems comical at Connie's wedding in the very first sequence of the film's events. Brasi, surprised and delighted that he has been invited to the wedding, sits outside the Don's office and rehearses his appreciation, stammering over his words. He does no better when finally inside the office, but the Don acknowledges his gratitude.

Brasi's violent death dominates the screen as a closeup in which he strains his round, full face, his tongue dangling to one side and eyes bulging. After Sollozzo stabs him in the hand, confining him to the bar, the garroting lasts a full thirty seconds with Brasi gagging and wheezing desperately. The men killing him look on gleefully, as if they are taking part in a childhood game. The simple length of time it takes to kill him and the various camera angles emphasize the brutality of gang violence. An eye-level view of his staring eyes evokes feelings of intensity and horror. As he slowly sinks below the camera's view, the feeling produced is a loss commensurate with the dying of an older regime: slow, deadly, violent. This "bad guy" is vulnerable and pathetic.

In a wonderfully intense scene, when Michael eliminates McCluskey and Sollozzo (Sterling Hayden and Al Lettieri), the most apparent aspect is that their murders do not seem

rushed, even though Michael must leave the restaurant at once. Instead the scene is self-conscious and slow about its own violence. The three men gather for a dinner meeting at a Bronx restaurant, where Tessio has left a gun for Michael behind the toilet. Just before Michael returns to shoot his two enemies, the sound of a train passing in the background becomes louder and louder. The rushing, screeching noise parallels Michael's inner turmoil and his anxiety associated with having to kill. But a spray of blood soon issues from the back of Sollozzo's head, as the bullet goes through, and the sound of the train subsides. The implication is that Michael's immediate turmoil dies with Sollozzo; killing is suddenly a little easier, and Michael displays greater resolve as he guns down the police captain in perhaps the grisliest of all the killings. Extracting Michael, therefore, from his position as coddled son, Coppola shows Michael as new leader now, losing his moral grounding rather quickly, because of the intense desire for revenge.

Captain McCluskey's shooting, along with Sollozzo's demise, occupies about thirty seconds of screen time. There is a medium shot, showing Michael from the side, his arm completely and confidently outstretched. He shoots the policeman once in the neck, and then the film cuts to a closeup of McCluskey holding his throat and gurgling. The sound from his throat alone conjures images of savage death and adds to the grisly character of the slaying. His pain looks unimaginable, and his facial expressions evoke sympathy for even this crooked man of the law. Viewers are not allowed to dismiss the corrupt cop and move on with the narrative. As he sits there choking on his own blood, Michael shoots him in the head, and McCluskey's face begins to twist and contort, as if to illustrate his pain. Still the policeman holds his position for a few seconds before the camera cuts back, exposing Michael's hardening look as he becomes a criminal in front of our eyes. Finally, McCluskey falls rather abruptly against the table. Blood

sprays, dramatic falls, Michael fleeing to the tune of loud, tone-setting music: these effects are exciting, yet almost certainly entertainment is intended as the secondary function. The primary purpose is to have us concentrate on the pain in violence itself. Hence these lengthy death scenes are not just catalysts for cinematic action; they are there—they sit still on screen—to show the ugliness and desolation that is death. For, as much as *The Godfather* is an indictment of the cruel progress of American commerce and as much as viewers are to see McCluskey as corrupt law enforcement and Brasi as a dying breed, the audience is also to see all the men involved as mere men on some level.

Our displeasure in looking at the victims' agonies should evoke feelings of shame for their killers. In the moments it takes to kill people, the fact of whether or not they side with the Corleones is immaterial. When we really get a chance to look, to gaze upon their deaths, they sit or stand before us looking straight ahead—head and shoulders facing the camera directly, for all the audience to witness their vulnerability. These characters are not allowed the dignity of a side shot, nor are they allowed the quick exit from the film below the camera's range. Slowly and eventually they cease to look like mobsters and begin to look more like what they really are: men dying. If the sheer duration of each death scene gives us pause to ponder these issues, so does each closeup. When the camera zooms in on their faces, it exposes them for a moment in complete isolation, disclosing their weakness and vulnerability to mortality. For their last moments on earth, they have to live with the agonizing physical pain, as well as the pain of all their sins and involvement in organized crime. More importantly, the audience has to live with the memory of the horrible images it has just witnessed, and the specter of murder's consequences becomes unmistakable. Shock, horror, displeasure contribute to a lingering reminder that death and killing come with a set of circumstances that amount to more than just

the elimination of an enemy. Taking Robert Austin, Stephen Prince and Devin McKinney's recommendations as reasonable, one realizes that Coppola has surpassed the compassion-in-violence that Peckinpah advocated. What makes all my assertions above possible is that violence and its physiological component, pain, have been considered and enmeshed together.¹

Scandalously, however, Michael harnesses power and profits from their deaths, save for Brasi. He rises to the level of a major player in the business he once rejected. If we feel any relief on Michael's behalf when he avenges the attempt on his father's life by killing McCluskey and Sollozzo, the unflinching stare on his face later, during the baptismal rite, should fully discourage us. This is Coppola removing the subjective point of view again so that we witness Michael's complete turn inward, toward negativity and revenge. And the killings at the film's finale make it very difficult to imagine any sequence of events in the history of American cinema, illustrating such a final delving into evil, rendered more effectively. As he becomes the spiritual godfather to his nephew, Michael Francis Rizzi, Michael also consolidates his power over the five New York families and crystallizes his role as the criminal godfather.

But what I want to emphasize here is that the speed of editing reflects Michael's total withdrawal into his own hell and sin as a person. No less artistic and commendable than the slowly edited scenes examined above, these faster, more abruptly edited moments of the baptismal slayings infuse the film with their own poignancy. The power of speed, dramatic music, Catholic pageantry, and Michael's aloof stares lies in the very haste with which they are rendered and the onslaught of pain they create. Although much of the anguish is inflicted psychologically onto the audience through Michael's mutilation of religious and moral tradition, the fallen dons, old and robbed cleanly of their final years, provide adequate examples of suffering during their last seconds on earth.

Concurrent with that development is Michael's complete flouting of his religious convictions. As Girard makes clear, societies of lessening spiritual values yield bastardizations of the scapegoat, and to that end Michael Corleone is at once a symbol of evil and a symbol of capitalist greed's overtaking spiritual matters. According to Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, "the *sacrificial crisis*, that is, the disappearance of the sacrificial rites, coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community" (49). Like the modern judicial system and the electric chair which Girard maintains are controlled non-spiritual forms of revenge, Michael's order to massacre his enemies is nothing more than a continuation of the carnage. And the baptism scene's intercutting amounts to an erasure of the sacred; each time the camera takes in the richness of Catholic pageantry and ritual is affirmed, it is negated by the constant reminder that the violence is louder and more spectacular than the ceremony. Commenting on this issue, Robert Kolker suggests that the church is being used as a kind of superficial protection:

It is significant, for the narrative, in its clear presentation of Michael as a vicious man, willing to use ritual as a shield for his character. . . . The religious protection that guides the family can be seen as a shield and a fraud: the baptism that covers Michael's slaughter of his enemies, the saint plastered [in *Part II*] with bills that is carried through the procession that covers Vito's murder of Fanucci indicates that rituals can be used to hide corruption. (177, 190)

With a more lucid essay that represents a spiritually articulated rethinking of this topic, John R. May has taken it a step further. In "*The Godfather* Films: Birth of a Don, Death of a Family," he demonstrates that "both ritual and myth . . . are integral to the narrative structure and symbolic fabric of *The Godfather* films. Coppola's principal cinematic devices emphasizing ritual are intercutting and framing" (68). The essay centers on the films' biblical allusions and references to Catholic ritual as a way of condemning Michael. Observing that several important instances

in all the films unfold in sets of three, from tripartite killings to Michael's lying to Kay, May's discussion reveals that Michael's transgression is a structured, unholy hypocrisy. Each instance of his forswearing the devil is actually a reversed affirmation, amounting to an evil version of the holy ritual he ostensibly supports: "Michael Corleone's threefold renunciation is a solemnized lie signaling the demonic bond of hypocrisy that holds together the human race; the matter and form of his sacrament of rebirth as the Godfather are not water and Spirit of truth, but blood and deception" (69). This backwards ritual Michael has enacted demonstrates a precise dismantling of deeply engrained morality that the church is supposed to represent. A quick examination of the filmic oscillations from the church to the carnage should suffice in illustrating this point.

After Clemenza kills Don Stracchi² in the elevator, Michael declares that he renounces Satan. Cut to Moe Green, shot in the eye, through the glasses, slowly dropping his head, paralleling the pipe-organ music, as he lies facedown on the massage table. The blood gushing freely from his eye is a horrible image, and the closeup of his cracked lens is an added touch of realism. Still, the scene cuts quickly to Michael remaining stoic, then to Cicci shooting Don Cuneo in a revolving door. The camera then returns to Michael declaring that he renounces all the works of Satan. Behind him is a congregation of witnesses to the ceremony, symbolizing and reinforcing family support. Yet viewers' attention is ripped from these otherwise tranquil and holy scenes by the loud and dramatic displays of carnage, which threaten to overshadow images of the church. Don Tattaglia and a woman suffer the agony of machine-gun blasts in a hotel bed, blood spurting freely as Coppola elects not to hold back. Then the camera returns to Michael rejecting the promises of Satan, just before the most moving and grisly of all assassinations—the death of Don Barzini (Richard Conte). Flesh hangs from his back as his arms go up, announcing his terrible pain. Then, there is a cut to his rolling down the steps of a

public building. This shot provides for high drama while not letting viewers see the gross detail of his mutilated body. His tumble down the steps emphasizes, with dramatic flair, the end of the whole ordeal: Michael's consolidation of power and his ironic embrace of evil. The violence emerges here as its own statement, a testament to the cruelty of death; even a man like the treacherous Barzini looks pathetic as he yields to the final pains of death and Michael Corleone's selfish concerns. "Michael Rizzi, go in peace, and may the Lord be with you. Amen," says the priest, as Don Michael gazes on him for a moment, understanding the irony.

Michael's hypocrisy is so blatant that one wonders about his sanity as he stands in front of the priest, making declarations affirming his faith, while his henchmen carry out orders to mutilate his enemies in broad daylight. This is no longer the Michael Corleone who murders Captain McCluskey out of love for his father; this is the confident mob boss, completely removed from any sense of emotion. These scenes candidly expose Michael's lack of concern by continually referring back to the images of the church and shots of the priest with the innocent child, portraying them as his polar opposite.

In a rudimentary sense, Michael Corleone is a bastardized scapegoat of the American cinema because he stands in the balance between the most exalted permutation of the Dream (if we choose to see him as a highly symbolic metaphor for success) and its ugliest incarnation. A closer look at *The Godfather's* violence, as I have argued, reveals this aspect with repeated efficiency of the film's numerous gunshots and garrotings. For as much as the film oscillates between familial good and capitalist evil, the well-rendered bloodlettings eventually topple the scales of moral relativity to show that absolutes still exist, thus castigating Michael's actions.

In a time when cinematic violence is as cartoonish as Saturday-morning specials, it is refreshing to review the film because it ironically attacks seventies cynicism and reinforces the

humanitarian message of violence: that it is unthinkable. Coppola's filming technique, whether with fast editing or slow, long takes, helps to condemn all of the movie's characters. Killings seem to exist in order to iterate and replay, for the audience, the horrible consequences of murder, so that they send Michael and Vito Corleone straight back into the throes of mimetic rivalry from which they sometimes seem to emerge. The film moves well beyond Ronald Austin's demand for better scapegoating mechanisms by exposing Michael in his unholiness. Although it surely indicts Michael this way, it humanizes his victims by making their pain (and ours) apparent, while asking for a halt to all the chaos. As a portrait of the complete breakdown of community, family, individual, *The Godfather* films cry out for their restoration to wholeness.

Notes

¹In the Introduction I pointed out that Stephen Prince's conclusions about Peckinpah's violence were to be used as guidelines for my own analyses. This concept of showing the pain in bloodshed, borrowed from *Savage Cinema*, will remain an important subject throughout this discussion.

²May's article gives the dons' names from all the Five Families.

Chapter 2

Deconstructing the Vigilante Line: *Taxi Driver* and the Lonely White Male

Exaggerating the white male's perceived fall from privilege, individualist films of the 1970s embodied middle-class aggression arising from the inability to accept social change. Several films aspire to cheer on the vigilante hero as he tromps through the urban setting, defeating enemies and rejecting the lure of the counterculture. The problem for him is the permanence in anger that simply continues the enmity, causing him to shy away from peaceful solutions and meaningful interactions with other human beings. The resentment of the hero, especially Travis Bickle, is irremovably tied to his confusion when negotiating the difference between self and Other. It is the cornerstone of any sacrificial crisis, and it serves as the key to *Taxi Driver's* critical and paradoxical reversal of vigilante cinema.

A celebration of blood and guts, *Taxi Driver* examines white, male alienation taken to its fullest extent in a show of camera angles, soundtrack music, and special effects that demand the viewers' attention. Although the picture is now understood as a Leftist admonition against violence, some critics in 1976 lambasted it for seeming to enjoy its own bloodshed. The fact that it narrowly avoided an X rating testifies to the ferocity of its imagery, the tenacity of its makers, and the uneasiness of some of its critics. Joan Mellen saw it as the latest in a line of vigilante movies that harbored contempt for society's more progressive and liberal citizens (310). Others thought it was excessively bloody, and they condemned it for seeming to relish in its brutality. In an early review, Michel Dempsey said of it, "During this scene [the bloodshed at the end], *Taxi Driver* reduces itself almost to the squalid level of *Death Wish*, the kind of adrenaline-pumping, unprincipled revenge melodrama, which will do anything to arouse its audience" (41).

As far as the film's plot is concerned, these suppositions could seem accurate. One can watch Travis Bickle drive through the New York streets, feeling alone and contemptuous of all the "scum" around him. Believing he can make his intended victims into scapegoats and enact reparation for life's problems, he lashes out and kills them all, initiating what would seem to be a necessary sacrifice. In fact, the newspapers seem to agree, affirming him as a street hero who saves a young girl's life. And the police ignore the fact that Travis has illegal guns and actively seeks out his victims. Therefore, one could view the film, in its most superficial appeals, as an espousal of the violent vigilante movie against the big city's more unsightly elements. Before Travis's dangerous lapses into warrior fantasies, Scorsese's camerawork functions to attract audience members by evoking sympathy for the forgotten white male. He is an individual threatened on all sides because he and his brand of manhood have been left behind by a society that has suddenly found itself in the midst of other concerns. Through its constant references to disillusionment in the big city, *Taxi Driver* seems to ask, what about those who are forgotten? What about those who have very little money, very few friends? And very few resources? Are these individuals simply out of luck?

But Travis's break with reality begins the real victimage process when Scorsese suddenly destroys the established subjective point of view in favor of an objective one that shockingly brands Travis as a Mohawk-wearing lunatic. Because Travis is not eliminated in the traditional scapegoating sense, viewers must settle for his exile by camera, a trick of cinematography that makes him appear as the most degenerative and evil of all protagonists in vigilante cinema. Thus, the bloodshed at the end becomes a disturbing lamentation and admonition for the alienated man and his self-imposed isolation. Its sharp and gruesome depiction explodes the entire vigilante line, dismantling it during Travis's rampage as an example of what not to do.

This implies, of course, that the film does not exist in a vacuum. It is a metonym for a long list of movies that explore American attitudes, values, politics and the resulting violence that heralded confusion in a radically polarized society. Understanding the spectacular ending of the film requires a short analysis of its own recent ancestry as product of American history and the urban nightmare that many films intended to comment on. We begin with the events of the late 1960s. When President Johnson spent staggering sums of money to escalate the war effort in Vietnam, he refused to raise taxes to pay for it. The result was an increase of inflation, which would eventually reach double digits, that Nixon had to contend with (Chafe 413, 431). Unemployment skyrocketed to over eight percent before the first recovery of the early eighties. Retarded economic growth caused factories all over the country to lay off workers or close altogether. Businesses saw decreases in revenue and lowering morale that nearly paralyzed their workplaces.

To make matters worse, the United States faced increasing difficulties in keeping up with its foreign competitors. Japan and many countries in Europe had entirely rebuilt their factories after the Second World War, making them safer, more modern, and more productive. In this country, executives and foremen struggled to keep their workers happy in old, unsafe factories that could not produce as quickly as others. Those that did modernize their workplaces purchased computer equipment and robots, allowing companies to lay off hundreds of employees (446-48). Those who did not achieve middle class status from government assistance fell into deeper poverty and suffered greatly from unemployment (442-44).

The welfare system and unemployment offices designed to combat these problems only made the situation more disheartening. People waited in very long lines to find leads to menial jobs. They were demoralized by having to struggle for employment and accept government help

while contending with the endless bureaucracy of the various departments and offices that assisted them. Those who did find employment were often plagued by doubts about how long their jobs would last and whether or not they would have to go back to the welfare lines. Thus, the country seemed to be stuck in an economic quagmire. The rich seemed to be getting richer and the poor were getting much poorer. Inner-city and blue-collar neighborhoods were awash in sadness and feelings of a bleak future that continued throughout the Carter years. Crime increased and so did drug use, the number of high-school dropouts, and the number of people who considered themselves depressed (431, 442-43).

Richard Nixon combated these problems with an endless stream of rhetoric designed to appeal to the millions of Americans he called the “silent majority.” In order to clinch the election in 1968, Nixon reasoned that many people could be rallied against the progressive civil-rights movement which gained momentum during the Vietnam War. Groups he could appeal to would be the angry white, blue-collar workers and Southerners who suffered from unemployment and directed their enmity toward African Americans and others whose civil-rights concerns seemed to snatch away jobs and money. Areas of contention for conservatives were legalized integration and busing, which they regarded as encroachments upon their traditional ways of life. Nixon inspired these groups, pitting them (and therefore their common cause) against liberal causes brought on by over-educated denizens of the Northeast. He united conservatives by convincing them that they represented most people in the United States—decent, hard-working, flag-waving individuals who saw good reason for our presence in Southeast Asia. They represented the “silent majority” who did not see fit to make noise or involve themselves in protests and youth-oriented threats to the traditional family, while cavorting around San Francisco and New York, declaring sexual liberation. After his election,

Nixon appointed several very conservative judges to combat liberal “softness” and leftist policies that offended his supporters. The intention was to correct the wrongs done by an effete and permissive legal system (383-86, 414).

Nixon’s vice-president, Spiro Agnew, was more abrasive than his boss. He spoke more resolutely about black militancy, drugs, and youthful arrogance. Creating the impression that common Americans were victims of a liberal conspiracy, Agnew railed out against antiwar activists, saying that they were effeminate, sniveling brats sent out to the ideological front lines by Eastern intellectuals who sought to undermine the America that decent people had all come to know and love (387). Thus, the American political climate yielded a people who were clearly polarized in the midst of a social and economic crisis that was wracking the nation. Almost daily reminders of this bifurcation came in the form of social unrest. In cities like Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Los Angeles, demonstrators clashed with police on every important issue of the period. Whether the people opposed the war, supported women’s rights, advocated civil rights, or detested their universities’ involvement with government contracts, there were always two sides to every story, and it seemed as if no reconciliation would be possible.

Reflecting these trying times and the rapid changes in social attitudes, American films began to explore these issues at the turn of the decade. Many directors set their stories in the big cities, where crime, drugs, and general dereliction had run rampant. Unemployment, malaise, and depression had seemingly made American life so unbearable that one had to exercise his wits and animalistic instincts to survive. There were characters being shuffled aside like Travis Bickle, and others like Dirty Harry whose no-nonsense attitude seemed to be constructed out of hatred for the counterculture. The trend, therefore, was a constant illustration of the political confusion that typified the time. Films stretched across the continuum on how they treated these

issues, from the most unambiguously Leftist to the most unapologetically Rightist. Some movies attempted to waver, as if they were undecided on which outlooks in our society should be given more credence. They too were sometimes violent, suggesting that the intensity and frenzied nature of a country in the grips of Nixonian polarization could best be confronted by truculence.

As Peter Lev explains, *Joe* (John G. Avildsen, 1970)¹ was a movie probably meant to evoke feelings of sympathy for hippie dissenters. Yet its real force and energy focuses so much on two establishment characters' quest to eliminate their hated rivals that it may have rallied those it was meant to critique (25). *Joe* is about a father, Mr. Compton (Dennis Patrick), who inadvertently kills a hippie named Frank for corrupting his daughter's life with drugs. In the shabby apartment where Frank questions Compton's fathering skills, he beats the young man to death. The violent scene incorporates special effects to underscore its brutality and accentuate Compton's rage. Although he feels somewhat guilty, he rationalizes his crime with the help of a blue-collar worker named Joe (Peter Boyle). The two decide that Compton was only protecting his daughter and future victims from the drug-dealing hippie. But later, after Melissa runs away from home, Compton and Joe embark upon a search for her through the counterculture underground, and they decide to use drugs and attend an orgy-style party. Here it becomes clear that despite all of their antagonism toward young people and their lifestyles, Joe and Compton are fascinated by it as well (25). The next scene, however, shows them going to a commune where two hippies who have robbed them are probably staying. Joe advocates using guns to retrieve their stolen property. He has a difficult time convincing Compton to join him, but eventually both men agree that violence is the proper avenue by which to complete their tasks. In an ironic twist of fate, once Compton decides to use the gun, he shoots his daughter in the back, and the film comes to an abrupt ending. Though it concludes clearly with an admonition

against violence, Peter Lev's suggestion that much of the movie seems to advocate Joe and Compton's decisions makes sense because the camera stays with them wherever they go. One can be tempted to view the movie as an unintentional illustration of confusion in the 1970s and a metaphor for a trying period in American history, where violence reigns no matter where one stands on the issues.

Another movie that effectively demonstrated its claim to middle ground was *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, 1975). A homosexual Vietnam veteran on welfare robs a Brooklyn bank in order to obtain enough money for his boyfriend to get a sex change. From the outset, the movie seems ambiguous about its stance on Left-Right issues. The camera follows Sonny (Al Pacino) throughout his long standoff with police and portrays him as a meek, feminine little man. He quickly develops a congenial relationship with his captives, who seem to recognize that he means no harm. During a scene in which he discusses terms for proceeding with the release of hostages, Sonny acts as a mouthpiece for the people against the police. He invokes the name "Attica," the locale of a real-life prison riot, which encourages the crowd outside the bank to cheer for him, against the cops. When Sonny releases an ailing hostage, the aggressive cops attack the man, mistaking him for a bank robber because he is black. Police Chief Moretti (Charles Durning) is so stifled by the unfolding events that he is unable to act as aggressively as he might for fear that the growing crowd may turn on his men. Even one of the hostages berates the police for their buffoonery, and she seems more at ease with Sonny. But finally the camera turns on him when an FBI agent shoots his accomplice, Sal, through the head. The camera focuses on Sonny's isolation. Despite all of his impromptu activism and meekness, viewers are not allowed to forget that he has broken the law, and his friend has died because of it. The

camera, zooming in on Sonny's face, lets viewers know that he must live with the pain of what he has done.

Marathon Man (John Schlesinger, 1976) is a very violent film also demonstrating its vacillation. Featuring Dustin Hoffman as a pacifist intellectual, named Tom, the film continually demonstrates his inadequacy at "facing things" as effectively and brutally as his brother (Mellen 305). Doc (Roy Scheider), Tom's older sibling, is a suave and sophisticated government agent who pays an old Nazi war criminal with diamonds in exchange for information leading to the arrest of other Nazis. But when the criminal, known as Szell (Laurence Olivier), stabs Doc in the abdomen, eviscerating him, Tom finds himself on a quest to avenge Doc's murder. First he must kill his brother's past associates in a frenzied gunfight to protect himself. When he finally finds the war criminal, however, Tom shows reason and restraint. The standoff between the two men becomes a war of words until he forces the Nazi to swallow the diamonds on which his life depends. When Szell finally tries to stab him, Tom dodges his attack, forcing the old man to fall down a flight of stairs and accidentally stab himself to death, thereby dying on his own evil and greed. Thus, the film advocates violent force when circumstances yield no other options, but it also shows that hatred collapses in on itself and has the power to destroy individuals.

There were other films in the period whose politics more clearly advocated bellicose behavior and were designed to appeal to members of the Right. For them, the Nixon Administration made much sense because it represented a no-nonsense policy toward "softer" societal influences and legalities. One area where the President excelled at dodging bureaucracy, legal wrangling, and careful consultations was the American presence in Southeast Asia. With enormous popularity and support, and energized perhaps by his high approval rating, President Nixon proceeded to undertake a "secret" plan to end the war in Vietnam. On this matter Nixon

preferred to take decisive action in consultation with a few close friends and complete tasks as he saw fit. Together with his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, the President initiated several clandestine, foreign-policy procedures without notifying the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense (Chafe 392-93). Often Kissinger was sent to Paris to consult with foreign dignitaries about procedures and agreements involving American presence in Asia. He also took part in informal chats with Russian diplomats to keep the peace. But it was not long before these undertakings evolved into more aggressive forms of activity. Nixon and Kissinger sent B-17 bombing missions into southern parts of Vietnam, then gave them new coordinates, while they were in the air, causing them to strike off-limits targets in Cambodia. Even as the U.S. withdrew troops from the war-torn areas of Southeast Asia, the two secretive leaders sought to pummel our enemies by ordering heavy bombing campaigns over several areas that involved civilian casualties. On Christmas Day, 1972, Nixon and Kissinger ordered a heavy offensive that wiped out factories, hospitals, residential areas, bus stations, and airports (393, 399-401).

Analogous to this form of foreign strategy was Nixon's political scheming, in which he and a few of his aides ignored the proper channels and did, more or less, whatever they saw fit. In this area too he sidestepped traditional protocols and seemed to ignore questions of legality and ethics to ensure political supremacy over the Democrats. The Watergate scandal revealed how far Nixon and his team were willing to go. Demonstrating an ultimate low in politics, evidence showed that a hired group, known as "plumbers" had broken into the hotel in order to steal documents belonging to members of the Democratic party (422). Many critics believed that these activities arose from Nixon's intense hatred of the Kennedys and his team's repeated efforts to spread rumors that would discredit several of his political enemies. But to conservatives who approved of the war and resented progressive governmental advancements,

these actions would seem to indicate that the President was initiating decisive actions to “get things done.”

Indicting films that championed these kinds of activity, Joan Mellen reads *Marathon Man* as a more intensely Right-wing film than I do. She interprets it as a kind of vigilante movie in the same vein as *Dirty Harry*, *Death Wish*, and *Walking Tall*, because it favors a strong, violent male who channels his primal instincts toward the resolution of difficulties. In *Big Bad Wolves*, Mellen claims that a whole series of movies evidenced a need for manly heroes to step in and grapple with society’s evils; these films conflated poverty and the rise of intellectual liberalism with urban decay, where “student-type dissenters are transmuted into vicious terrorists, snipers, whiners and bullies, a species of sub-being” (293). Mellen shows, for example, that *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971) illustrates this point. David Sumner (Dustin Hoffman) actually uses the two-fingered sign for “peace” in some of his salutations. Always distracted by his books and blackboard, he seems inept at pleasing his wife and satisfying her sexually. The film begins with the couple moving to a small town in England, where David can finish working on his book. But a group of ruffians, hired to work on the house, harass the couple. Amy’s frustration swells as her husband continuously fails at asserting himself and telling the brutes what to do. In one scene she becomes irate because he refuses to confront the men for killing the household cat. These problems escalate when David attempts to protect a child molester from an all-out attack by the ruffians. Amy wants to hand the mentally disabled man over to the attackers, but David prefers first to call the police, then to reason with the increasingly aggressive posse. But when neither works, he is forced to undertake horrid violence and brutally kill all of them to halt the attack.² *Straw Dogs*, then, calls for the effete intellectual to acquiesce to his own primal instincts and ignore his higher faculties. His manhood rests on his ability to wield violent action and

eliminate his enemies (302-05). Nowhere does the film communicate indecision about the use of force as the movies above do. Thus, *Straw Dogs* is an unambiguous example of '70s intolerance for unmanliness, weakness, and intellectual softness. Mirroring the Nixon Administration and its Right-wing agenda, movies like this communicated a tendency toward decisive masculine action in the fight against villainy of all kinds.

Another film Mellen scrutinizes quite aggressively is *Walking Tall* (Phil Karlson, 1973). It is the story of a stick-wielding sheriff whose county is overrun with racketeers. Early in the film, the crooks beat him badly and leave him by the side of the road to die. When he returns to collect money owed for damages and hospital bills, Buford (Joe Don Baker) pummels all of his assailants with his stick and demands only the amount owed to him. Later a sympathetic jury clears him of all wrongdoing in the incident, and he occupies the rest of his time directing a group of no-nonsense deputies in various criminal apprehensions around the county. Fending off numerous assassination attempts and suffering the death of his wife at the hands of his enemies, Buford leads the townsfolk at the film's end in a vigilante raid on a lounge, known as The Lucky Spot. *Walking Tall* advocates a complete turn to unorthodox brands of justice, favoring them over the alternatives of scum and villainy. "Neofascist to the core," Mellen says, "these films would substitute for the Bill of Rights a strong leader with absolute authority, making it clear that rights consist in allowing the strong leader to work his will against the unruly" (307).

In *American Films of the '70s*, where Peter Lev examines *Conflicting Visions* of the period, he begins by pointing out that several movies of the late 1960s valorized the "hippie" lifestyle and mapped out the beliefs of a younger generation. In his second chapter, concurring with Joan Mellen, he suggests that '70s films began to reflect a Right-wing backlash against a government that had gone "soft" in response to a progressive ideology. *The French Connection*

(William Friedkin, 1971), for example, is a police drama showing the often-fruitless efforts of Popeye Doyle and Cloudy (Gene Hackman and Roy Scheider) as they follow a snobby, French drug dealer through the gritty streets of Brooklyn. In order to complete any work worth mentioning, Popeye and his partner sidestep legal intricacies and bend the rules from time to time. They abuse their power in an African-American bar to obtain information about an upcoming drug deal. In another scene Popeye beats a suspect for the same purposes. Lev calls this the policeman's "subculture" and claims that most citizens tend to tolerate it because it helps to preserve social order (28-30).

What both Lev and Mellen tend to understate, however, are the directors' various successes at depicting realism in some of these films.³ Friedkin's dreary *mise-en-scène* in *The French Connection*, for example, helps to underscore Popeye's cynical outlook. It makes the viewer feel his increasing isolation in a decaying city that seems to have forgotten him and no longer respects law and order. Brooklyn is hazy, wet, and dirty. The streets are clogged with debris and abandoned buildings. Cold and shivering, the policemen are made to follow snobby, rich criminals through the streets. Popeye and Cloudy are part of this world, and their demeanors match it. They often look haggard, tired, or grumpy, and they seem to become part of the grittiness and cynicism around them. For instance, Popeye and other law-enforcement personnel apprehend some car strippers and slap them around, trying to discover if they are part of the drug heist, the camera shaking as it follows the proceedings. The cops and agents curse and harass their suspects, and they become angry when they realize that these "spics," as Popeye calls them, are not part of a larger operation. As the shaky, hand-held camera frantically records Popeye's activity, the action often cuts to a more distant, wider angle in order to show all the chaos, and the whole sequence looks like an episode of the documentary television show *Cops*.

Underscoring this realism and the fact that Popeye is a disenfranchised loner are the contrasts drawn between the police and the criminals. There are several instances in which the film makes clear that crime *does* pay and fighting it often *does not*. Alain Charnier (Fernando Rey) is the movie's principal undesirable. But he and his men are presented in stark contrast to all of Popeye's other suspects. Charnier is a rich, well-dressed, sophisticated criminal. We see him walking cavalierly around Marseilles, surrounded by beautiful scenery with water lapping up against the pier where he meets his friends to discuss plans. He and his young girlfriend give each other costly gifts on the veranda of their expensive house as they regard their ensuing drug deal in the U.S. as a sort of vacation.

Charnier's comfortable lifestyle appears often in contrast to Popeye's. On the subway, for example, when trying to follow the villain, Popeye is constantly stepping up, stepping back, looking, gazing, trying to keep up with the rich man. Most intriguing about this scene is that the issue of class difference cannot be removed from their cat-and-mouse game. In past scenes, Popeye is able to push people around and achieve whatever he wants. But with Charnier, things are somehow different. After a while we realize that the Frenchman knows Doyle is following him, yet he appears unmoved by this, as he casually sips his orange drink, sporting neat clothes and beatnik goatee all the while keeping his chin up high. Charnier is on the verge of teasing Popeye because he knows that there is no evidence of his wrongdoing. Doyle must play along and exercise more finesse than ever before because of this, and following Charnier is his only recourse; it is as if Popeye's hands are tied. When Charnier finally makes his uneventful escape, he gives Doyle a snobby, good-bye wave with a sarcastic smirk on his face. Charnier is a smart man, who is obviously familiar with police procedure. His playfulness symbolizes his potential immunity to the law, since people with money and power often have greater resources with

which to escape punishment. Like a legendary mobster, he is able to flaunt openly that he is a criminal though he knows he is being followed.

The only real victory for Popeye Doyle is his exterminating Pierre the hitman in the end of the elevated train chase. The whole scene is engorged with class imagery, symbolizing all the dynamics of the film. Once Pierre boards the train, Popeye is left in a long struggle to try to keep up with him. His pursuit is relentless, but like the rest of his endeavors, always in danger of failure. Whenever Popeye draws near, he runs across an obstacle to keep him back. Meanwhile above, Pierre has no trouble getting exactly what he needs. At gunpoint, he forces the driver to pass up the regular stop, then shoots a policeman in the abdomen. The squib explodes and the man goes hurdling back. Pierre's next victim, the transit attendant, also dies violently in the midst of all the action. When the train does finally stop, Popeye is still gazing upward, peering, trying to keep up with his prey. But when he has his chance, he shoots Pierre in the back. The hitman's facial expression is awash with pain; he has lost to this policeman, down below in the background. Wavering in agony Pierre finally succumbs to Popeye after an eternal-seeming pause. Pierre is defeated as he tumbles down the stairs. When he reaches the bottom, Popeye is falling onto the foot of the stairs from exhaustion, and the two men collapse together. The indication is that Doyle is finally able to drag one of the French criminals down to his level. Less adept at playing the game than Charnier, Pierre has gambled in Popeye's streets and lost. It is as if Brooklyn itself has come up and engulfed him, as it has done to Popeye in another register—and for a moment, the two lie defeated together.

Another police movie, *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971), represents San Francisco as a city overrun with crime and street vermin. The most malevolent of all its criminals is a serial killer named Scorpio, who has long hair and wears a peace-symbol belt buckle. His archenemy and

eventual demise is “Dirty” Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood), a renegade and highly individualistic cop, who disdains legal nomenclature and red tape; he favors swift, practical action in pursuing his suspect (Lev 30-31).

Harry is firm in his beliefs on how to deal with crime. Early in the movie, when Harry, co-workers, and the mayor are discussing how to deal with the serial killer, the mayor tells Harry, “I don’t want any more trouble like you had last year in the Filmore district.” Callahan responds, “Yeah, well, when an adult male is chasing a female with intent to commit rape, I shoot the bastard—that’s my policy.” When the mayor wants to know how he can judge intent, Harry responds, “When a naked man is chasing a woman through an alley with a butcher knife and a hard-on, I figure he isn’t out collecting for the Red Cross.” The comment is witty and funny, but it indicates more than just a willingness to banter with authority. Callahan is pointing out the obviousness of a serious crime. He is scoffing at legal nomenclature and exactitude, rejecting paperwork in favor of stopping a crime and solving a problem.

As the story progresses, this thematic element gains more force. Harry is continually juxtaposed to men whose sense of procedure and decorum comes first. When his partner, Gonzales (Reni Santoni), tries to arrest a group of men for beating Callahan up, he instructs Gonzales to let them go. Harry understands that the men were protecting their neighborhood because they mistook him for a peeping Tom. He does not mind so much that they intend to protect their neighborhood. Gonzales is portrayed as soft again later when he is unable to look at a mutilated child. Harry sends him off to tend the mother, while he takes on the examination. No scene, however, positions Callahan antagonistically against legal exactitude more than the one in the District Attorney’s office. The D.A. (John Mitchum) reprimands Callahan, to his obvious surprise, for taking violent and unorthodox action in apprehending Scorpio. Harry has

shot Scorpio in a football stadium, flipping him over, in order to obtain the location of the kidnapped Ann Mary Deacon. When Scorpio refuses to reveal her whereabouts, Callahan kicks him and grinds his foot into Scorpio's injured leg. The scene is tense and violent. We see the two rivals in a battle of endurance and feel tension implied by the clock ticking against Ann Mary Deacon's life. Harry is a man suddenly desperate to save a woman in distress. But the D.A. is not impressed. Their conversation is almost heavy-handed:

D.A.: You're lucky I'm not indicting you for assault with intent to commit murder.

HARRY: What?

D.A.: Where the hell does it say you've got a right to kick down doors, torture suspects, deny medical attention and legal council?

Where the hell have you been? Does Escabedo ring a bell?

Miranda? I mean you must have heard of the Fourth Amendment?

What I'm saying is that man had rights.

HARRY: Well, I'm all broken up about that man's rights. . . .

D.A.: It's the law.

HARRY: Well, then, the law's crazy! . . . Ann Mary Deacon—what about her rights? I mean she's raped and left in a hole to die. Who speaks for her?

Harry's contempt for the law as it appears on paper is obvious. More pressing and serious to him are real, tangible persons. To administer his version of the law, Dirty Harry needs only his .44 Magnum, "the most powerful handgun in the world."

But the most unequivocal and "fascist" development in this line of films is *Death Wish*. In it, Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) suffers the loss of his wife and disabling of his daughter as the result of street hoods robbing and raping them. Kersey ventures forth and enacts revenge on countless would-be criminals, turning them all into victims (38-39). An interesting fact about the film is that Kersey is so consumed by his vigilante bravado, he does not seem to care that, of all the people he tracks down, the criminals who destroyed his family are never seen again.

Death Wish also participates in demonizing the big city and showing its protagonist's isolation. Too overbearing to be "realistic," its director's device is to make constant use of contrasts by way of skillful editing. The first thing the film demonstrates is the decay of a city in the grips of young hoodlums. Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) and his wife Joanna (Hope Lange) enjoy a relaxing vacation on a beach in Hawaii. Romantic music chimes in as the two discuss going back to the hotel to make love. The film's opening credits, however, hint at a more sinister tone for the remainder of the picture. The title *Death Wish* appears in all-caps, superimposed over the New York skyline with the sun going down behind a sinuous tree. The musical score takes on a dark timbre that sounds more appropriate to a horror film. There are sinister bells, chimes, and violins played eerily before a wide shot of an elevated subway train moving through the foggy, dark city. Throughout, this film depicts New York as a concrete jungle, a place where a person must take up arms to survive.

The most compelling and disturbing scene is the one that begins Paul Kersey's descent: the assault on his wife and daughter, Carol (Kathleen Tolan). The pathos of this event makes us sympathetic toward Kersey and especially his wife and daughter. It serves as an underpinning to the vengeful feeling of the film and gives Kersey a motive to commit his murders. The hoodlums' assault is played out in terrible and violent detail, and it is so shocking the audience must see it as impossible not to feel horribly wronged on behalf of the Kerseys. The hoodlums enter the house by posing as delivery boys for the neighborhood grocery store. They begin by asking for money, but as punishment for Joanna's not having very much, they become terribly mean and brutal. The first assailant beats up the mother with a blunt instrument, while the others spray paint the walls and terrorize Carol. The second hooligan rips off Carol's clothing, throwing her to the sofa and groping her. The camerawork presents a series of intercuttings in

which the mother, lying helpless, watches as the criminals coerce her daughter into performing oral sex. We see Joanna Kersey dazed and disoriented, blood on her face, as the camera cuts back and forth between her and one of the hoods' thrusting buttocks. Every time we see the daughter, it is through Joanna's skewed and tilted perspective, the camera moving slowly and wobbling to approximate her disorientation. The music contributes by taking on a creepy, prickly cadence. This sequence evokes feelings of pity, meant to be very stirring, as the brutality obviously underscores the two women's agony, which truly becomes difficult to look at.

The camerawork functions well because the scene oscillates between the victims' visages, creating an interplay of pathetic point-of-view shots, always coupling emotion with the vanquishing effect of violence. The hoods, contrasting the mother's love and concern for her daughter, manhandle the young woman as they fumble around the house, laughing and yodeling. One of them, identified only as Spraycan, paints her buttocks, while the others hold her down. The opposition between the victims' slow, sad movements and the hoods' carefree gyrations is jarring, and the scene takes on a nightmarish surrealism. When the hoods finally leave, one of them kicks Joanna in the face, seeming to deliver the blow that kills her. The camera then shows a long shot of the entire room, forcing us to look upon the aftermath and absorb the horror of the incident. There are books thrown about, spray paint on the walls, a coffee table overturned, and the topless, disoriented daughter crawling toward the telephone. The simple impact of its appearance on screen and the lasting images of the mother and daughter are sure to haunt the viewer, similar to the way they must haunt Paul Kersey, and retribution becomes a more palatable alternative.

None of the movies of this genre, however, combines loneliness, disillusionment, and violence in a manner as effective as *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976). Travis Bickle's

(Robert DeNiro) profound, often-mourned isolation from communion with friends, parents, co-workers, or lovers is an essential note sounded throughout the length of the entire film. More skillfully undertaken than other films in this chapter, the masterstroke of Paul Schrader's screenwriting is to make Travis's withdrawal seem to be only partially his fault; the rest of his influences simply creep up on him. Possibly traumatized by his background as a Vietnam veteran, alone, and unable to sleep, Travis makes it known through various cues that much of the city back drop disgusts him. Through his windows the audience can see whores, pimps, common street thugs in a world where the driver is, at once, taking part but also boxed-in and removed from it. Throughout the film's first two thirds, Scorsese's camera never lets us lose sight of the fact that we see through a sad and angry man's eyes. And the subjectivity created by the director's camera makes it easier to sympathize with Travis. Robert Kolker, concerned mostly with camerawork, comments on this aspect of Scorsese's filmmaking in the third edition of his enlightening book:

The viewer, made to gaze *at* the character in particularly discomfoting ways, is made to gaze *with* the character himself, to see the world as he sees it. This is done immediately in the credit sequence through the appearance of the people in the street and, more forcefully, because more subtly, in the observation of the men arguing in the cab owner's office. His gaze is joined whenever he drives in his cab. Whores and gangs inhabit every street, whores and their clients and would-be murderers are his fares. (226)

Robert B. Ray concurs: "[T]he movie to this point had carefully insured the audience's identification with Travis by holding closely to his point of view. . . . Scorsese had also structured the film around skillful juxtapositions that encouraged the audience to regard Travis as the one honest, genuine character" (354-55). It follows, then, that as we come to see things Bickle's way, many of his actions may seem like simple problems with self-esteem, not intrinsic evil.

But when he struggles against his growing alienation and earnestly tries to gain a sense of community, he only reveals that it is somehow difficult to accomplish. Clearly he is a loner, ostracized by events he did not incite, always attempting to overcome his removal. In a series of voiceovers, presented as journal entries, Travis himself reflects on all this. But he clearly means to indicate that he does not choose an isolated life. A scene early on, for example, shows Travis talking to a clerk at the pornographic theater. Granted, the setting itself would make any woman wary of a young man approaching her, no matter what the reason, but Travis is very polite and non-intrusive. All that he does in this scene serves to indicate his desire for communion, as in many scenes to come where he identifies himself—"My name is Travis"—and informs the clerk that her name is all he desires. But the woman remains cold and even becomes hostile, leaving Travis visibly rattled, finding it difficult to order candy. His feelings are hurt, and his voiceover touches upon an emotional issue in the following scene: "All my life needed was a sense of some place to go. I don't believe that one should devote his life to morbid self-attention. I believe that someone should become a person like other people." Furthermore, the voiceover indicates that he is not a typical misanthrope. He is not a man who enjoys, revels in, or is oblivious to his isolation. He knows his situation and grieves because of it.

His second try at talking to a woman, although drawn out over a longer sequence of events, yields the same results. When he takes Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) out on a date, Travis is able to show some knowledge about etiquette and how to dress himself. His hair is neatly combed; he wears a shirt, tie, and ironed slacks. He also wears an attractive sports coat. Betsy is happy to receive his gift from the record store, and it seems as though their date will proceed smoothly. But taking her to a pornographic movie, *Suddenly Sweet Susan*, Travis negates his boyish charm and knowledge of manners. Despite Betsy's abrasive reaction and her refusal to

listen to his explanation, Travis honestly does not know that the pornographic film is inappropriate. The *mise-en-scène*, always showing us the context of the unclean streets, seems to invade Travis's every action. As he tries to explain himself, a scantily clad woman stands near him and Betsy. Several porn theaters appear in the background, filling the scene with perversion. Travis, in the foreground, seems helpless as Betsy's ire overshadows his own uncertain quietude. And as she slips into a cab and disappears into the perverse New York night, Travis is left there, half talking to himself and half to the woman standing near. Always both part of it and alien to it, Travis cannot escape the urban decay that seems to pick away at his psyche and gradually ostracize him.

And his propensity is to join it as if compelled to do so. For instance, the confrontation scene, following the unsuccessful date, sees Travis categorizing Betsy now as part of the urban backdrop she slipped into outside the theater that night. When he confronts her at Senator Palantine's headquarters, he says, "You're in hell like the rest of 'em. You're like the rest of them." Just another function of the streets, Betsy is now "cold and distant. Many people are like that: women for sure." This time the voiceover plays simultaneously with his angry exit from the headquarters. As he condemns most people and the city they come from, Travis transforms himself into a freak that people stare at as he tromps furiously away from the building; he is now a street thug whom the policeman anxiously follows in order to keep peace.

In light of what has happened with Betsy, Travis feels depressed, and we may perhaps still feel sorry for him when he watches the happy, loving couples on the TV show *American Bandstand*. The music conveys a tender, loving mood as the couples dance slowly together. But the soothing sounds are trumped by Travis's pointing a gun at the screen. Now his predicament, as in the scene at the Palantine office, is one of rejection turned to anger. A second television-

watching scene reveals Bickle rejecting the one thing that most Americans use to keep in touch with the world around them, the television—the one instrument through which Travis relates to the politics of Senator Palantine, for example. Now, he stares, focused, as a man and woman discuss divorce on a soap opera. Slowly, he kicks the television over, destroying it, at once cutting off his connection to the outside and his aspirations for romance.

Though these instances weigh heavily upon his emotions, they still may not qualify as grossly out of the ordinary; they may even have been forgotten if Travis had found something to raise his spirits. But the cuckolded passenger (Martin Scorsese), who asks Travis to remain outside his cheating wife's rendezvous, seems to qualify as the most bizarre influence upon Travis and the one that finally solidifies his decision to hurt people. But as an influence, the scene cuts deeper than it at first appears. More than simply a motivational factor in his slayings later on, the ensuing conversation in the cab acts as a metonymic acknowledgement of *Taxi Driver* as the next and profoundest force in the series of seventies vigilante films. It conjures images of *Dirty Harry*, while reflecting that film and surpassing it at every turn. Gun references, lurid descriptions of the gun's power and, later, the mirror scene set up the connection. In this way, *Taxi Driver* is a Girardian, mimetic reiteration of its predecessors that both belongs and does not belong with them at all.

As a germinal influence for Travis's rampage at the end, the estranged man eerily and repeatedly describes the brutality he wishes upon his wife: "I'm gonna kill her, I'm gonna kill her with a .44 Magnum pistol. . . . I'm gonna kill her with that gun. Did you ever see what a .44 Magnum pistol would do to a woman's face? I mean it would fucking destroy it—just blow it right apart. That's what I can do to her face." This reference to and implied critique of Harry Callahan's gun penetrates the entire line of vigilante films and establishes *Taxi Driver* as a

member of the species. From one end of the spectrum to the other, this large and powerful weapon of destruction has made its way. Streets, crime, revenge: all of these themes enhance the symbol of the gun, associating it with street violence that unscrupulously solves men's problems.

As a continuing misogynist fantasy, the estranged passenger's intonation develops to include more detail. He wants to validate his promise to kill his wife by demonstrating the gruesome lengths to which he is willing to go. As if to punish her in the place where her sexual crimes originate from, he asks, "Now, did you ever see what [the gun] could do to a woman's pussy? Now, that you should see! . . . I know you must think I'm pretty sick or something." This insistence on the gun and its destructive force recalls Harry Callahan's own fetish for his weapon. In the scene, for example, where he foils the bank robbery and endeavors to intimidate one of his foes, Harry shows that he likes to discuss his guns. Standing above the robber, Harry issues his famous speech for the first time: "Being this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself one question: do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?" A masochistic smile slowly develops on Harry's face just before he leaves the robber. The passenger in *Taxi Driver* entertains masochist fantasies too, and his elaboration exceeds anything Dirty Harry has said about the gun, to the point that it is verbally disturbing: "Now, did you ever see what it could do to a woman's pussy?" This is where we learn that this film aims to graduate beyond the ordinary realm of the vigilante films and surpass the carnage and sickness of any movie like it.

A few scenes later, the study of guns continues, this time with slow, calculated motions of the camera instead of lurid dialogue. In a hotel room, during an illegal gun sale, the very first thing Travis says to Easy Andy is "You got a .44 Magnum?" Andy does have one, and as he brags about his merchandise, the film concentrates intently upon guns, delving closely into their

efficiency and capability for destruction. Andy refers to the guns affectionately as “beauties” and “honeys” as the camera pans over them and past them, using extreme closeups to follow along their butts and barrels. This scene becomes elaborate and lengthy, sparing no detail, as Travis tests out each one; now Andy refers to their firepower as “action” and “wallops.” Travis intends to harm people, and in another salute to the likes of Dirty Harry, he practices shooting in a firing range, as we see him honing his skills and getting a feel for the power of the guns.

Another link between the two films emerges during the famous mirror scene. Again, it recalls Dirty Harry’s catch line “Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk.” After Travis has bought the guns from Easy Andy, he appears rehearsing in the mirror, trying to look tough and exercising his street smarts: “I saw you coming, you fucking shit heel. I’m standing here. You make the move,” he says as if someone is confronting him. Then come the movie’s best remembered lines and Travis’s most rehearsed: “You talking to me? You talking to me? You talking to me? Well, then, who the hell else are you talking to? You talking to me?” His practice in the mirror is an artifice he wishes to make real by repetition. It represents his increasing need to be some kind of street hero, almost as if he has been watching *Dirty Harry*, but also, the scene reflects a self-conscious, cinematic attempt to create a catch line, a memorable point of validation. Ken Page observes in an article about Robert DeNiro’s performances:

The gunslinger/tough cop pose, drawing on movie imagery is both text and test of his will to act. He becomes his own pinup. The morose image presents Travis both as his own antagonist and his ideal other. . . . At one point, a second take of the same action is used. This not only denotes rehearsal, but also disturbs realist convention, because it draws attention to acting itself. (142-43)

It calls attention to filmic artifice by allowing viewers to see repeat cuts of the same line, said again and again. The editor has spliced together Robert DeNiro’s different attempts at getting the line right. The mirror, then, is a mirroring of the vigilante line and all the machismo and gun

fetishizing associated with it. It marks a strange filmic moment of imitation, reflecting cinematic creation and the vigilante genre back to *Dirty Harry*, thereby rehearsing, becoming, and renewing vigilante cinema.

The mirror scene has more than one level of imitation. In a Girardian play of mimesis, Travis seems barely aware that he is about to join the urban melee he hates so much. Fantasizing about heroism in the mirror, Travis wants to turn on the world around him and defeat all the villainy that he possibly can. But as many critics point out, he will soon go into the night and join them in all their criminality. In a book analyzing the entire film, Amy Taubin lucidly examines the visual effects of the scene and the play of alterity it invokes:

Scorsese edits the scene so that Travis's disorientation and (mis)identification become our own. The mix of jump cuts, reverse angles and 180-degree swish pans make it difficult for us to distinguish Travis from his mirror image. To add to the anxiety we are positioned almost directly in the line of fire. Thus, when Travis inquires 'You talkin' to me?,' he's barely ten degrees away from looking us straight in the eye. It's as if Travis implicates us in his paranoid confusion of self and other, and of projection and reflection. (58)

Thus, the person he stares at in the mirror, himself, is appropriately the one he directs all his animosity toward (though he does not seem to know it).

These phenomena recall some of Jacques Derrida's work, because they operate upon a play of alterity that seems essential to Girard's own ideas about mimesis. And both theorists are well known for citing instances in which the play of signs undermines any assumptions of stability in language. The two thinkers' theories would seem to converge at the point where Girard "deconstructs" several terms to show how ambivalence is inherent in the sacrificial process. He turns to the etymology of words like *catharsis* and *sacred*, revealing that their definitions can diverge into polar opposites in many situations. As his primary example, Girard delves into the ancient Greek function of the *pharmakos*, an unfortunate person held on reserve

for parading around the arena at times of social discord. The same as a scapegoat, the *pharmakos* at once absorbs and dispels the community's troubles, then remedies their circumstances by receiving abuse and ridicule until he is led out of the arena to be sacrificed. "It is not surprising," Girard notes, "that the word *pharmakon* in Classical Greek means both poison and antidote for poison, both sickness and cure—in short, any substance capable of perpetuating a very good and very bad action, according to the circumstances and the dosage" (*Violence* 95). Girard maintains by working words like *pharmakos* down to an aporia, that communal vocabularies represent their infrastructure (one that is ambivalent about its scapegoat), the final underlying basis of which is the sacrificial event. He claims that "such usages make it clear that we are not dealing here with a heterogeneous collection of references, but rather with a unified system to which the surrogate victim holds the key" (249). As in Derrida, Girard's insistence on the *pharmakos*'s ambiguous quality enacts a refusal on the fixing of signifier/signified relations.

This is why Girard cites Derrida's long essay "Plato's Pharmacy."⁴ In his treatise on the *Phaedrus*, Derrida establishes writing's threat to undercut the dominance of speech, despite repeated philosophical insistences that it is secondary to speech, by showing that one must rely on writing to convey ideas about the living qualities of the spoken word and its immediacy. As Christopher Norris puts it, "thus Plato is unable to define what should count as the good (philosophical) employment of language, memory, reason, and so forth, without falling back, by strange compulsion upon metaphors drawn from writing" (34). Derrida focuses on the word *pharmakon*, affirming that it serves the double purpose of signifying "remedy" and "poison": it is precisely within the functioning of these words within the *Phaedrus* that writing becomes both remedy and poison as an indispensable supplement to speech (Derrida 95-119).⁵ He points out that translators' insistence on choosing one meaning of the word or other does violence to the

very term they are trying to make clear, when they reduce it to something that it does not exactly signify, thus exposing needs of traditional logic to “ignore the problematical effects of writing that nonetheless resist such a reduction” (Norris 37-38). Girard elaborates by saying virtually the same thing about the word *katharsis*:

A cathartic medicine is a powerful drug that induces the evacuation of humors or other substances judged to be noxious. The illness and its cure are often seen as one; or, at least, the medicine is considered capable of aggravating the symptoms, bringing about a salutary crisis that will lead to recovery. In other words, the crisis is provoked by a supplementary dosage of the affliction resulting in the expulsion of the pathogenetic agents along with itself. (*Violence* 287)

As a *remedy*, the supplementary dosage enacts a cure for the *poison* of which it is already a version. The *katharsis* cannot function as a cure without first coming into play with the sickness. The implication is that an iterable version of sameness lies in the difference between the two usages. As soon as one begins concentrating on one meaning of a word or substance, the suppressed alternate possibilities begin to glare back at him. Ambiguities like this emerge often in Girard’s writing because they function to indicate how the scapegoat serves first as communal evil, then passes into good, once the community has decided that his life and death has been beneficial. For Travis, this flux in alterity bears him the burden of hating himself. The sick, dejected part of his personality acts as a dangerous supplement or *katharsis* to his Everyman. Thus, when he hates the “scum” of the streets, he really hates a version of himself. As the *katharsis* for the purging of the city’s evils (as Travis sees it), he is always already a part of it. Travis, play-acting and pretending that he sees a foe in the mirror, in other words, implicates himself as the foe. His confused understanding of this is the primary motivator for the reciprocal violence in the sacrificial crisis, as Girard explains in *Violence and the Sacred*:

The antagonists caught up in the sacrificial crisis invariably believe themselves separated by insurmountable differences. In reality, however, these differences gradually wear away. Everywhere we now encounter the same desire, the same

antagonism, the same strategies—the same illusion of rigid differentiation within a pattern of ever-expanding uniformity. As the crisis grows more acute, the community members are transformed into “twins,” matching images of violence. I would be tempted to say that they are each *doubles* of the other. (78-79)

If sameness in perceived differences constitutes the height of sacrificial crises, then Travis, practicing in the mirror, is a literally doubling over on himself, contemptuous of all Others in himself because he is always becoming more like them. The profoundest indicator of this is the very end of the mirror scene. He focuses on the last person left whom he can still rely upon, namely himself. Yet he castigates his image in the mirror. “Listen, you fuckers, you screwheads, here is a man who would not take it anymore, who would not let . . .” he declares in the voiceover, as he turns to view himself in the mirror. Then his speech begins again, as we see him turn back to the mirror: “Here is a man who stood up. Here is . . .” Cut back to the earlier rehearsing scene, resembling the “you talking to me?” stance, again in the mirror. “You’re dead,” he intones, coldly and irreverently, accusing himself of being totally bereft of any feeling whatsoever—of being spiritually and communally dead.

This and other scenes toward the movie’s end serve as Scorsese’s way of turning on his protagonist. Removed now from a perspective shared with the audience, Travis looks more like the lunatic he has slowly become. Our ability to sympathize with and understand his woes here begins to subside into alienation. For Robert B. Ray, Travis’s point of no return is the first time the camera shows his Mohawk:

Suddenly, the movie confirmed any incipient fears that Travis might represent a distorted version of the Right hero. The camera pans slowly from the podium through the crowd, moving at knee level, finally stopping on a pair of legs, obviously Travis’s, stepping out of a cab. Then very slowly (in a shot whose atomization imitated *Breathless*’s policeman killing), the camera moved up his body, to the waist, then to the jacket bulging with guns, and at last to Travis’s head, horribly shaved in a Mohawk haircut. The shock was terrific. (357)

Now, with the distance of an objective camera and the weirdness of a Mohawk, it becomes easier to assign blame to this backwards hero.

The camera then exposes several other problems that indicate Travis's self-hatred in his disdain for the urban backdrop and its inhabitants. It becomes quite clear that vigilante-style murder is his preferred form of justice. Travis enters into the reciprocal violence of a decaying community by making himself a sacrificial arbiter, believing he can rid the community of its ills. And Matthew becomes his ostensible surrogate victim, the unlucky object of a young man's rage. Yet Scorsese's camera reveals something different for the viewer, now showing Travis from an unsympathetic point of view. Further intimating his self-Other confusion, Travis begins taking on the mark of a scapegoat, even as he prepares to make Matthew into one. Insisting that scapegoats are part of the community *and* the margins, Girard reasons that since all participants in the victimage process appear the same during early stages of the unrest, a surrogate victim need only to act in such a way that attracts persecutors' attention:

Sickness, madness, genetic deformities, accidental injuries, and even disabilities in general tend to polarize persecutors. We need only look around or within to understand the universality. Even today people cannot control a momentary recoil from physical abnormality. . . . The abnormality need not only be physical. In any area of existence or behavior abnormality may function as the criteria for selecting those to be persecuted. (*The Scapegoat* 18)

Travis more than fulfills these precepts with the haircut and his interesting, prosthetic-like contraptions he uses to attach weapons to his body. He fastens the track from a dresser drawer to his arm, creating a sliding mechanism for a gun, so that it may emerge from his sleeve when needed. He also stands with an enormous holster puffing his jacket out, making him look suspicious, even to the untrained eye. These accoutrements help us to mark him with blame as he goes into battle. We see an ill, desperate man on a criminal rampage, not a hero.

After he fails to kill Senator Palantine, Travis's rage takes him over and compels him to turn to the next best outlet for his violent energy. Seeing himself as some sort of urban street hero, Travis sets out to rescue Iris (Jodi Foster), the young prostitute, from Matthew (Harvey Keitel) and his henchmen. Containing fast and slow motion, fingers blowing off, bleeding holes in the skin, the end of *Taxi Driver* is a celebration of violence much different from its predecessors. When Travis shoots Matthew, the camera is at a distance, and it is relatively undisturbing. But the room keeper loses most of his hand to Travis's .44 Magnum, and the very next shot reveals a hole in Travis's neck gaping and running with blood; this shot comes from Matthew's returning blow. When we see Travis standing there, bleeding, still cold and calculating, and the camera cuts from him to Matthew, then back to Travis, there is no pathos conveyed. True to self-Other confusion in the reciprocal melee, this scene, when cutting between the two characters, reveals no difference between them. They are both cold and vengeful; they are part of the dirt and dilapidation around them, and their actions demonstrate a desire and ability to do evil. This filthy space that these men inhabit is like the deepest pit of hell that the New York City streets have to offer. As the demons who have entered it, these men seek only to destroy each other, with the camerawork revealing little else about them. The ugliness in this scene recaptures the filth and grittiness of *The French Connection*, but stands on its own as a place of evil breeding evil and collapsing in on itself.

As if to make sure of that point, the single most audible and haunting sound throughout this entire sequence is the room keeper's repetitious "I'll kill you, you crazy son-of-a-bitch!" He howls it over and over again as he chases Travis up the stairs, toward Iris's room. The bleeding man is relentless, as he creeps toward Travis in slow and regular motion, his voice sometimes asynchronous with the film speed and the movement of his mouth. He is a sign that the "scum"

of the streets have risen up to take Travis down with them, no matter how intent he is upon defeating them. The man jumps onto Travis's back and drags along with him until the whole ordeal comes to an end. He seems physically to engulf Travis, hindering him as an almost ceaseless burden, sucking the life out of Travis's last heroic deed.

Travis's complete absorption into a decadent world becomes cemented when he mercilessly guns down Iris's john with a total of eight shots. The man's body jerks spastically after we see him take bullets directly into his face. Finally, after stabbing the room keeper in his already-mutilated hand, Travis blows a hole into his head; he does this against Iris's pleading, thereby defying the only source of light he has come to save in this whole dark sequence. Instead of a hero, come to save a damsel in distress, Travis has become a raving street maniac who paints the walls with a helpless man's blood in front of a young child. The keeper's loudly dripping blood counterpoints Iris's frightened cries, as she looks away from the scene in horror.

Next there is a three-shot, showing the room keeper, blood splattered on the wall behind him, Travis sitting expressionless on the sofa, and Iris crying on the far right side. This long take embodies the lowest point one can reach in American life, a place where degradation can go no further. It recalls Girard's proclamations that societies involved in declining spiritual and communal beliefs are most susceptible to the sacrificial crisis. Travis, here, affirms those theses by embodying a full reversal of Catholic imagery. Several authors have discussed Martin Scorsese's religious imagery and commented on his Catholic upbringing while analyzing his violence. One writer, Richard A. Blake, sees the Catholic faith as a system of sacraments meant to turn religious doctrine into material activity. Of characters in *Mean Streets*, for example, he says, "They are exposed to many different forms of salvation, each mediated through the material universe" (8). When Blake discusses the final battle in *Taxi Driver*, he draws parallels

to the blood of Christ and implies that the bloody mess is a kind of success for Travis: “In these cases the blood not only signifies redemption, but it also accomplishes what it signifies. If Travis did not shed his blood, the work of redemption could not have been accomplished” (6). Though he is right to delve into the spiritual level of the film, Blake’s claim for Travis’s success is a point of contention for me. In the scene, after the room keeper’s death, Travis sits between him and Iris as a kind of inverted savior of her inverted prostitute honor. Instead of trying to explain himself or console her in any way, he simply stares forward, sporting his bizarre Mohawk, removed from any sense of what must be very traumatic for the young girl. Travis’s misdirected heroism and its resulting evil sit still for the audience to ponder and for the young woman to recoil from, as he blends in with the same people he has come to destroy. This scene of soulless carnage cannot possibly signify redemption. Perhaps more appropriately, for a character who has just brutally murdered several people, Les Keyser suggests, “The confluence of Schrader’s Calvinism and Scorsese’s Catholicism bathes Travis’s slaughter in the holy waters of ritual without absolving him. Travis has confused sacrifice with slaughter, *Taxi Driver* shows, so he cannot achieve martyrdom and salvation” (83).

The reversed sacral character of the scene strongly refuses any possibility of the sacred. And it does not represent a communal effort to immolate the scapegoat; therefore, one could and should reasonably believe that the victimage process is bastardized, as it only serves to perpetuate the reciprocal bloodshed. As for the movie’s proffering of the newspapers’ praise and Iris’s parents gratitude for Travis’s heroism, it serves only to expose a society so lost that its inhabitants believe him to be right. But the director expects viewers to know better.

This is why I argued early in the chapter that audiences must rely on the camerawork to exile the protagonist. The shift to an objective point of view, the shocking image of the

Mohawk, and the religious negation join to produce an effect different from the one Travis's community sees. Viewers see a Girardian monster, symbolic of several evils. By perpetuating reciprocal violence, he spills the blood of unholy contagion and appears as the personification of what not to do. Making it clear that he knows this, in a gesture meant to chide the arriving police, Travis points a pantomimed gun at his own head, creating the image with a bloody left hand. He is acknowledging that he is the last person to snuff out; the way to conclude all of the carnage is to eliminate its arbiter. Blood dripping from his hands, Travis concedes that violence begets violence with his last eerie introspection and "morbid self-attention." His fingers drip with the blood of his backwards martyrdom and symbolize the atrocity it entails.

The final bloodbath is gore in excess, and it calls attention to its own gruesomeness, distinguishing *Taxi Driver* from other films in the genre. Time spent with the camera concentrating on it appropriately constitutes a negative study of the effects. As with Peckinpah's and Coppola's work, Scorsese produces compassion in violence by slowing his camera over the carnage, refusing to allow viewers facile escape from the brutality they are witnessing. The camera zooms in on the guns, as it did in the hotel room during the sale. But this time the consequences taint the images, as if to expose the dirty flipside of Easy Andy and Travis's fetish for the weapons. Firearms, this film's central symbol of power, are shown as an ugly, unforgiving force. The camera traces the path of the destruction backwards from Travis to the path's beginning, slowing over each gun. Next to the .38 snub-nose, there are speckles of blood; with the .44 Magnum there are droplets. The music here holds a sense of grim finality, a conclusiveness, which suggests that the viewer take heed. The last closeup shows another pistol still clasped in Matthew's dead, stiff hand near his pants' leg, which is stained with little trails of blood. The camera then pulls away over the police and bystanders, allowing darkness to loom

over the scene. The dirt, the slowness, the quietude, the guns, each with their accompanying blood drops, cast a sickness over everything that can only reflect Travis's sickness and his disdain for handling things in more legally acceptable ways.

Let us return, for a moment, to some of the other films in this chapter. Their violence amplifies the white male's need to strike out against the forces closing in around him. For instance, the forward-moving, violent action the hero must use in *Dirty Harry* to complete his tasks underpins its fun and excitement as an action film. In *Marathon Man*, Roy Scheider's character valorizes a similar kind of force by showing his muscular, chiseled body flexing as he fatally defeats his would-be assailant at the end of a bloody fight in a hotel room. And the extremely cynical *French Connection* upholds the use of force as a way to achieve success in a filthy city. The exploding squibs in the el-train chase make for excitement as Popeye races to halt the killer and blows a hole in his back. These and other violent scenes represent growth since the dropping of the Production Code, even if in a negative light; they are cues partially taken from Peckinpah's lead that assist in capturing the immediacy of a movie's moment.

But with *Taxi Driver*, the viewer is asked to pause *inside* its gritty world, to gaze and see how ugly it is. After Travis shoots the old man's hand off, the camera pulls back for a moment so that we see a two-shot with Travis in the foreground. And when the report from Matthew's gun echoes through the hall, the slit on Travis's neck opens wide and gushes in front of our eyes. Cut to Matthew behind Travis, then to Travis again in a shot/reverse shot; it is as if the spectator is standing between the two, cramped in the hallway. The same is true a few moments later when Travis faces off with Iris's john. In fact, the entire massacre works as a series of closeups and medium shots, so that the sloppiness of the action is something that drags us along. Everyone suffers, and viewers are asked to feel it vicariously. In addition this last sequence

serves as homage to Peckinpah, because the slow motion, intercut with normal time motion, throws the video and audio askew, creating a dramatic surrealism, which amplifies the sickening commotion of slaughter. Though the finale looks like a spectacle of action, Scorsese refuses to cut short the bloodshed and pain. His characters' demises approximate the suffering of their counterparts in *The Godfather*, calling for an end to it by repelling the audience and showing the destruction that hurting people brings.

With the same alterity as the mirror scene, the bloodshed at the end establishes *Taxi Driver's* Otherness by reflecting and surpassing the rest of the movies treated here. In their own right, those movies harness the visceral energy of violence to emphasize their points on disillusionment in the big city. Their directors exercise adequate know-how in jarring the viewer with bloodshed. But as *Joe* makes clear, envy and fear wracked the white middle-class, and sadly many of the films of this chapter accomplish little more than to cheer their heroes' skewed efforts. *Taxi Driver*, on the other hand, provides audiences with a cautionary analysis of that behavior and advocates, by implication, a return to community. Like Derrida's *pharmakon* and Girard's *katharsis*, the climax is both poison and remedy, suggesting that there must be an aggravation of the symptoms, followed by sickening purgation to expel them forever.

Notes

¹Providing several facts, summaries, amateur criticism, and all the credits for motion pictures, including distributors, rating, etc., the *Internet Movie Database* (imdb.com) is an excellent resource for rudimentary information.

²For a brilliant analysis of the bloodshed in *Straw Dogs*, including notes on Peckinpah's decisions and preferences, see Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1998).

³Although I ultimately have different points to make in trying to expound upon aspects of realism, camerawork, and disillusionment, Mellen and Lev's writings serve as models for the helping me establish the import of the films in question as conservative texts. Combined, the

writers' works constitute a substantial and lucid study of seventies vigilante films. While Lev deals specifically with a few films in his chapter, Mellen critiques several, including *Jaws* as a version of the vigilante genre.

⁴Andrew J. McKenna discusses the similarities between the two thinkers by beginning with "Plato's Pharmacy." He suggests, "What Girard does is thematize the moral impulse of deconstruction, which uncovers violence in texts only to concern itself thereafter with textuality and not with violence. This in itself might be considered an instance of symbolic repression, the more-or-less ritualized oblivion of the violence to which Derrida's reading of the text nonetheless beckons our attention." See Andrew J. McKenna, *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1992).

⁵For a clear explanation of Derrida's work, see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986).

Chapter 3

Scapegoating the Independent Woman:

Fatal Attraction and Eclipsing Narratives of the Reagan Era

A quick review of what has come before this chapter will shed ample light on the material that follows. The Girardian paradigm, backed by years of research and literary analysis, dictates that acquisitive mimesis lies behind most actions people undertake. When an entire community becomes involved in mimetic conflicts, a violent crisis will eventually develop, resulting in an uprising in which the community's denizens believe themselves to be struggling over differences. In fact, they are imitating one another to such an extent that they fail to realize they have become very much the same. This will continue until one individual, no more guilty or innocent than his neighbors, attracts his persecutors' attention and draws the entire society's enmity toward him. The people then kill or exile this person, believing their actions will cure the community of its ills. And it does, so long as all the inhabitants agree on the person's guilt, and he has come from the margins of their own community. Later efforts to commemorate the scapegoating event result in the development of myth, which then becomes ritual. In the community's enthusiasm to prevent future violence and their general sense that they are celebrating a moment in time, their mythos eventually effaces hints of the victim's supposed wrongdoing, and the scapegoat becomes something of a savior. Thus, he occupies an ambiguous space in his society's overall history and mythos.

As I explained in the Introduction and Chapter One, the tenor of seventies films was such that an ideal scapegoating mechanism was not possible. Since the fall of the Production Code, filmmakers had been better able to reflect their society "realistically," as they saw it, by incorporating mass quantities of violence into their films. And as Ronald Austin says in his article about cinematic scapegoats, the mimetic crisis of films *themselves* developed to showcase

violence in ways that provided for overly facile endings. My purpose, therefore in Chapter Two, was to examine that disturbing trend in which increasingly violent, cinematic depictions of a decadent society yielded decadent and violent heroes who had come to end the chaos. But according to Girard, a society that is so caught up in the crisis and has no spiritual or communal underpinning cannot satisfactorily complete the mechanism. Thus, both *The Godfather* and *Taxi Driver* yielded perverse heroes who simply continued the sacrificial crisis. They were not immolated; they did not quell their communities' troubles; and their claims to sacred ambiguity were questionable at best. They were in effect bastardized scapegoats whose processes had to be completed by their directors' cameras.

Not so for *Fatal Attraction*. It is the first film in this study that participates in an ideal depiction of the process. The reason is that the socio-political backdrop of the 1980s recreated and solidified our conception of the American Dream by making it very persuasive for many people. Thus, the strong communal commitment required for a meaningful scapegoating process had been reassembled. In the years *Fatal Attraction* was being written and rewritten, our nation became a society of mostly streamlined beliefs that created a homogeneous quality similar to the post-war ideology pervading the fifties.¹ Commerce and capitalistic accumulation were set into high gear by the new administration's policies on the deregulation of business. On the social front, the religious Right stressed the father-headed family and recharged the Nixonian policy of castigating "progressives" who did not fit into their strict definition of what it meant to be a reverent and family-loving American. And somehow underpinning all these beliefs was the idea that one could supercharge his patriotism by disliking all things Russian. As an outcropping of these precepts, *Fatal Attraction* reaffirms the family through patriarchal violence. The film's villain, Alex Forrest, is the scapegoat who symbolizes all that counters the dominant structure,

and she must be eliminated to restore the peace and quiet of family life. Yet her transmutation from villain to martyr occurs in valorizations engendered by years of lively intellectual discourse on the film. Commentators, as I will show, enact a deconstruction of the film's most common readings by insisting on her as a powerful force in the American cinematic milieu.

The first task, however, is to situate her in the progression of 1980s filmic violence. As the story of two mythical, female archetypes and their struggle to be recognized and validated unfolds on the screen, *Fatal Attraction* becomes an intense display of horror. But the movie does so by employing certain plot elements—the pleasantries of family life, the domestic bliss of a happy, loving wife, and the ravings of an *Other* woman—to “eclipse” what is really taking place subtextually: the reinforcing of the conservative status quo. Typical of the Reagan era, this notion of “eclipsing” one narrative element with the red herring of another pervaded the decade. I will be using this term to illustrate the strong tendency of big-money or blockbuster films to manipulate and lull their audiences into simply effacing their memories of the issues they pretend to deal with in their opening moments, so that the issues are somehow transformed at the film's end.

When Ronald Reagan began his presidency in 1981, he convinced the American public that his platform of simple yet lofty ideas generated a new hope, one that could dissolve residual memories of the U.S.'s involvement in the Vietnam War, the oil crisis, and hostage situation in Iran that plagued the Carter Administration. After the disheartenment these events created, many citizens characterized themselves as “ready for a change.” Reagan, “the great communicator,” seemed able to eclipse the narrative of recent history and rewrite past wrongs by giving moving, patriotic speeches, arguing single-issue emotional appeals, and taking a firm stand against economic disaster, the liberal “conspiracy,” and Communism (Chafe 470-77).

Reagan pushed vehemently for policies, both material and conceptual, against Russia and all her constituents, labeling them as a menace and cautioning Americans that the threat of Communism was ever-present, while affirming, at the same time, that the U.S. had every right to assert itself in the world, wherever there was Communist aggression. The President reinvigorated the Cold War by acquiring Congressional approval to spend 1.2 trillion dollars improving our military defenses and sending support to assist in third-world conflicts. On television he referred to the groups he helped as “freedom fighters,” and remarked upon their anti-Communist bravado, even when there was sometimes little evidence that they were any different from their tyrannical, “Communist” enemies (474-79). Making bold, sweeping, and sometimes unethical statements in speeches, the President proceeded to change the U.S.’s outlook toward Russia and the Eastern Bloc altogether. He referred to the Soviet Union as the “evil empire” and mentioned, in one press conference, that its citizens were accustomed to lying; thus he managed to instill into the hearts and minds of the American public distrust for anyone from that part of the world, as well as the notion that political ideology entailed moral corruption. The idea of the Soviet Union as a menace, a monolithic American-hating force, gained its own momentum until the American populace saw our Eastern counterparts as a conglomeration of misguided adversaries with little or no redeemable qualities. Oversimplifying our ideas of the global makeup into two groups (American haters and not), Reagan made it palatable to define military spending, anti-Communist rhetoric, and anti-Russian paranoia as nothing more than vehemently patriotic (477-78).

As his conservative regime continued to reinvent the Cold War, the President succeeded in linking the Soviet menace with the newest form of warfare predominant in the third world, namely terrorism. He gave speeches warning us that the Cubans were gathering in Nicaragua

and working with Russians in Grenada, and that African guerillas were “operating” in different parts of their own continent (Prince, *Visions* 31). No example, however, of the potency of combining patriotism, rhetoric, and television is more emblematic of Ronald Reagan’s way of relating to the American people than the one William H. Chafe relates in *The Unfinished Journey*. In October 1983, following questionable placement of American marines in Beirut, a terrorist bomber killed 274 of them. Reagan and others should have received significant lambasting and serious probing on the logistics of the matter. A few days later, he was able to eclipse the mishap by securing a “victory” over 750 Cuban laborers (only 110 of which were military) by sending ten thousand marines to exterminate Communist influence in Grenada (478). In a speech meant to address the undertaking Reagan told the story of

a wounded marine in Lebanon unable to speak, who scrawled the motto, “Semperfi” on a pad and handed it to a visiting general. The president attempted to tell the story twelve times before he was able to complete it without choking up. Finally, he used it to end his exhortation, in the process fusing his own leadership with the courage of the troops he commanded, celebrating their shared pride, honor, and patriotism. So vividly did he communicate his own burning convictions of 100 percent Americanism that other emotions or criticisms fell away, as if trivial and selfish. The next day, Reagan’s approval rating rose 15 percent. (479)

The example seems extreme but no less extreme than Reagan’s ability to mobilize this kind of reductionism and historical editing through the media.

It is no surprise that the same reductionism informed American cinema in a few simple and effective ways. In a cultural climate dominated by conservative politics, some of the most powerful, patriotic, and emotionally manipulative films of our time pervaded movie screens of the eighties. As with the hyper-patriotic films of the fifties, the overwhelmingly homogeneous political climate of the eighties produced a plethora of action films designed to restore and affirm a new national spirit previously dampened by the Vietnam War. The importance and

intelligence with which Penn, Coppola, or Scorsese treated on-screen gore began to vanish in favor of cartoonish and frivolous bloodshed, which fostered little insight into what the violence meant, how it was effective, or even how well it was created on the screen. Many of these films, including *Red Dawn*, *Under Fire*, *Missing in Action*, *Rocky IV*, *Iron Eagle*, and *Rambo III*, presented an American hero, venturing into some sort of adversity, then defeating enemies in full and with relative ease (Prince, *Visions* 52). The heroes' dexterous skills of military know-how, incredible stamina, and staggering emotional reserve allowed them to cut through trees, buildings and bodies, firing machine guns and picking off enemies like little video-game monsters. The message was as simple as the violent action it warranted: "Don't mess with the U.S." These films were unambiguous in their purposes, dramatic in their execution, and overwhelmingly emotional in their appeals; most of them were equipped with loud, grand musical scores to help manipulate their viewers.

Missing in Action (Joseph Zito), for example, is an early and very simple critique of Communist aggression. Released in 1983, it is also a correctional gesture aimed at blaming the Vietnam War wholly on the Vietcong, while using the action star Chuck Norris to expose and solve all associated problems with swashbuckling force. The movie opens by showing Norris's character, Braddock, distraught over missing American prisoners still in Vietnam. The news anchor he is listening to reports the latest developments but makes very little mention of how much the U.S. government knows about it, how much they intend to do about it, or how much they are responsible for. The storyline reduces down to very few basic elements: there are soldiers in Vietnam, they must be saved, and Braddock is the man to do it. Much of the movie has Braddock rampaging through the Far East, evading would-be assassins, and eventually finding the prisoners. But before he does, his mere presence inspires a group of sad-looking,

impoverished peasants to take up arms against their oppressors. A short, meek Asian man gazes up at the muscular, white hero, thanks him for simply standing there, and tells his fellow villagers, “We will fight for our freedom.” The sequence is remarkably simple and amazingly one-sided. Any hint of Americanism in the face of Communist gloom is an untold inspiration, and U.S. benevolence toward “the people” rises above our contempt for their government.

Finally rescuing the prisoners, Braddock guns down enemy forces with swift and precise action. Narrowly avoiding shots from a rocket launcher, Braddock employs violence with grand explosions and heroic adventure. Nothing can destroy Braddock’s quest to do justice against an evil people who harbor the evil secret of MIAs hidden in their hellish jungle. The most dramatic and only well-done scene in the film is the culminating sequence of events. Braddock and the MIAs he has rescued burst into a press conference in Saigon just as the Vietcong official there is denying that there are American prisoners still being held in Vietnam. The hero now has completed his mission on all fronts—first liberating the peasants, then extracting prisoners, and finally proving the Communists to be liars. The uproar in the press conference is cacophonous, as the bystanders lapse into confusion. The camera finally cuts to Braddock supporting a battered veteran, arm-and-arm with his fellow man, standing boldly in the face of their lying enemies. There the film freezes, and the last image of Braddock, lending support to another, is what the audience is left with. The freeze-frame of this dramatic image communicates an attempt to shut out questions, ambiguity, and any chances of real contemplation. Chuck Norris represents righteousness and the American government taking care of its own. Loose ends are not allowed, and in 1983, all of a sudden, the specter of Vietnam, we are supposed to believe, should become a closed case.

Rambo III (Peter MacDonald, 1988) is a film, however, that pretends not to let the Vietnam issue go without some debate. John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) is a reluctant hero whose resentment of his government and sense of isolation keep him from joining the U.S. in efforts to assist Afghanistan in its struggles against the Soviet Union. He chooses to remain a loner, remarking several times that his government is guilty of denying responsibility for the plight of Vietnam veterans. Yet he eventually joins the cause with the personal objective of saving his old friend Colonel Trautman (Richard Crenna), whom the Russians capture soon after the movie's beginning. His quest is a masterful plot device, designed to thrill the viewer and divert attention away from seriously contemplating Rambo's lingering Vietnam issues. Soon the hero's resentment for his government dissipates under the more pressing danger of the Soviet menace. The film emphasizes the hero's resolve as a renegade mercenary of freedom, while decentering his disaffection for the U.S.'s past mistakes in Vietnam. True to the reductionism of the Reagan era, Rambo's preoccupation with the Soviet Union eclipses all that has come before the Russians have invaded Afghanistan. A series of spectacular explosions, machine-gun fire, and manly grunts of aggression replaces poignant conversation and thought-provoking dialogue. The film's beginning seems left behind in the distance, as the violence mounts up, glorifying the humanitarian efforts of the United States, while demonizing the Soviet Union.

We witness the cruelty of the Soviet Empire in the person of the Russian Colonel Zaysen (Marc deJonge). He enjoys hurting Trautman and destroying an entire Afghan encampment. Nothing in the film, however, conjures up images of hell more than the first phase of Rambo's attempt to rescue the Colonel. Russian soldiers creep through tunnels and cavernous passages, angrily prodding prisoners of war to walk on ahead of them. Rambo sneaks around amid dim, blue lighting and the sounds of voices crying out in pain. Sometimes these voices seem to come

from near our hero; on other occasions, they echo hauntingly from far away. There is a flash of light from behind a door, accompanied by another agonizing howl. It becomes apparent later that the source of all this is the large henchman, strolling through the passageway, using a flamethrower to taunt the prisoners.

In contrast to these depictions comes Rambo's cartoonish and swashbuckling brand of daring heroics. In numerous scenes, we see him eliminating enemies with precision, the camera cutting away just before the bodies fall and their blood emerges. Rambo's violence works toward destroying the Russian menace and rejuvenating the Afghan spirit. Such sweeping feats and heroic goals require large, dramatic explosions with very little "realistic" content. In one scene, for example, we see Rambo emerging from a huge burst of flame to the tune of majestic and moving music. In another he perseveres gallantly, enduring a machine-gun blast to the leg, ignoring it, for all intents and purposes, so that he can carry a Molotov cocktail into position and blow up a tank. The climactic battle scene, however, includes the most mythic and unbelievable imagery in the film. In the culminating moments, after Rambo has secured a tank, he and Colonel Zaysen, who is flying a helicopter low to the ground, speed head-on toward each other. The camera cuts to closeup shots of each of them bracing for a crash; then, there is a wide shot of the two vessels smashing together with colossal force. The phallic turret on Rambo's tank pierces the helicopter in the collision, and another explosion kills the Russian Colonel. The American hero survives and completes his task.

Once all is well, the final scene draws together all the film's issues in compact resolution. The Afghans are saved; Trautman is rescued; Rambo is at ease. He sits in calm resolve, and for the first time, he is wearing his combat jacket from Vietnam. Rambo's shift in attire suggests that he has come to terms with his past; his reunion with his commanding officer implies his

reconciliation with the U.S. military (and his government). It is therefore possible to rectify the problems of one event by undertaking another. Assisting a righteous people on challenging terrain and achieving a morally sound outcome reverses earlier and more sinister outcomes of another campaign in Vietnam. The movie invokes this possibility in an earlier scene with the American and Russian Colonels arguing over a chessboard. Trautman tells Zaysen:

You know there won't be a victory. Every day your war machine loses ground to a bunch of poorly armed, poorly equipped freedom fighters. The fact is that you underestimated your competition. If you'd studied your history, you'd know that these people have never given up to anyone. They'd rather die than be slaves to an invading army. You can't defeat people like that. We tried. We already had our Vietnam. Now you're gonna have yours.

As the Colonel points out in his own admonition about Afghanistan, the same points are true for American involvement in Vietnam. The Colonel's speech suggests that he and the U.S. have had time to learn from their mistakes. And only now is he qualified to give begrudging advice.

Rambo III enacts a physical, military translation of the Colonel's words by reversing the phenomenon and having the U.S. assist the Afghan rebels. By defeating the Soviet Union on screen, we defeat our Vietnam, and history can be edited by simply overwriting it with emotional appeals.

What is clear about these heroic action films is that the roles they included for women were minimal. Heroes drinking beer in bars, fighting in the blistering desert, or cutting through the balmy jungles left little room for feminine presences. When these movies dealt with enemy forces who had come from or existed on foreign soil, their chief concerns were all masculine processes that had developed from mostly male politicians, who delegated authority to mostly male, military personnel. The irony, of course, was that the eighties represented some of the greatest advancements for women's movements since the sixties and seventies. Even though women had much to continue achieving, their situation had significantly improved. More and

more of them were going to college and graduate school. Still more were acquiring traditionally male jobs as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and businesswomen. Even on occasions in which the everyday housewife thought the women's movement to be "too extreme" or "too radical," many surveys indicated that they supported the ideas of better jobs, better pay, better daycare, and more input in family decisions (Chafe 434-35).

The first to benefit from the women's movement were the young college students who had conformed to the "new morality" of the sixties and seventies. They pushed for greater recognition by advocating sexual freedom, abortion rights, and equality in the workplace (434). These new beliefs and behaviors brought significant changes to the U.S.'s population. Contrary to what one might imagine about sexual freedom and changing values during the time of relaxed social restrictions in the seventies, the birth rate dropped so low by 1980 that it was enough to create a zero population-growth rate. Women's changed lives, their attitudes about sex, their increased levels of education on birth control, and their new outlook on exactly what constituted their role in the family generated a new pattern in the way women regarded sex, and it affected the family makeup. As William H. Chafe writes, "the composition of the typical American family also changed dramatically. As late as the 1950s, more than 70 percent of American families consisted of a father who worked and a mother who stayed at home to take care of the children. By 1980 that figure applied to less than 15 percent of all families" (436). These developments had taken a long time and often represented a heavy price paid, but now the station of the American woman was much better than it had been before, and there were marked differences in the areas of economics, population, politics, and personal fulfillment.

Sadly these advances may very well have contributed to much of the conservative activity in the form of a backlash. For there seemed to be just as many women defending strong

conservative views, reacting against their “liberal” sisters and fellow women in an effort to protect “traditional” American values. After all, the Reagan era was a return to older, simpler ways, and its driving sense of righteousness and strong ideological manipulation was very difficult to resist. The New Right movement succeeded in likening the extreme patriotic posturing of foreign policy to a conservative and repressive domestic policy. Steven Prince, for example, refers to it as an “extraordinary amount of ideological production” (*Visions* 29). The New Right mobilized an aggressive mailing campaign, headed by purveyors of the conservative ideology like Richard Viguerie. They thrived on single-issue, emotional appeals by aggressively promoting their strong views on abortion, busing, homosexuality, prayer in schools and gun control. Helping to forward these ideas was the growing number of radical groups (Prince 28-29; Chafe 463). Prince asserts,

While many of these New Right groups were too crude and extreme to be permitted a close identification with the Reagan Administration, much of the impression that the country had moved to the right during the 1980s was nevertheless due to their high visibility. Anita Bryan’s crusade against gay rights, Phyllis Schafley’s anti ERA Eagle Forum, Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, and diverse others became celebrity players in domestic political dramas. (29)

The dream these issues created can be seen as a collective set of beliefs, marketed as a pro-family platform, promulgated by conservatives who resented the liberal “conspiracy” to invade the sanctity of the family. Busing was a ruse to keep parents away from their children a little longer each day, and lax abortion policies were designed to allow teenagers to keep sexual promiscuity in their lives a secret (Chafe 462).

Ronald Reagan’s attempts at fending off liberalism by attacking social programs and completely overhauling the accomplishments of past administrations left no stone unturned. He ordered his attorney general to fight affirmative action laws in the federal courts and established a network of individuals whose job it was to ensnare the Civil Rights Commission and EEOC

whenever and wherever possible. This sweeping move toward conservatism, constructed by the President's rhetoric on Russia and his resentment of "liberals," generated a seeming consensus of political ideology that had not existed since the 1950s. Traditional Democrats and former moderates were now believers in the new American mission. One of the groups inhabiting a contradictory space in the socio-political spectrum and bearing the brunt of Reagan's reforms on social programs was American women. On the one hand, they represented several of the progressive views and social programs that liberalism had come to stand for: abortion rights, equal rights, equal pay, child care programs, and social initiatives for sex education and pregnancy prevention. On the other hand, they were poised at the center of a set of traditional values that the Right cherished so much: the home and family (474-75).

These contradictory circumstances began to pervade women's everyday lives. While they made significant gains, the period still evidenced male anxiety and paranoia about women's encroachment upon their world. The statistics of the time showed that most professions were still dominated by men, and women only held an average of twenty out of 420 available jobs listed by the Census Bureau. Women still made about fifty-two percent of what men made and were much more likely to live in poverty. Divorces often left women in economic ruin, because their salaries were so much lower than their husbands' (437-40). Sexual harassment was an accepted and tolerated side effect of employment. So was the common idea that women were "dingy," "scatter-brained" or hired only for their physical beauty. The security of their positions was often questionable, because they had to leave the office to pick up children from school or because they were not physically strong enough to do manual labor.

The result for violent films that managed to include women was that they seemed sufficiently confused about positioning women in their plotlines. Women emerged as mitigating

forces for their male counterparts, often taming them by small degrees. In a refreshing departure from the cop films of the seventies, the heroes suddenly cared about whether or not they had feminine presences in their lives. They had wives, girlfriends, ex-wives, and women they wanted to date. Their care for these better halves influenced their behavior and ostensibly affected the import of many films. Even the bloody and revenge-laden *Death Wish* series included a girlfriend for Paul Kersey, who seemed far too withdrawn to interact with women. It was as if some directors recognized the need to valorize the fairer sex. But the degree to which they were willing to go was often limited because of the main character's machismo, waiting to burst forth at any moment.

Nighthawks (Bruce Malmuth, 1981), for example, opens very reminiscent of *The French Connection*. The streets of New York are filthy, and small-time criminals abound. Deke DaSilva (Sylvester Stallone) apprehends his suspect with rough and brutal action, and then drags him down the street while reading him his rights. Other early scenes in the film depict Deke and his partner, Fox (Billy Dee Williams), pursuing small-time crooks and administering their own interpretation of justice. The main story, however, involves a terrorist who bombs a building in London, alters his appearance through plastic surgery, and escapes to the United States. The two main characters pursue this terrorist mastermind, known as Wulfgar (Rutger Hauer), trying to foil him before he can wreak any more havoc. Having exemplary military records that contribute to their brutal effectiveness, Deke and Fox echo the tough-cop characters of the seventies.

But Deke reveals himself to be soft by admitting that he has is very conflicted about "taking the shot." His primary complaint is that he will not shoot to kill, especially when a hostage is present, unless there is very good reason. In a basement classroom, arranged for

education in anti-terrorist action, Deke argues with Interpol agent Hartman (Nigel Davenport) on the issue:

DEKE: I don't know about you. I don't know about the rest of these men, but I didn't join the force to kill people.

HARTMAN: Oh, for Christ's sake, man, to combat violence, you need greater violence. To defeat a violent people, you have to be trained to react in a given situation with ruthless cold-blooded violence as well. If any of you think you don't have the killer instinct, you're wrong. We all have. It's just a question of pushing the right buttons.

Making him even softer than his seventies ancestors is the presence of a serious love interest, his estranged wife Irene (Lindsay Wagner). There are a few scenes showing Deke calling or visiting his wife to tell her that he would like to reconcile and repair their relationship. He is more affectionate and more socially adept than his seventies counterparts. There is a scene, for example, in which he visits Irene through the "back way" of the store where she works; he has the sense to know she would be embarrassed by his ragged clothing. There she tells him that their relationship will benefit from his getting transferred off the streets.

Both issues of Deke's wife and his unwillingness to "take the shot" return during the movie's rising action when Wulfgar finds Irene's address and proceeds to her house to kill her. He breaks in and sneaks up on her, only to find that she is actually a *he*—Deke dressed in a nightgown and wig. An over-the-shoulder shot from behind Deke reveals him spinning around quickly to meet his enemy; here the music builds to create tension. The camera zooms in for an extreme closeup on Deke's face, then cuts to an extreme closeup on Wulfgar's face. By disguising himself, Deke has successfully circumvented a wild shooting rampage or unnecessary bloodshed, thereby finding a more reasonable way to "take the shot." He has taken on the persona of a woman and used the disguise to mitigate the violence. The irony here is that the closeups make it clear that the two men have come face-to-face; it is their battle, and they intend

to settle things in a violent and bloody way. Under the chimera of woman's mildness and the façade of frailty comes a swift but brutal death for the film's antagonist. After Deke shoots Wulfgar, there is a medium shot of him stumbling down Irene's hallway with a hole in his back; the walls are sprayed with blood on both sides. Deke fires again to finish the job, sending his enemy through the glass door and down the stairs. The movie ends abruptly. Viewers are not allowed to know if Deke and Irene ever reunite. In fact, the film has progressed several moments and several scenes without Irene's presence at all. *Nighthawks*, therefore, balks at its own notion that the woman is important in the tough cop's life. Deke indirectly saves her, dresses as her to do it, but never makes it back to her. She is effectively evicted from the screen of a film that ostensibly presents her as a mitigating force.

Another film, which attempts to give women great force and the power of influence over their men, is *Sudden Impact* (Clint Eastwood, 1983). Complete with several shootings, beatings and car chases, superfluous robberies, and a rape scene, the film was released as the latest Dirty Harry installment at the time. It appears to be a film designed to do nothing more than lure audiences to the box office by appealing to their visceral needs for violence as action. Almost all murders occur with little or no concentration on blood, pain, or consequences. After a gunshot or punch in the face, each scene is severed so as to move the action along and refuse to dwell on its own violence.

One interesting plot element pervades the film, however. In a strange gender-reversing departure from most serial-killer or slasher films, Jennifer (Sondra Locke) is the murderous culprit, traveling throughout a small town, killing each of the five people who have raped her and her sister ten years before. She appears headstrong and confident, even sophisticated, as she achieves vengeance. She is a tough independent woman, and it seems that nothing will stop her

from finishing the job. Yet the end of the film finds her kidnapped by her own victim and two of his henchmen. Mick takes Jennifer, crying and whimpering, to an amusement park, where she no longer appears to be the same tough woman she was throughout the film. But a silhouette of Dirty Harry soon startles the henchmen, and they cower from him as he comes to the rescue. Callahan shoots them down with the greatest of ease. After several moments of suspense and a short chase up the tracks of a roller coaster, Harry shoots Mick down from the high point of the ride, and Mick falls onto a unicorn horn on the carousel below. This rescue appears oversimplified and completely out of sorts with the rest of the film. The self-confident, vengeful murderess is quickly reduced to a damsel in distress whom Harry *allows* to walk free because he feels sorry for her.

Some other films render the dichotomy in more sporadic and confused ways. They seem at best to manifest male appreciation for women's advancements, but anxiety about their encroachment on men's independence. *Scarface* (Brian DePalma, 1983) serves as a virtual recasting of *The Godfather* story with the exception that the protagonist is Cuban. Tony Montana (Al Pacino) wants to enrich his life domestically by courting Elvira (Michele Pfeiffer). But his greed and propensity to control her and his younger sister leads him to a bloody and dramatic death. Tony's drive and ambition to accumulate wealth, maintain it, and assert his control over everything within his grasp results in Elvira's exit from the movie well before its ending. In 1984, Clint Eastwood stars as Detective Wes Brock in the poorly filmed *Tightrope* (Richard Tuggle) about a serial killer who prowls the city of New Orleans, murdering prostitutes who are close to the protagonist. Although Brock wants to catch the rapist, much of his behavior mirrors the suspect's *modus operandi*. He also decides to date the local rape counselor, despite his hatred for women's advocates, because he wants to experience the satisfaction of licking

sweat off of her body (a fact he cannot resist declaring aloud to a woman he barely knows). Even though the new girlfriend aptly teaches students techniques of physical resistance to attackers, Brock finds himself rushing through the streets to save her from the elusive criminal. 1988 brings the resurgence of Chuck Norris as Danny O'Brien in the film *Hero and the Terror* (William Tannen). He too must save women from an evil serial killer in the streets of Los Angeles. These movies emphasize an attitude of aggression toward women, while affirming the fact that men appreciate them for their domestic value. Although the fairer sex seems to have emerged from virtual absence in bloody films of the seventies, films of the eighties continue making it clear that they should be relegated to secondary status behind their male heroes.

That trend was so strong by 1987, it is no wonder that *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne) became one of the most lucrative and debated films of its time. The movie appears at the end of the decade as a sort of family epic, a final encapsulation of all issues prevalent in eighties cinema. Like no other in this chapter, the film examines the woman's position in society and acknowledges her problematic, ironic placement, while seeming to validate her; but then, in an eclipsing maneuver, it forcefully and unequivocally undercuts that position. The ideological battle of the liberated, independent businesswoman, who has prospered from recent advances, versus her apparent opposite, the homemaking wife, reaches a full and rich literality on the screen. Many family films of the eighties end with a concentration on father-son relations as they push the mother to the outside of the family circle. Movies like *The Great Santini*, *Ordinary People*, and *Gleaming the Cube* demonstrate, more or less, that the mother is only a conduit, a temporary stepping-stone for the eventual union of father and son. The most emphatic instance of this kind occurs when, in *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford, 1980), Mary Tyler Moore's character leaves the film and makes it possible for father and son to affirm their love for

each other (Rattigan and McManus 16). Refreshingly, *Fatal Attraction* assigns real value to the wife and mother but does so at a blatantly violent price. It culminates in nearly rapturous, thrilling, and suspenseful brutality, which functions only to reinforce the prevalent mood of the Reagan era.

When *Fatal Attraction* was first released in 1987, audiences focused on the scene with the boiling rabbit. Rumors about the film and how scary it was hinged upon the motherly and tranquil Beth (Anne Archer) discovering her daughter's pet dead in a pot upon the stove. Her daughter fearfully screams, unable to find the animal, and her husband Dan (Michael Douglas) jumps, already aware of who the culprit is—the insane other woman in his life, Alex Forrest (Glen Close). Principally as a result of this gruesome discovery, audiences cheered during the final scene as Dan violently removed Alex from his life (Holmlund 25). This raving woman seemed so incredibly disturbed, it was difficult not to want her out of the picture, and the dread she caused became more and more intense, creating an overwhelming sense of hatred in the audience and sympathy for her intended victims. Alex was a nuisance and came to embody all the film's evil. We were frightened to see her follow Dan home; we were shocked to hear her call him “cocksucker” on the cassette tape; we jumped from our seats when we saw her in the mirror during the film's culmination in the bathroom. Alex's obsession with a married man, whom she had slept with only a few times, was difficult to understand, and it seemed she was chasing a dream that was simply not worth the trouble. Clearly she was sick, and the question on many of our minds was, how could she ruin an entire family for a man she did not really know?

Fatal Attraction's moral encoding worked easily because of our society's presuppositions about gender relations in the Reagan era. The movie succeeded in siding overwhelmingly with Dan Gallagher and convincing its audience to nod its heads in agreement. The insistence on the

traditional family and the sense of perversion associated with Alex's Otherness helped to create an exciting and firm resolution for a movie that explored harrowing and deeply disturbing domestic discord. The great, even heartfelt relief, evinced by *Fatal Attraction's* ending was the simple fact that Alex had died, and everything was going to turn out for the better.

What we find more difficult to remember, however, are all the indiscretions actually brought on by Dan Gallagher; they constitute moral bankruptcy, a violent, aggressive personality, a lack of regard for Alex and any consequences of his involvement with her, and finally, a total lack of respect for his wife. Dan is the one who initiates the affair by asking Alex out for a drink; Dan is the one who tries to cover up for his problems by suggesting an abortion; Dan is the one who shoves Alex against a wall and threatens to kill her; he is also the one who speeds uncontrollably toward Alex's home and unleashes a terrible strangling attack on her. The tendency to misremember the occurrences with Alex as the instigator is a powerful effect of the film, as well as the era it is so deeply involved in. Consistent with the Reagan era and in a manner similar to *Rambo III*, the latter events of the movie eclipse its earlier events, and its commitment to the male-headed family helps to edit its narrative and distort the evils of its protagonist. As a scapegoating mechanism, however, the film possesses a strong undercurrent that constantly hints at a breakdown in differences between the two principal women. That possibility always threatens to emerge and undercut the film's otherwise firm message, resulting in a springboard for feminist critics and a fruitful completion of the victimage paradigm.

The movie opens in a domestic world where the Gallagher family lives a happy, fulfilling life. Mother and father both deal with their daughter benevolently as they move freely and comfortably about their home, clad only in their underwear. The daughter Ellen (Ellen Hamilton Latzen) enjoys an episode of *You Can't Do That on Television*, sitting near her hard-working

father. In a later scene the family dog becomes a tranquil symbol of the Gallaghers' domesticity when Dan begrudgingly yet lovingly takes him outside. Dan has responded to Beth's smiling reminder, "Aren't you forgetting something?" When he returns, he finds that his daughter has snuggled into the bed with the wife. There will be no lovemaking tonight, but the sugary sweetness of the scene lets us know all is well for the moment. Also, Dan's professional life serves as a refreshing complement to his family. Although Dan is an affluent lawyer, he and his friends appear to be kind and unpretentious. At a large party, honoring the publication of a Japanese exercise book, Dan converses genuinely with all his coworkers and treats his wife lovingly.

Providing a momentary yet piercing contrast to all this is Alex Forrest, who sports a grim and angry look on her face. She stares intensely, responding to a light, humorous pick-up line that Dan's friend Jimmy attempts. Her frizzy blond hair sticks up and out, revealing her forehead, and she appears devoid of any humor as she turns away. A later scene establishes Alex as the center of mischief and foul play. In a meeting, intended to inform lawyers of a publishing dilemma, Dan must know if a novel's author has slept with an Ohio senator in real life. Alex, the author's editor, explains that in fact she has, and during her discussion of the extramarital relations, she becomes excited. She shrugs her shoulders and takes on the affectations of a mischievous little girl. She stares flirtatiously at Dan, as the camera focuses in on him, and the sound fades to indicate Dan's preoccupation with her as temptress, opposite the dutiful wife.

Many successive scenes evidence Alex's and Beth's perceived differences throughout the film. Beth takes care of her daughter, loves the dog, and attends to her husband. She makes Dan spaghetti sauce, tries to see to it that Ellen gets a pet rabbit, and goes to the country to inspect a new house. Beth's fast-walking, stylish archenemy, Alex, entices Dan with an entirely different

résumé. Unlike Beth, who allows Ellen to sleep in the bed, Alex is a sexual free spirit who smokes cigarettes in bed. She will have sex on the elevator, on the sink, and of course the bed. She maintains her career as an editor for a large publishing house and flaunts her knowledge of opera.

When Dan goes to her house, he enters a world outside the domestic scene. Alex's life is a flipside to Dan's normal routine; this energetic, sexy woman throws herself upon him among the cold, sophisticated, white walls of her apartment, where he takes pleasure in her aggressive sexual action. Wildness and animus are elements that constitute Alex's extramarital locale. Making their relationship look as untamed as possible, the movie succeeds in using these early scenes at Alex's place to closely link sex to violence. Dan pushes Alex into the sink as they rip off one another's clothing. They go spinning around, knocking things over and tumbling onto the bed. The wild fellatio scene in the elevator depicts Dan wincing, and the look on his face straddles the line between pleasure and pain. He appears almost as if he is being attacked below the belt. Enjoying the effects of "letting loose," the illicit couple succeeds in managing the fantasy for a while. But as Girard acknowledges, this kind of overlap indicates a dangerous flirtation with violent purgation:

Even within the ritualistic framework of marriage, when all the matrimonial vows and other interdictions have been conscientiously observed, sexuality is accompanied by violence; and as soon as one trespasses beyond the limits of matrimony to engage in illicit relationships—incest, adultery, and the like—the violence, and the impurity resulting from this violence, grows more potent and extreme. Sexuality leads to quarrels, jealous rages, mortal combats. It is a permanent source of disorder even within the most harmonious communities. . . . Like violence, sexual desire tends to fasten upon surrogate objects if the object to which it was originally attracted remains inaccessible; it willingly accepts substitutes. And again, like violence, repressed sexual desire accumulates energy that sooner or later bursts forth, causing tremendous havoc. (*Violence* 35)

In a Girardian context the animus produced *outside* marriage vows constitutes a disruption, a surrogate symbol of the violence (sacred, unknown) that calls for elimination, though it must be released as a contagion first. Quite obviously, then, these scenes help to set up Alex's position as the most viable scapegoat in the movie, while foreshadowing violence with sex.

Alex's position as a marginalized part of Dan's life is intensified by Adrian Lyne's clever intercutting by which he plays upon the audience's notion of the family and its sanctity. The editing juxtaposes the two realms Dan is trying to keep apart and shows how he gradually loses control. Allowing that by 1987 extramarital affairs had become regular occurrences in American cinema, the trick was to make Alex and Dan's affair seem exceptionally ugly and insulting. Our sympathy should easily lie with Beth. For example, until the daytime episode at Alex's house, the illicit affair between the couple is serious yet not surprising. But when Dan brings the dog, symbol of wedded bliss, to Alex's apartment, he begins crossing his two worlds, insulting his wife more subtly than before. Dan seems unaffected by the idea that another member of his household has become an unwilling partner in the affair. The camera shows the animal moping around the unfamiliar setting as if to confirm this idea. But the mingling of realms becomes almost too much to bear when Dan joins Alex at the table for a nice, spaghetti meal. The parallel here is appalling; Beth also makes spaghetti, and in her thoughtful way, she leaves it in the refrigerator for her husband.

What the camera shows unfolding is a situation in which two worlds do not seem so different anymore: man, woman, dog, and spaghetti dinner on one hand, and man, woman, dog and spaghetti dinner on the other hand. In a Girardian breakdown of differences, the tension builds and Dan's anxiety begins to emerge. As many critics have pointed out, Adrian Lyne has problematized the wife/witch dichotomy by making Beth look very sexy at times.² In two scenes

of soft focus and warm, earthy tones, she applies makeup and fixes her hair, wearing dainty white underwear. The implication is that a homemaking wife can be sexually enticing too, and the effect those scenes have renders the differences between the two women very dubious. A telling moment, exemplifying this phenomenon, is when Alex comes to visit the Gallaghers, pretending she is interested in buying the apartment. In one instant, wife and temptress are standing together, looking quite similar yet very different at the same time. They appear shoulder to shoulder, looking at the camera as it films through Dan's point of view. Here are two women both deceived by the same man, gazing at him in the same way. Next to Beth, Alex represents a numinous version of her domestic counterpart. The women together symbolize two archetypes, blending into one another. And for Dan this is a disturbing instance.

Businesswoman and housewife stand side-by-side insinuating their closeness and the possibility of overlap. Dan's struggle to maintain separation between them embodies American attitudes and anxieties of the eighties. He is the American male stewing in his own ravings about this newly thinned border between the two types. Just on the other side of the disappearing line between wedded bliss and the world of commerce is the danger of the unknown. The wildness and exoticism of the autonomous female conveys her sheer eccentricity and power—her unwillingness to be neatly categorized by a dominating patriarchy. Alex symbolizes the possibility that the 1980s imply choices and responsibility for the wives and mothers of our culture. Could it be, then, that Beth need only get a job and stop making spaghetti to change her world radically? Or is the real problem that she would be radically changing Dan's world? As Kerstin Westerlund-Shands puts it, "they inhabit different spaces. But the borderline between those spaces is precarious: the two women also mirror each other and can be seen as two side of the same woman, or as two sides of Woman" (114). As Girard explains, the breakdown holds

dire implications for future violence, which is why twins or doubles signify danger: “Twins invariably share a cultural identity, and they often have a striking physical resemblance to each other. Wherever differences are lacking violence threatens” (*Violence* 57). Of course, Dan’s anger, on the literal level, is a reaction to Alex’s fragrance. But the anxiety embodied in his stare is the worry of a man on the edge of his own loss of control. Here, he is outnumbered by women who stare at him in the same way and who almost touch each other in a tenuous moment. His worst fear is that they come together, that they exchange information, that one lets the other know what life on the other side has to offer.

His only choice, then, is a proactive disavowal of the other woman, which proves to be the most difficult thing he finds himself doing. The film asserts the power of the other woman in the following scene, and shows that her position is valid. But embracing the ideology of the period, it also couches her rationale in the greater context of the other woman as raving witch. The final effect is to display Dan as a justified violent and aggressive male. Consider the conversation:

ALEX: It’s [pestering] gonna go on and on until you face up to your responsibilities.

DAN: What responsibilities!

ALEX: I’m pregnant. I’m gonna have our child.

DAN: Alex, that’s your choice, honey; that has nothing to do with me. . . .

ALEX: I’m not gonna be ignored, Dan.

Her demeanor here is forceful and serious. She leans forward and crinkles her eyebrows, while emphasizing and drawing out the end of the word *ignored*. Alex communicates the idea of a woman desperate to be recognized for who she is. Dan, however, wants to make it clear that no matter how hard she tries, she will not. They continue:

DAN: I’ll pity you. I’ll pity you because you’re sick.

ALEX: Why? Because I won’t allow you to treat me like some slut you can just bang a couple of times and throw in the garbage? I’m gonna be

the mother of your child. I want some respect.

Alex's position is clear. As half of the adulterous relationship, Dan is responsible for the dilemma as much as she is. As I have argued, however, the film obscures this point by siding with Dan and favoring his life inside the family structure. Although she has argued her case as potential mother figure, someone very similar to Beth in at least one respect, the fact that she feels like a "slut" is directly related to her position on the outside and the vulnerability associated with it. Intensity and the audience's pleasure in watching the thrilling events unfold on screen, as the movie progresses, help to obscure this point. At the end of this scene, when he tries to exit her house, Dan slams Alex against the wall and threatens to kill her, but as long as Dan's violence is intercut with Alex's mad raving, we side with Dan.

Plot movement and her propensity for madness work together to continue alienating Alex from both Dan and the audience. She pours acid onto his car; she follows him home after leaving a ranting cassette recording for him to listen to; she even kidnaps Ellen, escorting her to a roller coaster at an amusement park. The most haunting of all these scenes—and the only one sympathetic to Alex—is the scene that shows her outside the house looking in. The window, reinforcing the separation and silencing the activity inside, reveals a happy family. Alex's isolation is emphasized in this scene, and as the camera pulls away from her right side, her loneliness is underscored by the darkness that gathers around her. We see no more than a silhouette now, and the frizzy hair, sticking up in the dark suggests that she is some kind witch in the woods (her last name is Forrest). The scene is replete with sickness and repulsion as she runs off to throw up. The irony here is that she has been sickened by a man who sits warm and cozy on the inside playing with his daughter's new rabbit, pretending to be the ideal father.

Alex's final, intrusive scene involves a calculated attempt to kill Beth. The story must culminate in this scene because Alex has attempted every other avenue into Dan's life, through proper and improper channels, and none of them have seemed to work. Dan's compulsion to defeat her has shut her out and dampened her spirits. It is only fitting that her weaker and more passive rival bear the brunt of her madness. Thus, the film makes sense from this standpoint because, in a way, it is the story of friction between two women.

By the time she confronts Beth in the bathroom, Alex's madness allows little room for rational thought anymore. Her condition has escalated as she stands in the bathroom cutting herself, defeating her own will to go on. She stands now as a mere symbol, an allegorical, one-dimensional emblem of the crazy other woman, standing in the way of proper wifely pleasantries. Dan and Beth will be justified when they kill her, because she poses a serious threat to their safety. But that threat gains its potency and momentum from the film's own concentration on her madness—a madness that must be there in order to personify conservative anxieties about progressive women.

One good way of showing her madness is to have her standing, looking into the mirror, devoid now of anything but basic human instincts to search and destroy. The first time we see Alex in the bathroom, her reflection appears next to Beth's in the mirror. Steam on the glass, creating a misty look, reminds one of the time the two women stood together in the Gallaghers' apartment. Then the two seemed the same, and the scene insinuated autonomy and the single life just across the marriage border. This time, the differences could not be more apparent. Alex appears as only a shadowy vague reflection, looking insane, as she stands barely aware of her own impropriety. It is as if the film has completely abandoned any possibility that the women could ever have been similar.

Her first attempt at stabbing Beth creates enormous excitement, because the camera closes in on Beth's face, and the audience cannot see whether or not the knife is connecting. It is a thrill, however, to see Beth's face become vengeful as she punches Alex and sends her falling to the floor. When the knife goes sliding out of reach, the two women engage in a manual struggle wailing and clamoring on the floor. Beth's attempt to escape, showing her underwear as she kicks and screams suggests some vulnerability, and she is beginning to lose the fight. The sicker and more aggressive woman is determined to overcome her softer competition. The noise and clamor of this moment is intercut ironically with a calm, domestic moment: a whistling teapot downstairs, where Dan immerses himself in little husbandly tasks of atonement. The intercutting makes clear Alex's complete and overwhelming threat of domestic invasion.

Dan has to eliminate Alex permanently if there is to be any hope for peace at all, and when he comes howling into the bathroom, he means never to falter again. Alex has reclaimed the knife, raising the stakes and intensity, as this tripartite feud rages on. When Dan slams the back of her head into the mirror, the camera cuts to an angle behind her and shows the glass splintering in several directions. Now the possibility of reflection, of the two women looking like one another, is gone forever. Beth's shadowy reflection, misty recollection of wife and businesswoman, or any similarity between the two has been eliminated in a furious raging crash. It is fitting, then, that Dan has rushed in so quickly and taken charge so brutally in these last moments; his strength and force have been tested, and to keep his family going, he must compensate violently, shutting out the reflection of the witch. His determination and compulsion to extract impurities from his life and marriage have come to a climax, and he chooses to dominate with sheer force of his strength.

The scene continues with exciting and impressive action as the two struggle about the room. Noise and chaos here symbolize the turmoil an extramarital relationship can bring to a family. Dan must deal with his sin with tremendous force in much the same way that one might exorcise his demons, and by this time Alex has come to personify that very concept. As her drowning in the bathtub becomes more and more successful, the chaos is hushed, and the family turmoil is symbolically quelled. This detailed and intense drowning scene is one of the most horrific acts of violence that I have ever seen depicted in mainstream film. As Alex's eyes begin to pop out and blood issues from her mouth in the bubbling water, Dan's visage bespeaks utter, unyielding hatred, turned to intense physical struggle. This scene of graphic strangulation is simply gruesome. And it is disheartening to recall that these moments were the most wildly satisfying for the audience at the movie theater, especially when considering that Dan has become the raging symbol of male anxiety over the breakdown of differences between women.

But she keeps coming up, threatening the happy home. The film's penultimate gesture includes Beth shooting Alex through the chest after she rises from the water one last time. Blood splatters onto the wall as the antagonist quietly dies. Alex's blood flows generously onto the wall as the camera cuts, revealing the tattered Beth to be the final arbiter of familial justice. Beth asserts herself, proving her strength to be coterminous with her softness. Her sense of resolve, implied by the killing of Alex, signifies her strength as dutiful family member, and Alex's blood is a red reminder of what must be sacrificed. Because she absolutely has to, Beth joins with her husband in dealing with the juggernaut so harrowingly cast out before her. The implication is that the family as a whole can come together and function with great efficacy.

By focusing in on the family portrait on the desktop, slowly and closely, *Fatal Attraction* strongly reaffirms the family unit. All related issues of adultery and turmoil, associated with it,

are obviously meant to take on secondary importance. This last closeup of mother, father, and daughter, tightly framed together, implies that no matter what Dan has done, no matter what future problems arise, and no matter how much pain Beth must endure in her efforts to forgive him, everything will turn out fine.

No doubt, Alex, as the mannish businesswoman, is the scapegoat of a normal family life in Ronald Reagan's America. To maintain order, this symbol of the liberal conspiracy and women's advancements must be eliminated. What viewers are obliged to accept is that *Fatal Attraction* has the most strongly intended monological ending of all the major films discussed in this essay. But as such a film, it exposes Dan for who he really is—a rage-infused American man trying to maintain the myth of the all-powerful male hero. We need only to take a second glimpse at his eyes from below the surface of the bath water to confirm this notion. From a low-angle shot with an underwater camera, audiences are made to drown with Alex as the film reinstates Dan's violent power. Seen in relation to the movies of Chapter Two, Dan represents the revamped individualistic hero in corporate clothing. He is the same boyish ruffian who knows best how to lash out at others he does not understand, except that the overwhelming socio-political force of the 1980s has reintroduced him to the mainstream, where he enjoys the pleasantries of home. Dan is Dirty Harry; he is Deke DaSilva and Rambo with a college education and a house in the suburbs.

This strong thematic message, together with the film's impressive box-office performance, naturally attracted attention from commentators on all levels. Film critics examined the movie, calling it a morality play; others dismissed it as a cheap thriller; and others championed it as good entertainment; but the most lucid and in-depth criticism came from the intellectual community, particularly feminists, who treated it as the chief herald of the backlash

against women's advancements up through the 1980s. Susan Faludi, Pauline Kael and others critiqued the film soon after it was released, but as time allowed for greater clarity and objectivity, commentary became more detailed, and the polemics developed a resounding cadence that picked at every iota of the film's politics.³ The result was that by raising Alex up and turning the generally accepted semiotics of the film on its head, critics have completed a scapegoating mechanism. They have solidified Alex's martyrdom by using her unfortunate predicament to assert feminist polemics that resonate among the sharpest in the realm of film criticism.

One obvious area critics focused on was the heavy-handed messages associated with anxiety toward women's advancements. Susan Bromley and Pamela Hewitt, for example, offer quotations from several articles that discuss some of the most negative aspects of the picture. As expected, critics lambaste the movie for making Alex into a career-minded "bitch," whose drive to succeed in life and longing for a family is equivalent to madness. Bromley and Hewitt are led to conclude: "In the 1980s the single career woman must be killed in order to preserve the sanctity of the family" (23).

Other scholars have delved into narrative progressions of the film, questioning its plot contrivances. Liahna Babener, for instance, complains, "There will be no legal entanglements to mar the tranquility of this newly reconstituted nuclear family, no moral self-reflection on Dan's part to illuminate his misogynist behavior, no diagnosis of the pernicious effects of patriarchal marriage for the audience to grapple with" (Babener 33). Others, such as Elaine Berland and Marilyn Wechter have castigated the overwrought and baseless insistence on Alex's psychosis:

These crazed actions function to trivialize Alex's anger by focusing on her increasingly irrational behavior rather than on the content of her speech and thoughts. . . . Rather than explore the problem initially raised—how to manage marriage and yearning—the film reverts to a conventional narrative strategy of

portraying the woman who owns her desire as the culprit. Although Alex's insanity is set up as the problem, *Fatal Attraction* does not actually develop the dreaded passionate woman as a theme. The film narrative offers no plausible reason for her alternating current of seductiveness and rage. There is no evidence presented to support a break from the woman originally seen as a competent, attractive professional to the woman shown as disheveled and out of control. The narrative lacks a case history and a psychological rationale for the character's disintegration. (40-41)

Still, other opinions create legendary status for Alex as she passes through the readings of various commentators, who see her predicament as a serious problem of '80s culture. An aura resonates around her, and the story's context begins to change to the point that intellectual discourse removes her from the shackles *Fatal Attraction* has fastened. As Girard maintains, through the passage of time, the legend of the surrogate victim carries on and incorporates different meanings:

It is conceivable that a victim may be responsible for public disasters, which is what happened in myths as in collective persecutions, but in myths, and only in myths, this same victim restores the order, symbolizes, and even incarnates it. . . . The greatest of all delinquents is transformed into a pillar of society. In some myths this paradox is diminished, censured or camouflaged, no doubt by the faithful whom it scandalizes almost as much as our contemporary ethnologists, but it is no less transparent beneath the camouflage. . . . The higher order of mythology ends with the victim becoming sacred, thereby concealing from us, and in some cases totally eliminating, the distortions of persecution. (*The Scapegoat* 42-43, 49)

Instead of the defeated she-monster, she begins to appear as the independent woman's martyr, whose death only heightens the intensity of the need to be recognized. Authors writing about her are more than willing to force alternate readings and tiny fissures in the story's politics to the surface, calling more attention to the weaker side of the wife/witch binary. Kathe Davis writes, "Despite the relatively stereotypical portrayal of feminine evil in these films, viewers are left with a recognition of the deep anxiety that women continue to inspire in contemporary

patriarchal culture” (55). Making this idea into the crux of their paper, Berland and Wechter assert:

Although the final moments of the film’s ending resolve conflict by reiterating regressive and conservative messages, it is critical to read the film in its entirety, complete with contradictions. The final solution may be to do away with Alex as if her demise will likewise do away with the problem her yearnings pose, i.e. changing gender relations. Alex may be dead but new twists on conventional polarized female images have been envisioned and projected on the wide screen—albeit briefly—and once seen cannot be erased from psychological or cultural memory. To image change is empowering and at the same time threatening, as women and men struggle to construct individual and collective meanings during a transitional period. (42-43)

Perhaps the most clear and effective interpretation of the film is Deborah Jermyn’s “Rereading the Bitches from Hell,” in which she borrows terminology from Julia Kristeva, explaining that Alex serves as an “abject.” Briefly defined the term “abject” designates an ambiguous figure who disturbs order or identity and appears both repellent and fascinating (254). This of course defines her in almost the exact same way as I have, because the term’s meaning closely approximates the functioning of the scapegoat. In Jermyn’s article, she scrutinizes three popular movies that feature a violent and dangerous woman as the antagonist. Of *Fatal Attraction*, she says the danger for Dan and his subsequent need to kill Alex arises, at least symbolically, from the fact that

the abject *draws attention* to the precarious nature of the symbolic order; the female psychopath can be read positively in that she *instigates change* or awareness in her female counterpart. She highlights the instability of the domestic and precarious nature of the roles society has assigned to other women; she is a catalyst who forces them to confront their unhappiness or dissatisfaction. (258)

And so she stands as a harbinger of what Beth can become, of the assertive and independent woman she has already shown she can be (by getting tough during the finale). Alex suggests, therefore, to woman viewers and readers that the line between domesticity and the autonomous

female denizens of the executive office in the high-rise building need only be crossed by simply doing it.

These positive readings of the ending facilitate interpretations of the film that defy easy categorization. They call sufficient attention to the fact that the film's more subtle details are difficult to prevent from emerging. One of them, I believe, that undermines the conservative demeanor of the movie is a symbolic (and virtually ignored) abortion. As I have asserted, family values became pinnacle single-issue platforms of the Reagan era: the home, children, church, etc. Opposing the liberal "conspiracy," those who pushed these values succeeded in having them understood as the opposite of alternative ideas that were corrupting the country: abortion, homosexuality and women's liberation. The movie's problematic position in the middle of this dichotomy materializes when Dan and Beth use physical force to kill the baby inside Alex, inadvertently performing an abortion. By eliminating the film's primary antagonist, the Gallaghers also do away with her future progeny and, of course, any material representation of Dan's wrongdoing. But the residuals of Alex's death remain at the end, and they are no less disturbing: the dead baby, the family's sacrifice, is a necessary evil if Dan is to carry on his life with his wife. Thus, the film willfully forgets and fails to address the issue of the slaughtered innocent; the unborn child is rendered a secondary and underlying issue.

It is as if the movie's own strictures have wound it up too tightly for its closure, and inadequacies of its message have been squeezed through and upheld for all to see. Summarizing all the story's flaws, one could easily acknowledge that the conservative message of the film contains at least three glaring fissures, discussed above: Dan's instigating all the key events and his violent aggression against the woman antagonist; Alex and Beth's overlap; and now the abortion, the most sacred *anti-* of the conservative movement. Thus, the backlash against

women becomes highly compromised by a film that otherwise intends to make its message clear. The very strength of the ending and the vehement response of the film's earliest audience expose their own anxiety; they acknowledge Alex's energy and generate the appropriate paranoia, so that the collective memory of Alex rises to the surface as a dangerous supplement, the poison to Beth's remedy, different from her only in degree. As Girard has noted, myths become exaggerated, overblown in time because of the vehemence its adherents possess. *Fatal Attraction* embodies that process as an eighties blockbuster because it clamors with loud, slick violence and glares in the faces of woman detractors, while exposing the fears of a Reaganite culture that has to create myths for its survival. Its own eclipsing hypocrisy epitomizes the double standard of an extremely conservative ideology, which professes democracy and promotes individuality, personal drive, and the spirit of business competition, while making it clear that only a selected few are actually allowed to participate. The film embraces this strange dichotomy, while inadvertently acknowledging it as contradictory and oppressive.

Notes

¹ A detailed account of the screenplay's progression from the 1980 British movie *Diversion* to the 1987 American rewrite, which heavily favored Reagan-era morality, can be found in Joyce Thompson, "From *Diversion* to *Fatal Attraction*: The Transformation of a Morality Play into a Hollywood Hit," *Journal of Popular Culture* 26.3 (1992): 5-15.

² The film has engendered an unusual number of popular and scholarly articles on a wide range of topics. In addition to the ones I have cited here, see Pauline Kael, "The Feminine Mystique," *The New Yorker* 19 Oct. 1987: 196+; James Conlon, "The Place of Passion: Reflections on *Fatal Attraction*," *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: U of Texas P, 1996) 401-411; Janet Karsten Larson, "Filming the Poor in Spirit," *Cross Currents* 38.1 (1988): 76-86; Barbara Leckie, "Fatal Subtraction: Women and the Sexual Double Standard," *American Philosophical Association Newsletter* 89 (1989): 58-61; Sandra R. Joshel, "Fatal Liaisons and Dangerous Attraction: The Destruction of Feminist Voices," *Journal of Popular Culture* 26.3 (1992): 59-70; Naomi Segal, "The Fatal Attraction of The Piano," *Scarlet Letters: Fictions of Adultery from Antiquity to the 1990s*, ed. Nicholas White and Naomi Segal (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1997) 199-211.

³ Ibid.

Chapter 4

Fragmentation and *American History X*

Inheriting pyrotechnic styles from the 1980s, nineties cinema sported slick, stylish movies that titillated viewers from one scene to the next, often with loud, raucous violence. It would not be long before some of the more thoughtful directors would parody these elements of the cinematic experience to create comedic gestures that ridiculed so much bloodshed. But the act of turning surface-level slaughter into a cinematic farce and lightening its import can only assist in forwarding the impulse to the point of obliterating plotlines altogether with gore and explosions. These factors constitute an acute mimetic crisis for the film industry and the cheapening of the American cinema. *American History X* emerged from this milieu by returning its audience to the real horrors of violence and enacting a study of mimetic hatred and revenge. Scapegoating the protagonist's younger brother, the director condemns the contagion of mimetic violence, while showing also that it is a deeply engrained, social phenomenon that is difficult to vanquish. The film engages the cinema of fast editing, numerous flashbacks, and changing film stocks by inserting meaning into the end of a line of movies, which are nearly anemic from poverty of content. A dead, young boy lies still on screen for a seeming eternity, his lingering image decrying the nonsense of a world (and film industry) "gone mad."

The story of how American cinema came to reflect a society "gone mad" lies within the larger context of recent history, during a time of peace and prosperity that served to turn our nation into a self-reflective entity, absent any real consideration of political policies, education, or idea structures around which to construct our identity as a whole. Consider, first of all, the political and social events that shaped our history during the last decade. At the onset of George Bush's administration in 1989, East and West Germany united after the tearing down of the

Berlin Wall. The event proved a catalyst in the continuing decline of Communist regimes and the seeming supremacy of democracy. Perhaps in the name of democratic governance, U.S. troops in concert with a U.N. coalition, successfully defeated Saddam Hussein in his attempt to invade Kuwait in 1991. Our country continued its inclination to rescue oppressed peoples by assisting in the wars of Yugoslav succession, during both the early and later parts of the decade, first to limit the killings in Bosnia-Herzegovina, then in order to halt the mass murders of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo (Woloch and Johnson).

The Internet and global economics contributed to new forms of commerce, which often made American employees dependent upon large companies that conducted business in the international markets and transferred vast amounts of capital from country to country. To help control and negotiate financial fluxes and economic changes induced by the new global economy, the U.S. joined a series of organizations, known by their acronyms, APEC, NAFTA, GATT and the WTO. On the social front, women's advancements and the struggle for equal pay, as well as laws against sexual harassment continued throughout the last decade of the twentieth century. These issues progressed alongside new debates over immigration, when legislators made new laws allowing the largest number of immigrants into the country since the massive influx of the early twentieth century. The Congress also instituted a liberal policy for those seeking political asylum (Woloch and Johnson).

Yet none of these issues received as much attention as the highly publicized O.J. Simpson and Clinton-Lewinsky scandals. Foreign, social, and economic occurrences simply did not appeal to average Americans who saw them as numinous background issues that did not have an effect on their daily lives, despite their infinitely more important impacts upon our country. The most plausible explanation for this remarkable shift in American concerns is that the people of

the United States simply had nothing better to do.¹ The trouble abroad, during the Gulf War and Yugoslav conflicts, did not engender difficulties at home, and the relative economic prosperity of the Clinton years acted as an opiate that mitigated any serious possibilities for domestic strife (with some exceptions, discussed below). The 1990s was the first decade in recent history in which political rhetoric did not polarize the country against a common enemy, either here (like hippies in the seventies) or abroad (like Russians in the eighties). Instead, the last decade was one in which the country turned inward and began to examine itself through the most revealing of all public mirrors, the television.

One major source these changes derived from was Ronald Reagan's proclivity toward deregulation in the 1980s. Governmental relaxations seriously impacted the broadcasting industry when the FCC announced that it was scrapping several rules on programming and advertising. The demise of these regulations had the effect of diminishing the airtime of family-oriented, public and religious television and radio shows. It also lessened the effectiveness of watchdog groups who attempted to insure quality programming, as well as fairness in multi-sided issues. Also affected was the number of TV stations, rising from five to twelve, that a company could purchase and control (Johnson 174-76).

It was not long before "quality" programming gave way to the intense desire for profit in a competitive market. The news stations hired media consultants to take surveys and gather demographic information about their audiences. Once these consultants reported back to their clients that the most visceral stories would appeal to them, the "bottom line" information they provided paved the way for what stations disseminated for the next twenty years. The lowest common denominator, the easiest, fastest and most intense aspect of the audiences' lives that stations found they could appeal to was their sense of excitement, curiosity about bloodshed,

violence, sex, decadence, and public figures' dirty laundry. Local news stations began to compete with each other, trying to provide for the public the most exciting and attractive stories. The "fifteen-second spot," catchy jokes, funny weathermen, and action reporting became mainstays of the shows that were desperately trying to outdo each other. The more TV stations tried to increase ratings and make profits, the more superficial their "newsworthy" material became, and the more "inside" the situation the reporters seemed to get. Thus, local affiliates demonstrated for their network counterparts that the shows were cheap to produce and effective at gaining higher ratings. But the problem was that important issues for our society at large, such as foreign relations, social welfare, or education began to suffer. In Louisiana the special report of the day was the alligator found in someone's back yard, while in California the traffic was intolerable for the third Monday in a row. One could, after a few weeks of watching the local news, be sufficiently convinced that people were seriously concerned with car accidents and the latest 20-minute recipe. The networks followed suit by slowly changing styles and revamping their pieces so that presentations on shows like *Nightline* exuded high styles, excitement and appeals to the most basic of human impulses. The real bottom line for stations involved and their network executives was money (Stark 388-90).

Fast, catchy editing, insider scoops, and up-to-the-minute analyses began to shorten in length and resemble what we now call "sound bites." A formidable manifestation of this phenomenon was the proliferation of sensational, yet overwhelmingly successful tabloid shows such as *48 Hours*, *Hard Copy*, *A Current Affair*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and *Inside Edition*. Cable joined the trend with its own versions in shows such as *American Justice* and *True Hollywood Crime*. As the eighties faded and the nineties progressed, shameless networks continued pandering to America's most frivolous desires, developing shows like *Cops* and *When*

Animals Attack, which capitalized on people's embarrassment and misfortune in a more blatant manner by simply replaying raw footage from video cassette recorders.

As if to provide the perfect subject matter for all these phenomena, when a man from Los Angeles turned in a tape of Rodney King being brutally beaten by police in March of 1991, the television stations played it over and over again. A year later, when the riots, spawned from the policemen's acquittal, spread throughout South Central Los Angeles, they would make the videotaped beatings seem small in comparison. Television screens all over the U.S. were suddenly stalling their regular programs in order to show people involved in the six-day-long melee. In one of the earliest confrontations, a group of men pulled truck driver Reginald Denny from his vehicle, kicked, beat and smashed his face with a brick, then robbed him. Although Denny lay unconscious and bleeding on the ground, the two men danced around him in joy, mingling horrible violence with childish frivolity. In an article about television's relationship to performative behavior, Ian Watson discusses how constant television coverage of the riots represented America's explaining "something" to itself about the state of the underclass. But he demonstrates also that we do so in terms of television-presented packages, with computer graphics, news logos, and talking heads surrounding images of bloodshed. "Camera angles, lighting and editing play a significant role in documentaries, and, to a lesser extent, even in programmes with less time for aesthetic considerations, such as the nightly news" (214). Producers use these effects to make their material look more exciting and to command viewers' attention. In fact the riots, while serious indicators of a society in desperate times, drew far more public attention than the arguably more important Middle East peace agreements transpiring on the White House Lawn at the same time (214). Local reporters and their national counterparts

got as close to the fray and as up-to-the-minute and analytical as their ability to improvise would allow them.

The year before, Lyle and Erik Menendez were arrested for the brutal slaying of their parents. Beginning with their first trial in 1993 and continuing with their second, which did not end until 1996, television sets glowed with the high drama of two rich and privileged young men who explained tearfully that they committed murder because their parents molested them (Pergament). Around the same time, another tale of the failed family emerged for dramatic television story-telling when Lorena Bobbitt admitted to the police that she cut off her husband's penis and threw it into a field. The Bobbitts' troubles spawned a surge of interviews, discussions and analyses on rape, gender issues, and even the question of whether or not feminism had gone too far, as if Lorena's action reflected activist beliefs ("Legal Flashback"). An even more shameful event beloved by cameras was the pipe-beating incident that left figure skater Nancy Kerrigan weeping on the ground in front of millions of viewers. Like the others, this event haunted the airwaves for a substantial portion of 1994, with pundits making guesses about the women's rivalry, Harding and her ex-husband's chances at reuniting, and which of the two women was going to skate better. ABC even tried to capitalize on the occurrence, airing a show called "Tonya and Nancy: The Inside Story" ("Harding-Kerrigan Saga").

Nothing would garner ratings and interrupt regularly scheduled programming, however, more than the O.J. Simpson debacle that began on television in June of 1994. The story of his ex-wife's murder and whether or not he was involved soon overshadowed all other television events and demanded more media attention than any other event in history. One would have to have been in another country without a television set and away from all other people not to have seen or heard about the police cars in a slow chase after the retired football player's white Ford

Bronco (Johnson 107, 114). What his cheering onlookers did not know or chose to ignore was that the reason for this now carnivalesque event was that two victims lay murdered in gory pools of blood a few days earlier. Nicole Brown Simpson had a slash through her throat to the spinal chord; there were four other stab wounds on the left side of her neck and two on the back of her head. Ronald Goldman, her friend, had been stabbed several times in his sides; he also had three stab wounds in his chest, one in the abdomen, and one in the thigh. They both had multiple cuts on their hands, indicating defensive postures (110). This violent scene would seem to be enough to warrant less jovial behavior as the caravan of police cars passed on the freeway, but in the petty sensationalist, fast-moving, camera-happy trend of recent television events that had been serving as history since 1992, much of what was happening seemed as if it belonged.

Similar imbalances occurred again during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Just as the public seemed to grow weary of O.J. Simpson, their newest voyeuristic target became the personal life of President Clinton. Not long after Kenneth Starr received permission to include in his federal investigation information from Paula Jones's civil suit against the President, Matt Drudge released the details of the affair on his conservative website. The long tale of sex and inappropriate behavior in the Oval Office was copied by other conservative and far-Right websites and spread quickly over the Internet (292-94). In addition, eight months later, videotaped footage of Bill Clinton, nervous, angry, and embarrassed was leaked into the public sector just a day after he was promised it would not be, and it was shown on the news stations repeatedly (356-62). Images, especially sound bites, are easier to remember than words in books or apologetic rhetoric. The mental imprint of images and snippets will live on in people's minds as the logical consequence of their own repetition. In *The Best of Times*, journalist Haynes Johnson compares the Simpson murders to the Clinton situation, implying that the two scandals

attest to the same phenomenon: the media, especially television, helps to create one narrative, usually superficial and relatively unimportant, that appeals to the audience's sense of the visceral (297). However, under the surface, there are likely to be competing narratives that, when examined more closely, usually reveal other truths, and carry more serious and meaningful social or political weight. In the case of O.J., that more serious narrative was the one involving our country's ongoing racial turmoil. In the case of Bill Clinton, it was revealed to be the serious ethical and legal questions of leaking information and countless miscarriages of justice that seemed literally to issue forth from Kenneth Starr's offices. Perhaps understanding the power of television, the single detail Starr omitted from the famous tapes of Monica Lewinsky's testimony was her statement that "No one ever asked me to lie, and I was never promised a job for my silence" (393). Legal, social, ethical concerns did not matter; the image created was everything.

A quick review of these events, which served in lieu of real history, shows that each and every case was a dramatization of sex, violence, or both. And none of them, inasmuch as they were examined and propounded on a daily basis, informed us very much on political, social, or educational issues with any real ideological weight. These happenings, as television events, are comprised of the sensationalization of fifty-eight deaths, 1,850 injuries (many of them shown on videotape), a pipe-beating, bloody stabbings, a severed penis, and graphic sexual depictions and stories, mostly in great detail. These phenomena indicate that the American public has entered into an obsession with television in which they crave the intrigue of sex, scandal, and violence, all edited for the fastest, most exciting effects possible.

The major import of all this is that on one level American mass culture appears to project a sameness that makes us seem to have a sterile, streamlined culture of trash television and not very much else. But what the overwhelming wealth and economic growth of the Clinton years

tended to stimulate was the creation of more and more TV stations, music videos, cable shows, video games, coffee shops, websites, magazines, and wrestling shows that cater to more and more sub-pockets of our culture and communities (457). The resulting effect was that, in a culture that seems and is heterogeneous on one level, we are a nation, on an entirely different level, that continues splintering and fragmenting farther and farther away from any version of social cohesion whatsoever. People eventually learn to define themselves by difference of opinion, mode of dress, choice of music, age, etc. They commune with individuals within a tiny group, finding commonality but only with a select few and then only in reference to the one website or coffee shop they frequent or the one author they seek to emulate. Calling this “disconnect,” Haynes Johnson suggests that “Americans don’t really know one another; or, at the least, they have relatively little contact within their individual blocs: professional or working class; inner city inhabitants or suburban “soccer moms”; black or white; private schools or public; military or civilian; new immigrant or old inhabitant; rich or poor” (556). Johnson further stipulates that the desire for wealth is the underlying trend influencing all these differences, as well as the networks’ frenzy of visceral material. He cites several interviews and statistics that indicate a country caught up in the moment, a whole generation of young people attending college in order to acquire as much money as possible, not a well-rounded education, in their near futures.

Johnson further intimates a society whose values are closely related to immediacy and youth-obsession making ours a nation that, on the average, shuns deeper meanings, values, historical backgrounds, and traditions. These conclusions help to constitute the idea of people in the grips of an alarming mimetic crisis, a whole nation of individuals who believe themselves to be different along so many lines yet who are actually all the same in their race for self-identity

and a taste of the American Dream. The repeated imagery of the SUVs, identical cubicles at the advertising firm and fast-food outlets in movies like *American Beauty* and *Suburbia* help to illustrate these increasingly noticeable aspects of American life in amusing short hand.

The result for the more violent films of the decade was a tendency to imitate media and MTV filming styles, while parodying our society's staggering sense of fragmentation. An entire series of films emerged that showcased a barrage of characters who seemed young and hip. They had very little concern for the community, their sense of self-fulfillment (except where money was involved), and others outside their immediate circles. Their directors and editors elected to cut together montages of fast editing, oblique angles, and "cool" special effects to create a sense of speed and pop cultural references with storylines that were fast-paced and fun, but did not have very much thought-provoking, edifying, or philosophically profound material. They seemed simultaneously to be joining into and commenting upon our society's sense of the immediate and superficial, as if to make money while evincing ostensible commentaries on frivolity and fragmentation. Films like *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *2 Days in the Valley* and *Things To Do in Denver When You're Dead* are episodic and circular in structure. They begin either *in medias res* and cut backwards to the genesis of their own events, or involve themselves in several plotlines that are not connected to a central event as much as they stem from each other. Others, like *Love and a .45* and *True Romance*, treat the subject of love as fast and furious, investing little time, if any, in examining human relations, tenderness or what it means to be in love or lose it.

Many of these films may have appeared to re-imagine noir genres because they feature a barrage of characters from the seedy side of life. Some characters resemble the "white trash" stereotype, as they live in dirty trailers or dilapidated apartment complexes. They have filthy

hair, hyperbolic country accents and little knowledge of manners or propriety. And all of them have undertaken criminal activity in some way; they reject traditional employment as either boring, unsatisfying, or not lucrative enough, so they turn to illegal endeavors in order to enact a quick fix for their financial lives. Ultimately, however, I would reject the idea that these films are truly noir because they often shun focus on a central character who is constantly insulating himself, protecting himself from the world around him until his hubris contributes to his demise.

Part of the ruminations on the meaningless and superficial aspects of life is these films' insistence upon intrusions of chaos and chance. They all include complicated plot twists precipitated by accidents and unforeseen events. As evidence of the fact that the characters cannot rely on order, major portions of their plotlines focus on diversions and detours almost exclusively. These twists often become comic or tragic, semi-central events that create intensity as the audience anticipates their return to the original thread of occurrences that began the diversions.

The problem with these films, for many critics, revolves around their aesthetics involving violence. Many movies of the nineties demonstrate a throwaway quality in their bloody scenes that far surpass the shallowness of blockbusters from the eighties. They simply become an endless flow of references to trivial topics outside their storylines, banking on the assumption that viewers would know all the latest bells and whistles of a media-obsessed society. Several scholars agree that filmmakers have simply come to the understanding that kinetic activity overshadows all other aspects of the cinematic experience. Filmmakers must make concentrated attempts to rise over the din of pop cultural nothingness by creating bigger and louder nothingness. Leo Charney discusses how sharply rendered screen brutality enacts an attempt at immediacy:

Moments of violence aspire to restore, or at least, to represent, the moments of tangible presence that are otherwise unachievable, as if the very force could hurtle them into the inside of a present moment. . . . Contemporary action movies may trade on postmodern nostalgia for an imaginary past potential to make an impact, to cut through the diffusion of the Internet and three hundred satellite channels to feel the force of a simple explosion. . . . From the historical perspective, what reviewers predictably identify as a deterioration in storytelling aesthetics can be more accurately described as an increased (re)privileging of kinetic sensations over linear storytelling. (49-53)

These films further diminish their own social commentaries or studies of violence by employing rockabilly or surfing music to lighten their tones. Others employ witty banter, situational bumbling, and funny dialogue to create comedic detachment.

The film most obviously attempting to satirize its own violence for the ostensible purpose of ridiculing a media-obsessed and superficial society is *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994). More so than any other films in the category, Oliver Stone's ultraviolent romp through the pop cultural milieu is at risk of becoming exactly what it seeks to condemn. Again, on this topic many of the commentators agree. John Bailey says,

The defining aesthetic is MTV. And if it is meant to be otherwise, if it is meant to be a de facto critique or satire of the American and media obsession with violence, I can only say that on this level it is, for me at least, a complete failure. The filmmaking tools, which are wielded so artfully and with such panache, distort the putative attempt. (83)

Of the film in question and *Pulp Fiction* also, Marsha Kinder remarks, "Instead of asking whether violent action is warranted by moral or political circumstances, they are more concerned with how it is being orchestrated and amplified by popular culture. They show that violence has become synonymous with action, making its antonym not peace but boredom" (77). The consensus implied is that surface-level violence that does not slow down for contemplation does not succeed in becoming a critical analysis of the industry. It joins in with the industry,

repeating the already repeated spectacles of violence, fast editing and MTV style so that it can “wow” the audience in a rapturous fetishization of bloodshed.

Natural Born Killers's opening seven minutes feature three disorienting jump cuts of desert scenes interspersed with Mickey and Mallory's (Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis) visit to a small diner. A few moments after Mickey orders a key lime pie from the waitress, Mallory begins a sexually provocative dance in front of a jukebox. By this time, there have been several shots in black and white, one with a red filter on the lens, and several oblique angles that twist and oscillate from one vantage point to the next. When three men enter the establishment, one attempts to dance with the whirling and gyrating Mallory. After he has insulted her with inarticulate flirtation, Mallory begins beating the man with swift and skilled action, to the tune of an upbeat rock 'n' roll song. Several shots from different locations in the diner at varying angles are quickly intercut to create a sense of chaotic motion. One particularly interesting effect of this brand of shooting occurs when Mallory punches her new foe. She then says, “Your move, fucker. Go!” but the audience hears her say “your move” twice. In the first instance, it bears the effect of a voiceover, because we see her punching him as we hear her saying it. The shot is quick, and the sound of Mallory's fist hitting the man is very sharp. Then there is another shot of her saying “your move” again, throwing open her arms to indicate it is his turn. Clearly this last instance is the same as the first but repeated from another angle on different film stock, as it alternates between color and black and white. This double shot of the same moment contains quick editing to produce the illusion of fast repetition.

The action continues when Mickey joins by stabbing one of the men to death. When a cook, wearing a hair net, tries to stop him with a meat cleaver, Mickey swiftly shoots her in the head. Here the camera follows the bullet in a slow-motion, point-of-view shot until just before it

hits her; cut to the wall with the cook's blood splashing all over it. The scene contains maddeningly fast, rough intercutting, sometimes revealing Mallory in the background still brutalizing her victim. The music, black and white stock, and snappy editing conflate to make the scene resemble a modern music video. Appealing primarily to a young, MTV-influenced audience and reflecting the sensational tabloid-style editing of current television shows, the scene gains a surreal cadence. Consider the alterations in editing from the movie's beginning to the current melee. Before the fighting begins, the film contains shots of seventeen, twenty-five and ten seconds. But once the brawl monopolizes the screen and dazzles viewers' eyes, the shot duration drops to anywhere between one and five seconds, averaging at about three. This fast and furious filming style becomes a trademark of the movie as it continues through the ending, making it seem more and more absurd.

Adding to this element, in compliance with Oliver Stone's claim that the film is a parody, *Natural Born Killers* demonstrates a certain comedic flair. For example, when Mickey shoots the cook, just as the bullet approaches her forehead, it pauses for a moment, and she views it fearfully for an instant as if to consider its power. An operatic screech momentarily supplants the rock song from the jukebox during the bullet's curious pause before it hits the woman in the head. A moment later, the operatic recording accompanies a knife the camera follows in slow motion through a window into Mickey's victim's back. This surreal exchange and dramatic touch of opera work together to displace any pretenses toward realism. Indeed, what little realistic action that exists in the film is constantly flouted, undercut and supplanted by self-consciousness as a parody of the media and the neties trend of MTV-style editing.

Take, for example, the end of the first scene. After ruthlessly massacring four people, Mickey and Mallory affirm their love for each other by dancing to slow romantic music. Most of

the lighting goes dim, save for a spotlight that glares upon the two. Mickey twirls his girlfriend in ballroom style, and the camera pans left to an image of fireworks, as if it is being projected there on the diner's wall. Drawing from the common cliché that a loving couple "sees stars," this projection is a symbol of their feelings for each other. It implies that, as well as fast and furious, the couple is fiery too. Of course, their penchant for killing people, and upbraiding and pacing around before they do so, cheapens any illusions of "love" the movie has. However deep the characters may believe their feelings to be, their amorous gestures seem surface-level and silly to the audience.

Curiously though, the series of psychological landscapes, backdrops, and flashbacks that the film continually projects provide clues to the reasons for the couple's wild murdering spree. Much of the film depicts imaging that appears freely in the sky, on a wall, on a window, or next to one of the characters, as if it were inviting us to see into their psyches. There are horses running, angels floating, and constant references to freedom and the wide-open spaces of the American West. These images become supplements to the couple's tendencies toward hedonism, movement, and the snide understanding that they are doing exactly what they want without any compassion for others. In one scene, for example, they discuss plans for the future as Mickey constantly clicks the TV remote. Flickering in the window are scenes of violence and symbols of freedom. As if to respond to his actions, the projections on the window transform to reveal different depictions every few seconds. We see the Nazis marching in unison, a nuclear bomb exploding, and several gruesome moments from *Scarface* and *The Wild Bunch*. A poignant moment comes when Mickey complains about Hollywood excesses of violence, and he asks, "Anybody out there in Hollywood believe in kissing anymore?" As in the diner scene, the couple conflates love with killing and bloodshed; Mickey kisses Mallory's leg, affirming his love

for her, while horrible images of slaughter flicker next to him in the window. He further undermines his own lamentations about kissing when he has sex with his girlfriend in front of a kidnapping victim, whom he later rapes.

As Oliver Stone's free style and special effects so heavy-handedly insist, these intimations of Mickey and Mallory's psychological landscape indict television as the insidious culprit behind all of their activities. Mallory has a flashback that emerges as a television sitcom called *I Love Mallory* in which Rodney Dangerfield plays her father. Sloppy and repugnant, he walks around his house in boxer shorts and an undershirt soiled with yellow smears. While alluding to his incestuous relationship to his daughter, he berates her constantly, calling her a "stupid bitch." Apparently compensation mechanisms for Mallory, there are old-fashioned laugh tracks playing at times that are obviously inappropriate. Fake audience laughter chimes in when the father creeps up close to his daughter and warns her of their next sexual encounter. At times, however, we hear beeps and horns over several of the invectives, suggesting again that Mallory has developed a coping mechanism. Several beeps and laugh tracks later, Mickey arrives as the "meat man" and simply takes her away. Television images superimposed over what is supposed to be mnemonic narrative is highly suggestive of a young lady's life inundated by television and its overwhelming presence in her mind's eye. As Oliver Stone says of his characters, "these two kids are desensitized at the beginning of the movie, totally, to their environment by their parents, by their upbringing, and above all by television." As if to clarify the issue by making it explicit, a point-of-view shot through a Native American seer's eyes, in a later scene, reveals the words "too much t.v." spelled out across the protagonists' abdomens.

No media parody, however, is more over-the-top than Wayne Gale (Robert Downey Jr.), when he first appears as the host of his own show, *American Maniacs*, written, produced,

directed by him. He feigns a strong Australian accent and wears his hair much like the real-life Geraldo Rivera. Speaking in hyperbole, he introduces his audience to Highway 666 and segues into a dramatic reenactment of Mickey and Mallory's latest crime spree. Moments later, a montage of people from Tokyo, London and Paris appear on a television screen, displaying their fanaticism for the murderous couple. Cut to three modern-day hippies, speaking inflections characteristic of the San Fernando Valley. One of them declares, "Mickey and Mallory are the best thing to happen to mass murder since Manson." Another responds, "Yeah, but, uh, they're way cooler." This shot is intercut with quickly edited clips of fans standing up and cheering. Clearly a craze is developing around the couple, and television, it seems, is the main instrument of all the excitement, with Wayne Gale at the forefront of the action.

In a scene that again cheapens love and underscores the emptiness of Wayne Gale's sound bites, Mickey rushes to rescue Mallory during a fast-paced and spectacular jailbreak. There is a violent shootout that concludes with Mickey and Officer Scagnetti (Tom Sizemore) trying to defeat each other in a final standoff. Mallory creeps up behind the policeman and ruthlessly slits his throat. As Scagnetti lies bleeding and gurgling on the floor, the antiheroic couple embraces, declaring their devotion for one another. Wayne Gale's camera team focuses in on this travesty of human dignity as he announces their live reunion over the airwaves in a voice and tone that calls to mind an announcer delivering a soap-opera update. The filmmakers contribute to this scene's absurdity by playing romantic music and splicing in various flashbacks that dissolve into one another, creating the illusion the Knoxes are a light-hearted, fun-loving couple. As Gale continues in his soap-opera voice, he appears blissfully unaware that his pronouncements are hollow as long as a policeman lies bleeding in the name of the protagonists'

love. Silly and farcical, this scene is emblematic of what the whole film is ostensibly achieving: a sense of ridicule toward the media.

Yet, as I have argued, this lofty goal is difficult to achieve in a film so bent on its bloodshed and pleased with its excess. It is a long and grueling tapestry of gore that produces a surface-level love affair with violence as adventure. Though we are taken inside the chaos and confronted with heavy firepower, as in *Taxi Driver*, *Natural Born Killers* cannot evoke an objective contemplation of ultraviolence and its painful ramifications to those of us still living. Maureen Nemeck and Edward Lawry attribute this problem to the film's pop cultural flavor: "For the theme of a civilization gone mad on attached images of violence produced by an obsessed media to actually be aesthetically revealed in the film, some glimmer of a noncrazed culture would have to be represented" (170). The film never achieves that effect because of its overwhelming mix of flashbacks, cartoon sequences, intertextual references and silly parodies of tabloid shows. Its fast editing, though, is the film's most challenging obstacle to a more edifying portrayal of violence. With very few exceptions, the bloodshed in this film balks at its own invitations for the audience to see it. When someone fires a gun, throws a knife, or stabs a victim, the scene cuts to another sequence in the interest of keeping the action going.

Although still a flawed film, *True Romance* (Tony Scott, 1993) offers a much better projection of cinematic ultraviolence. It begins like most of its brethren, making a mockery of love and appealing to hip, catchy subjects in an attempt to cater to younger audiences. But its masterfully choreographed violence, combined with a stunning performance by Patricia Arquette, makes it a memorable attempt at returning to pathos-laden contemplations of violence contained in some of its seventies predecessors. It sports exploding squibs, issuing darkly-

colored splashes of blood. The camera lingers on dead bodies, shot-gun blasts, shooting through people's backs and pistol shots through a pimp's genitals.

Against the dreary backdrop of downtown Detroit, Clarence and Alabama (Christian Slater and Patricia Arquette) sit in front of a billboard to discuss their short time together. After revealing that she is a call girl, Alabama tells Clarence that his boss has sent her as a present for his birthday. Suddenly she tells him quite honestly, "Clarence, I feel really goofy saying this, after only knowing you one night, me being a call girl and all, but I think I love you." The absurdity is comical. As in the other films, this one suggests that ideas of love and loving need not progress beyond the thrill of simple, surface-level romance. After marrying Alabama very quickly, Clarence kills a pimp and escapes with a suitcase full of cocaine. Traveling carefree in a purple Cadillac, the couple declares their final destination to be Los Angeles, where they will sell drugs for an incredible sum of money. After an action-laden shoot-out involving gangsters, the police, a Hollywood producer, and their actor friend, the young couple ends up in Mexico with enough money to live on for the rest of their lives.

Prior to their success, there is a particularly brutal scene in which a gangster (James Gandolfini), looking for the cocaine, beats Alabama for several minutes. After she tries to gain the upper hand by stabbing him in the foot with a corkscrew, he throws her through a glass shower door into a bathtub. Her blood, covering her face, hands, and teeth and sticking to her hair, is dark and repulsive. She appears seriously battered and at the edge of death, yet finds new energy in spraying burning hairspray into the gangster's eyes and beating him with a toilet lid. As the big man falls to the floor, trying to extinguish the flames, Alabama stabs him in the back with the corkscrew, then blows a hole in him with a shotgun. Her numerous screams are loud and tumultuous; they suggest a primordial instinct for revenge and create surprisingly effective

intensity, bringing to the scene a sense of reality in the struggle against death. More strongly and excitedly edited than other scenes in the movie, this fast yet moving sequence seems to become a celebration of violence. For as much as we are repulsed by the staggering amount of bloodshed and the noise it produces, its powerful imagery conjures up deep-seated feelings of revenge, implicating the audience in bloody splendor. It evokes high emotion, as it engenders relief in the fact that Alabama slowly escapes what has, a moment ago, appeared to be certain death. A woman of small stature, Alabama appears very weak and vulnerable until these crucial moments. Her screams begin to sound like cheers for herself, encouraging her struggle to survive, as she mercilessly slaughters a cruel gangster. In quick succession, there is a slow-motion shot of her reloading the gun, then a closeup of her shaking it as if preparing for battle. Cut to a bird's eye view of more gun-shaking. These shots hone in on the reality of her thirst for vengeance, which seems far removed from self-defense now.

Screaming and crying in rage—wet, bloody, and sticky—Alabama becomes the personification of beauty defiled. Patricia Arquette's slight attractive features, contrasted with her ability to enact bellicose rage, provide for a repugnant and jarring scene that wreaks havoc for her character and the audience. It is simply a blood festival that begins a study in the consequences of ultraviolent confrontation by showing her crying over the body and struggling to regain her composure. Unfortunately, though, the film's plot movement stunts this development by showing Clarence burst through the door and whisk her away. Her reaction to her own rage is further undermined by a comical scene and never again revisited.

Pulp Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) is perhaps the best movie of this genre, because it engages in pop cultural referencing without completely annihilating edifying concentrations on violence. It does so by displacing its own narrative elements so as to decenter what would be a

traditional, chronological story. In this way, the film perpetuates the message that meaninglessness is everywhere and relationships are dubious. Yet it still works at times to bemoan the pain of bloodshed and mutilation. The movie focuses on two high-level hitmen, Jules and Vincent, who work for a gangster of ill repute, named Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames). The two men have an adventure that day in which they are forced to consult a cover-up expert to help them dispose of their friend's accidentally killed body. But Jules is puzzled about one of the day's events. After he kills a couple of young men for keeping Marsellus's briefcase away from him, a third young man emerges from the bathroom doorway, shooting at them and missing completely, even though the bullet holes in the wall seem to indicate that the two gangsters should have been killed. This amounts to a religious epiphany for Jules, who decides that he is going to tell his boss he is finished with the gangster life, and he would like to resign. After Jules and Vincent have a philosophical debate on the subject, Vincent continues in his line of work without Jules as his partner. His next job is to wait at Butch's (Bruce Willis) house to kill him for refusing to obey an order to "take a dive" in a boxing match.

If *Pulp Fiction* were shown depicting a traditionally chronological series of events, it would resemble a buddy film in which one buddy would realize that a moral change is necessary, and the other would perish by the error of his ways. A subplot would reveal a second chance at life for Butch, the down-and-out boxer who may have finally beaten the odds. But Tarantino's characters, though doubtfully moral, are fully developed three-dimensional people, and their accidental trajectories take them into filmic realms that are non-traditional and refreshing. Instead of concentrating solely on the running narrative and discourses of Vincent, Jules and their adventures, Tarantino allows his peripheral characters to escape their traditional bounds as supporting elements and become major players in the general chaos of his convoluted story. The

plot of *Pulp Fiction* becomes a character-driven, multi-directional montage instead of a linear series of events. The anti-chronological sequence creates a series of vignettes, which transcend the filmic conventions of developing a hero or main character. The result is a fractured narrative—a story that denies a moral or deep meaning of any kind. It obscures the lessons learned, if any, by Jules, Vincent or Butch. And what the audience learns from following them through their world is that chance and dubious human relations rule the day.

One juncture, illustrating this dynamic, is when Butch's girlfriend forgets to pack his father's gold watch. Fearing for his life now, because he has just disobeyed his gangster boss, Butch leaves for his old apartment, where henchmen are surely waiting for him to retrieve the timepiece. There he kills Vincent whom he has caught unawares in the bathroom. The camera's focus on Butch is the key device here that downplays Vincent's death. Seeing the events through Butch's perspective, the spectator follows him to his apartment, watches him kill Vincent, sees him take the watch, and observes him fleeing the scene in his girlfriend's car. These happenings all occur in a segment entitled "The Gold Watch," which continues for several minutes, gaining audience identification.

Any ostensible moral the movie might convey has been displaced by so much emphasis on Butch's position as main character of the "Gold Watch" sequence, which strips Vincent's death of any meaningful impact it might be capable of. In addition, Vincent and Jules's debate over divine intervention has been moved toward the movie's ending despite its actual occurrence elsewhere in the timeline of events. Only in the ending are we given the chance to indulge in these characters' misadventures and their conversation, and only there do we see things through their perspectives. Thus, Vincent's just desserts and Jules's moral lesson learned become decentered and obscured by a fractured narrative, forcing our concentration to shift at

inopportune moments. In this way the movie disperses moral contemplations, giving equal credence to Butch's point of view as well as Jules's, so that the question is no longer who is the better man? Instead it becomes, why even bother?

Thus the film projects a detached, morally apathetic playing field on which to make fun of gangster conventions and nineties tendencies toward triviality in filmic narratives. Yet smarter than it looks, at times bemoaning its own humorous atmosphere, *Pulp Fiction* does resound with serious examinations of violence, as if to reverse its own reversal. The most dramatic example occurs when Butch, believing himself to be free of troubles, has the unhappy accident of seeing Marsellus in the street. Hoping to end his problems, he tries to run over Marsellus by accelerating into traffic and causing a serious accident. Despite some of the film's earlier conflation of comedy and violence, this particular scene yields little humor. When Marsellus tries to shoot Butch, he hits a lady who has been assisting the dazed boxer. She screams loudly and consistently over a period of several seconds, her wailings echoing through the streets as Butch limps off for safety. The woman's screams are haunting, Butch's limp seems painful, and together they produce an effect appropriate for this violent situation; this represents a complete turn away from upbeat music and bumbling antics.

Marsellus chases Butch into a pawnshop run by a man with a strong Southern accent. When Butch wrestles Marsellus to the floor, viewers can see him from a low angle, showing Marsellus's perspective from the ground. The audience "receives" from up close four punches, affecting one solid *thud* each, as Butch connects squarely with Marsellus's face. Blood also trickles down Butch's face, creating a gruesome visual effect to go along with the loud, heavy punches. Here, unlike in other scenes, the pain of violence is adequately suggested, as the spectator is placed inside the scene and invited to feel the pain of the punches.

The next few moments yield similar results. After restraining both Butch and Marsellus with ropes around their hands and a set of leather S&M bridles, the Southerner, Maynard (Duane Whitaker), and his newly arrived friend Zed (Peter Greene) discuss in vague language what they would like to do to their captives. After waking a leather-clad “gimp” from a coffin-like box and instructing him to guard Butch, the two men take Marsellus into another room and rape him at gun point. When Butch enters the room, having escaped the gimp, during what is now a rescue scene, the open door reveals a long shot of Zed thrusting himself, with his pants half on, into the bent-over Wallace. Plain and simple, the ensuing scene is an ugly depiction of a male-to-male rape. It is a moment of utmost horror, difficult to look at, even after several viewings. An appalling closeup of Marsellus from the side reveals him leaning his chest on what appears to be a vinyl sofa. We see his body jerked and thrust back and forth from the brutal force of Zed’s off-screen violation. With each jolt of Marsellus’s body comes a dull *thud*, heralding the impact Zed is making, causing untold and unimaginable injury. The suffering gangster looks to his left, wincing from his pain, showing us, in his isolation, that he has simply and helplessly accepted his fate. Rape is the ultimate invasion and one of the most sickening forms of brutality; even for a movie so insistent on raw violence, this act seems to escape the bounds of acceptable cinema.

Tarantino, I believe, is aware of this, and the effect is an envelope-pushing tactic that is meant to attract and repel at the same time. Although these intense moments, mixed with inappropriate beach music, are akin to the excess bloodiness conflated with the comedy that is so pervasive in *Natural Born Killers*, they ultimately undercut their own attempts at humor. As we have seen, constructive violent scenes exist to provoke contemplation on bloodshed; this scene accomplishes that goal by establishing more sympathetic human qualities in Marsellus’s visage. Tarantino’s point here is to reverse his own comedic parody of his own film’s meaninglessness.

If most of the film has been about the absurdity and throwaway quality of interaction, depicted especially in the ridiculous philosophical conversation, this one moment turns that kind of parody on its head to continue asserting the value of human life. Butch reinforces this point when he seriously considers trying to save the man who has been trying to kill him. Not a moral paragon himself, Butch decides that even Marsellus Wallace does not deserve the indignity of being forcefully invaded and probably murdered afterwards, so he saves his old enemy's life. This constitutes a brief life-affirming flash in a movie that otherwise demonstrates no concern for human relations.

Of course *Pulp Fiction*'s brand of pop cultural parody and self-referential ridicule was not the only trend that pervaded the decade. There were other films that dealt with the fragmentation and escalating violence of daily life in American society, while lamenting death and destruction without using humor as a mitigating element. In a study on "Black Violence as Cinema," Ed Guerrero shows how the bloodshed of blaxploitation films from the 1970s has percolated into what he calls the "hood-homeboy" films of the nineties. But the difference between the two genres exposes a crumbling community on the verge of self-destruction. Whereas antiheroes in movies like *Superfly* symbolize black determination to rise from the underworld and triumph over white oppression, recent examinations of inner-city life emphasize the "grim, violent struggle for individual survival left in the wake of the faded collective dreams of the 1960s" (213-216). Guerrero concludes rather cynically, "At best, then, 1990s cinematic hood-homeboy violence is socially diagnostic in an attempt to raise consciousness by depicting the symptoms of a failed social and racial system. These depictions amount to endless variations on scenes of black and other nonwhite people trapped in ghettos and killing each other" (216). *Menace II Society* is his most useful example because it resembles the mainstream violence of

popular movies like *Natural Born Killers* and their over-the-top style, configured to do well at the box office. Guerrero is correct in citing the pessimistic outlook of the films in relation to their blaxploitation ancestors, yet I believe he is too dismissive. Products of nineties culture, the race-oriented films discussed below reflect life in the ghetto and comment on violence for a highly instructive purpose: to encourage a halt to the bloodshed. These hood-homeboy movies contain violence as a didactic element, dramatizing the fact that it destroys the already-small hopes of escaping ghetto life. It appears, therefore, that the nature of a continually fracturing nation in which the rich (mostly whites) get richer and the poor (mostly nonwhites) stew in the ghettos of the big cities, violence cannot be presented as a throwaway element designed only to thrill audiences. The directors of films like *Menace II Society*, *Boyz 'N the Hood*, *South Central*, and *American History X* wanted to take violence seriously, because in the worlds they depict the fragmentation along poverty (and racial) lines is no laughing matter.

For instance, no event demonstrated the sad state of race relations more sharply than the coverage of the Rodney King acquittals and later the verdict in the O.J. Simpson murder trials. In an outrage, reacting to the fact that white cops were set free for beating a black man fifty-six times in eight seconds, hitting him very hard with billy clubs, rioters suddenly burst onto the corner of Normandie and Florence in Los Angeles and unleashed a flurry of violence that lasted for six days (Johnson 167-68). While these riots overwhelmingly suggested an ongoing social undercurrent that finally surfaced because the rage could no longer be contained, O.J. Simpson's acquittal yielded statistical information, which showed that whites and African Americans were far from unified on issues of race, ethics, and legality. A Time/CNN poll showed that sixty percent of all whites believed that O. J. Simpson would receive a fair and impartial trial, whereas only thirty-one percent of African Americans believed the same thing. Six months after the trial

had begun, a poll by Lou Harris and Associates indicated that sixty-one percent of the white population thought the ex-football player was guilty, and sixty-eight percent of African Americans believed in fact that he did not kill his ex-wife. When the jurors announced the verdict, people in churches, schools barrooms, and university campuses all around the U.S. reported the same thing: that African Americans stood up and cheered, while white people sat staring at television screens in disbelief (136-140). The fact that an entire nation could be divided over a specific legal issue, based on meticulously propounded evidence that would otherwise appear to be cut and dried, raises serious questions on just how many problems of social fragmentation have not been addressed. People organized themselves around race, as if the issue of murder was a debatable, ambiguous topic, like abortion or the legal definition of pornography and its associations with free speech.

The fact that such poor race relations implicated a governmental system not yet prepared to assist in the reparations for a better life in African-American ghettos was undeniable. Products of rage, neglect, and Reagan-Bush changes in affirmative action and welfare, the inner-city neighborhoods of the Los Angeles area were lapsing into self-defeating cycles of low-value properties, drugs, violence, and anger. In neighborhoods where young African Americans walked among crack dealers, criminals with guns, bullies who thrive on intimidation, and angry, frustrated parents, the situation was nothing other than grim. In the early 1990s, thirty percent of all African Americans were unemployed. For those who were employed, their median income was 59.4 percent of the average income for whites. Blacks represented four percent of all college professors, three percent of physicians and two percent of lawyers. Perhaps most shocking, however, was the fact that twenty-three percent of all African-American men had been

incarcerated, and the homicide rate for all black males aged fifteen to forty-four was ten times the rate for whites (Guerrero 216; Brigham 101).

This state of affairs inspired films in the 1990s that conveyed a complete sense of despair, effacing the small glimmer of hope the ghetto has to offer. In a *Sight and Sound* review, Andrew O’Hehir asserts, “At its best *American History X* reaches for a richer, more ambiguous notion of evil as an insidious force that’s almost impossible to keep at bay” (37). But for a film that addressed the race problems of a city in the grips of violence and despair, the comment may as well apply to all related films of the decade, because they all deal with encroaching and generalized bloodshed, which snatches away hopes for redemption. *Menace II Society* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 1993) bears the grimmest of all messages in the hood-homeboy cycle. Cain (Tyryn Turner), who has been raised to compete in a capitalistic milieu of selling drugs and having the nicest car, cannot seem to break free from the shackles of inner-city life and the always present threat of violent death. Although the film (in its most glaring weakness) depicts him as a common thug or “knucklehead” during most of its duration, he decides finally to move with his girlfriend to Atlanta for a better life. But the angered cousin of an estranged and impregnated ex-girlfriend, seeking revenge, blasts him full of holes with an automatic weapon during a drive-by. The last moments of the film are rendered first as a montage of the shooting incident and second as a study of Cain’s suffering intercut with scenes of his life passing him by. Compelling in their impact, these last few moments show Cain coughing up blood and regretting his past in a voiceover. His friends surround him in a din of chaos as they scramble to make sense of the situation, but the film ends there, strongly implying that the cycle of killing and revenge is the worst thing that can happen to a young man in the ghetto, but it is certainly not the

most rare. A replay of the vengeful man's first shot, as the last image in the film, constitutes a compelling message for audiences to beware and avoid the temptation toward violence.

Boyz 'N the Hood (John Singleton, 1990) begins by displaying two statistical quotations in white lettering on a black background: "One out of every twenty-one black American males will be murdered in their lifetime" and "Most will die at the hands of another black male." The panicked and grieving voices in the background suggest that horror and chaos rule the day, and viewers are allowed to hear police cars arrive at the scene of another murder as bystanders lament over yet another death. The film's first shot, following the quotation, is a long take of a stop sign; the camera zooms slowly into it emphasizing the fact that the answer lies in the hands of black men and their decisions to end it all.

But the possibility of successfully avoiding conflict seems to dissipate at every turn. Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.) strolls around the corner, not far from his house, to view a dead body lying in the grass. Apparently the people of his neighborhood are so disillusioned and desensitized to violence that no one even sees fit to call the police, and their indifference to human life reflects a new level of malaise and apathy. Not long afterwards, bullies pick on Tre and his friends until a young man gets beaten up.

The central and most moving scene illustrating the point that violence is an ever-encroaching force is the death of Ricky (Morris Chestnut). Tre's life-long friend has a promising future as a college football player. His mother is proud; his girlfriend is happy for him, and all of his friends wish him well. But one day, as the two boys walk home together, a neighborhood thug, who has been involved in a minor standoff with Ricky's older brother, follows the boys in his car and shoots the innocent in the back as he runs for cover. The next series of shots constitute a drawn-out montage, demonstrating the consequences of killing. Covered in blood,

lying lifeless on the family sofa, Ricky does not answer as his mother wails in agony and his girlfriend repeats his name over and over. The blood continues flowing onto the sofa, as the noise and confusion of this young man's death consume the screen and strongly imply that his family's future hopes have dissipated. The mother, in a fit of anger and sadness, beats her son, Doughboy, believing he has had something to do with it. Although he protests his innocence, his mother will hear none of it. But his love for his brother emerges as hatred and anger too. Continuing the mimetic crisis, Doughboy (Ice Cube) enacts revenge in his brother's name, and is later slain himself off screen. *Boyz 'N the Hood*'s message is simple and clear: violence perpetuates violence. This point is further underscored when we find that Tre, the only one who consciously refuses the temptation of revenge, goes to college and begins a new life.

South Central (Steve Anderson, 1992) emphasizes the same theme with a more preventive timbre. The film hones in very closely on Bobby's (Glenn Plummer) efforts to save his son (Christian Coleman) from the streets. As Bobby spends time in jail for killing a local drug lord, his son grows up in poverty with a derelict mother and learns how to survive by associating himself with his father's former gang, the Deuce. He is shot trying to steal car radios for the gang's leader. Surprisingly powerful, the scene depicting this young man's back getting blown open as he falls over the side of a fence demonstrates the sickness of a society in crisis. The film chronicles the youngster's recovery in a hospital, showing his pain and the heavy scarring of his injury. The blood, sticking to the bandage as the nurse removes it, attests to the seriousness of the boy's wrongheaded decision to engage in gang life. Yet after the young man recovers, he continues to live a gang-intensive life and venerate the Deuce's leader.

In the culminating action, the film insists upon Bobby's clear and only goal: to save his son from a life on the streets, and to complete that task by avoiding violent activity. In a hideout,

during a showdown with the Deuce leader, Bobby asserts clearly and emphatically, “I’m your daddy, Jimmie. I love you. I want you back with me,” as he stands sternly in front of his former associates. The ensuing moments bring an intense standoff involving Jimmie’s past assailant and his temptation to avenge his injuries. Bobby intervenes by disarming a guard and pleading with his son not to do it. He tells him that stealing from a person and punching an individual are mistakes that one can atone for, but murder eliminates any possibility for repairing damage done to the victim or his family. In a brave, practical application of nonviolence, heeding the teachings of black intellectuals whose work he absorbed in jail, Bobby places his gun down, stands in front of his son’s intended victim and tells the gang leader very simply that he wants his boy back. Soon Bobby, his son, and the captive man all walk freely from the hideout. Like the long take of the stop sign in *Boyz ‘N the Hood*, clearly the film stands as an admonition to end the cycle of black-on-black bloodshed by simply stopping the killing. *South Central* acknowledges the problems of the streets and potential dangers they represent, while implying the sheer stupidity of robbing, killing, and selling drugs.

American History X (Tony Kaye, 1998) addresses similar themes by using emphatic, well-edited images of bloodshed and strongly-rendered audio technology to condemn racial violence and the mimetic rivalry of revenge in the streets. Absorbing the flashy style of nineties “cool,” using fast editing, black and white flashbacks, and a pessimistic story to highlight the call to stop the bloodshed, this film succeeds in conveying compassion in suffering. One could argue, of course, that this film relegates problems of the ghetto to secondary status, because it chronicles two white characters’ path to thwarted redemption. But, in truth, it implicates white rage and misunderstanding as at least one cornerstone of a system that does not work for minorities. On another level, the young men in the film are no different from their gangland

counterparts in the hood-homeboy movies discussed above. *American History X* simply completes the cycle of race-oriented films in the 1990s, opening its range of critique to those outside the spectrum of black-on-black violence. As Girard implies time and again, mimetic rivalry becomes a challenge to everyone in the community, and the scapegoat of this film will issue the call for whites and African Americans alike when he dies so dramatically in the never-ending entrapment of hate.

This picture centers on ex-gang-banger, Derek Vinyard (Edward Norton), who has recently spent time in jail learning how to disavow his racist tendencies and denounce the skinhead gang he belongs to. He comes home to a depressing family life, absent the father, who has been murdered by an African-American drug dealer. His mother is in poor health; his sisters appear generally disheveled, and his younger brother, Danny, has espoused the single-minded views of the local white-supremacist organization. Despite his new outlook, the film makes it very clear that Derek's family situation results from his recently discarded rage. A flashback to the past reveals Derek trying unsuccessfully to control his mother and siblings by expelling a Jewish man from the premises for endorsing liberal views. His behavior develops violently and aggressively as the situation progresses and the houseguest leaves. The last shot in the scene shows mother and son looking at each other, acknowledging their inability to communicate anymore.

While his brother undergoes change in jail, Danny (Edward Furlong), in the meantime, has been reprimanded at school for writing a paper heralding *Mein Kampf* as a book about a struggle for civil rights. His principal forces him to analyze his actions by writing a new paper in which he closely examines his brother's tainted past. In a series of voiceovers that reflect upon Derek's life, Danny retells recent events that have led up to the present moment. Accompanying

the voiceovers are illustrative scenes, filmed in black and white to dramatize their positioning in the past, underscoring the feeling that the present, filmed in color, signifies brighter days ahead. Those black and white scenes also imply that the older days are emblematic of black and white thinking, both in terms of race separation and simplicity of ideas.

There is a black and white scene, for example, in which Derek recruits several angry white youths into his gang by appealing to their sense of disenfranchisement and governmental abandonment. He channels his own rage for the murder of his father into a stream of racist propaganda and rhetoric that generates excitement among his naïve followers. His speech castigates immigrants who come to the United States seeking refuge and better employment. He quotes several figures in the billions of dollars saying that the federal government, as well as the State of California, are wasting resources on people who are not citizens. Although some of his concerns sound legitimate, assuming the figures he cites are correct, neither he nor his adherents seem to recognize that their complaints would be targeted more appropriately toward legalities of border control, immigration, and employment, not individuals of any race, group or creed. In the following moments we see a group of angry young men, ostensibly supporting a righteous cause, pulling stockings over their heads so they will be better able to ransack a store. They dash into the business and beat innocent people, humiliating and berating them. They knock over bottles, jars, cans, cash registers, and proceed to tease a Latina woman about her racial background by pouring milk onto her face and telling her she has a better chance to “move up in the world” because of the white coloring. The camera captures intense fear and confusion on the victims’ faces, humanizing them in their innocence and demonizing their molesters.

More appalling, though, are the two scenes showing Derek discovering two African Americans who are trying to break into his truck in the middle of the night. He kills one and

wounds the other as they prowl around his front yard. A medium shot from the first victim's left side allows the sharp popping sounds of the gun to have full and shocking effects. As each of Derek's victims goes down, the camera cuts to closeups of them falling in slow motion. The cinematographer (also the director) allows nothing to escape the lens in catching the victims' agony on their faces; this is especially true for the wounded second victim, whose fall has been captured from two angles. Splicing together several shots from various angles in slow motion dramatizes the men's pain. In addition, the background music of choirboys singing in Greek lends a solemn tone to the men's demises and prevents viewers from siding too easily with Derek. Also, the cut to a closeup insures that the audience perceives the shot from the victims' point of view. This kind of camerawork constitutes a truly effective contemplation of the consequences inherent in violence without showing overt bloodshed. Although not as gruesome as the scenes in other bloody movies, effectiveness here is carried solely by the impact elaborated by the camera. Such angling and splicing, I believe, create a more thought-provoking and serious effect than many of the films in this chapter. Despite his reasons, Derek has killed, and his boyish anger and racist naïveté has been transformed into a dark and brooding contamination of evil.

Later, when Danny's voiceover returns us to the same scene, we discover that Derek forces the robber who is still alive to put his mouth on the curb in front of his house. His anger is apparent and irremovable from his family-oriented troubles: "My father gave me that truck, you motherfucker. . . . You come here, you shoot at my family? I'm gonna teach you a real lesson now. . . . Put your fucking mouth on the curb!" We see an extreme closeup of the man's mouth open and his teeth touching the cement, making a chilling, chalky sound as they scrape against the curb. The sound creates the effect of vividly letting viewers know what these terrifying

moments must feel and sound like. The camera brings the audience down close to the man, on the ground with him, to share in his isolation and the excruciating feelings of what he must know are his last moments on the planet. The next moment, showing Derek stomping on the back of the man's head, splitting it on the curb, lingers only long enough for viewers to be assured that Derek possesses enough detachment to follow through with the act. But the gut-wrenching *crack* of the man's head, crunching on the ground, more than makes up for the quickly edited moment. Anyone watching the scene would wince from the graphic and sharply engineered audio-visual montage, indicating, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the loud *crack* is the sound of Derek's going too far; it is pure racial hatred, demonstrated in its most visceral form.

Derek holds his arms outstretched when the police arrest him. The visual effect is compelling. A medium shot reveals him as a very muscular skinhead, standing straight and proud, peering through the camera. In an obvious Christ-like pose, perhaps trying to portray himself as a martyr for his race, Derek actually represents his complete opposite, a perverse mockery of Christian values. The large swastika on the left side of his chest desecrates the reference to Christian iconography and tends to draw the viewers' attention to the utter profanity of the beliefs it symbolizes. To underscore this paradox, most of the shot is in slow motion with choirboys chanting the *Kyrie eleison* in the background. The Greek-language chant is an ancient, Roman Catholic penitential rite, repeated nine times to invoke God and ask for his mercy upon a sinful people.² The *Kyrie eleison* and Derek's sacrilegious stance undercut one another, exposing his sickening blindness. This invocation for mercy, if one chooses to see it as a plea proffered by the film itself, testifies to the extent of Derek's evil. Functioning opposite the surfing music in *Pulp Fiction*, the dark religious inflections help to condemn Derek's hatred by providing higher moral groundwork and a sense of objectivity for the audience. His redemption

will require, the scene seems to imply, more than just his will alone. This shot is intercut with a closeup of Derek affirming his insidious rage by smirking sadistically. As a complete reversal of spirituality, Derek simply does not care. Another shot of him smiling from a lower angle pans slowly upward to eye-level as if to flaunt his sinister look and emphasize his lapse into pure evil for a few more seconds.

The remainder of the film charts the course of Danny's lesson through his brother's narrative about his disavowal of racist attitudes in prison. Having arrived home the day before Danny's paper is due, Derek has a chance to recount the story of his rape by a fellow white supremacist and his change of heart through befriending a black man in prison. The following day, as Danny goes to school with his brother to turn in the paper, the film exudes a new beginning. Both brothers appear happy; the sun shines brightly outside; and Danny's relationship with his teacher is already improved when they meet before class in a coffee shop. The film radiates in sparkling color from this moment forth, and both brothers seem to be on the road to full redemption. The problem thwarting their redemption, however, is that they are in the city of Los Angeles, the site of so much urban decay, disenfranchisement, and the latest center of fragmentation. The seeds of "disconnect" have been planted long ago by rival groups of all colors, and the threat of perpetual destruction extends beyond the boys' control. As in the hood-homeboy movies, this film presents the forces of evil as an organic entity that surrounds and inundates, while taking into account that Derek's change of heart is simply too late.

After separating from his brother and going to school, Danny uses the boys' bathroom. He is surprised to see the young, African-American boy, whom he had an altercation with the day before. The boy has come for revenge and means to shoot his white enemy through the chest. When the bullet hits, it makes a graphic slapping sound of Danny's flesh being forcefully

pounded open. Like the richly presented noise of the “curbing” incident, the gory nature of the slapping sound leaves one wincing from the haunting reality of tissue being obliterated. More gruesome than most scenes discussed in the chapter, the blood splattered against the white walls of the bathroom evokes startling contrast in a bright and teeming reminder that the chain of violence has not come to an end. Danny is hurled with overwhelming force against the urinal, and again this shot plays in slow motion to emphasize his suffering.

Meant for maximum shock value, the effect of Danny’s fall is extremely disheartening. Danny is very young and intent upon building a new life devoid of anger, negativity, and hatred. But the bright, red splatters on the wall, literally his heart’s blood come through his back, are symbolic of a heart ripped from him and its warmth ripped from the world. Underscoring its own emphasis on the ongoing tragedy of ghetto life and racial tension, this scene stands in stark contrast to the hushed tones of the black and white ones, rendered distant by their placement in the past. Danny’s death is a reminder that the here and now is just as deadly.

Derek’s bitter realization that this could be the result of his own past is easily one of the most unpretentious and moving scenes of recent film. The slow contemplation, focusing on Danny’s death, is a return to violence’s bitter consequences illustrated so elegantly in *The Godfather*. A long shot of the bathroom with Danny lying still and alone and his head in a urinal underscores the seeming futility of the brothers’ efforts to enact positive change in their lives. The deep whites of the bathroom are quiet and sterile, except, of course, for the bespattered wall. “Oh, Jesus, God, what did I do?” says Derek as he cries, holding his lifeless brother’s head in his arms as the two lie on the floor together. The elder holding the younger against the backdrop of the bloody urinals produces a portrait of utter familial failure. The father dead, the mother sick, and now the youngest son with a hole in his chest insinuate the end of productivity or normalcy

for the Vinyards. Unlike *True Romance*, *Pulp Fiction* or *Natural Born Killers*, this scene is far from 1990s “cool”; there is nothing fun or humorous about the violence that destroys youth and hope. As if to make this point further, an extreme closeup forces viewers to look closely at Danny’s lifeless blood-speckled face one last time for five full seconds, then at Derek holding his own cheek against the young man’s head for another ten seconds. Ironically, a voiceover of Danny reading the conclusion to his paper plays through these shots as the slain boy declares, “Hate is baggage. Life’s too short to be pissed off all the time. It’s just not worth it.” A potential life of growth and enlightenment through understanding is reduced to nothingness by the simple pulling of a young gangster’s trigger.

A wrongly immolated scapegoat, Danny embodies the promise of redemption and the energy of youth destroyed by forces of evil that have grown up around our nation’s cities. Citing the constant cycle of revenge and reprisal, the films I have examined clearly illustrate their visions of a nation in the midst of reciprocal violence, which cannot be purified by its more sacramentally infused unanimous version. As Girard explains it, “the *sacrificial crisis*, that is, the disappearance of the sacrificial rites, coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community” (*Violence* 49). The last decade of the twentieth century harbors a myriad of films that generally confirm this notion and the related idea of thwarted redemption. The main characters lose their sense of joy, identity or redemption by allowing it to be inundated by the confusion and fragmentation around them. In *The Godfather, Part III* (Francis Coppola, 1990) for example, Michael Corleone confesses to the cardinal and finally achieves forgiveness for killing his brother so many years ago. But later, Michael’s resolution to continue his life and

atone for his sins becomes completely negated by the bloody hole in his daughter's chest. Mary Corleone's wound may as well be her father's, implied by his silent lamentation, as it attests to an incomprehensible inner pain far greater than any physical suffering. Completing *The Godfather* saga, Mary Corleone's death is clearly the death of the family and the burden of a man who has failed in all of his familial and spiritual endeavors. This is true also for Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) in *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), the story of a man who has become disillusioned with his life as an ad writer in the suburbs. As a solution, he quits his job and spends much of his time trying to experience the real beauty of life by simply ignoring the trappings of superficiality. At the film's end, in a moment of complete joy, Lester studies his family portrait and invests great meaning in its representing his family at a better time long ago. His neighbor, suspicious that he is a homosexual child molester, shoots him in the back of the head. The blood gleams bright red as it splatters onto the sterile white walls of his kitchen, as if to remind us of Danny's demise in the bathroom.

Unlike some films of the seventies, these nineties films do not require objective camerawork to complete their surrogate-victim mechanisms. That their protagonists die just before they can be redeemed is enough. The conditions in which they die contextualize the pain of death. In each concluding scene, we see a man about to turn his life around, killed and left in a bloody mess on the ground, on a sofa, or with his head in a urinal. These characters lose their lives in the din of sacrificial crisis and cannot enjoy the exaltation due a surrogate victim within the fictional worlds of the movies. But the admonishing tones of these films are designed to leave lasting impressions on the audience. The gruesome, slow deaths of these characters at once affirm that the truth about the ghetto is that the killing goes on, while Danny, Ricky, and even Cain draw audience sympathies, implying that it should not. They die to be remembered,

and in that dying they issue a desperate call for communal reparations. *American History X* elevates postmodern “cool” to the level of edification. Enacting a final punctuation of the hood-homeboy movies and absorbing all the bells and whistles of youth appeals and pop cultural signification, it both joins and halts the mimetic crisis begun by earlier films of *Pulp Fiction*’s ilk and injects meaning forcefully into a decade of films that sometimes suffers from a lack of thought-provoking bloodshed.

Notes

¹Haynes Johnson discusses this point in several sections of *The Best of Times*, speculating that Americans now live in a culture of immediacy and shallowness.

²I have to thank John R. May for explaining the significance of the *Kyrie eleison* to me.

Conclusion

Dying for the American Dream

The key to understanding the cynicism of many violent films is to examine the individual's plight as he endures relations with the American Dream and the capitalist society it entails. American attitudes about the potential of individuals' efforts in achieving success evidenced a general shift from optimism to pessimism, which characterizes the violent films examined in this paper. Briefly defined, the American Dream is rooted in the Protestant work ethic, a belief system which stipulates that an individual will prosper from hard work and good will toward others. The Dream ostensibly inscribes into our culture the collective hope that a capitalist system and a free market, minimally limited by governmental regulations, will provide a virtually level playing field on which to compete and prosper. Here, in this wide expanse that lured people west from Europe, then west to Oregon, California and even Alaska, an individual can experience the joy and the benefits of having a family, owning a home, and enjoying leisure time.

Perhaps the best-known and triumphant filmic examples of people living the Dream on virtue and hard work alone are the idealistic films of Frank Capra. His movies attest to the intensity with which people wanted the Dream to come true. His characters often utilize honest living and hard work to overcome humble beginnings and establish themselves in the social milieu as honorable individuals. Capra's most renowned work is *It's a Wonderful Life* in which George Bailey (James Stewart) denounces and defeats urban decay and corruption. His good nature runs parallel to his ability to outdo Mr. Potter, and the entire town is drawn to him for that reason. In *Meet John Doe* an out-of-work nobody becomes a Somebody by stressing that people should simply learn to reach out to each other and ignore phony ideologies such as politics. And

in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, James Stewart shows all the Mr. Smiths of the world that anyone can make a difference.

But we need only look as far back as the Industrial Revolution to detect a mechanized undercurrent to the Dream. Developments in technology allowed those who were in immediate need of money to obtain employment at factories or with the railroads. In short, the hope of leaving Europe behind and engaging in a different lifestyle, characterized by pure will to succeed, was coming true. Under the surface, however, the relentless movement of drive and success revealed erosion in personal values and people's compassion for their neighbors. Rapid development inspired fierce competition and a new commitment to mass production; conditions at the factories became insufferable and were characterized by filthy environments and long hours as well as intense labor for children; companies or wealthy individuals would cheaply purchase underdeveloped land from disillusioned landowners and use their new gains to make more money. The prospect of simply "keeping up" or "keeping one's head above water" was quickly becoming the *modus operandi* for thousands of people who had dared to dream of a better life (West).

In his later life Mark Twain lamented the loss of youthful idealism and playful spirit that the West had once embodied. He found the pressure placed on younger generations to "grow up" and conform to be overwhelming (Chernaik 98-99). In sum, it seemed as though the ideal of the generally good person slowly eroded, concurrent with the country's expansion westward. Illustrating this trend are the hundreds of American Westerns that chart the course of the boyish, rogue hero, whose carefree lifestyle is often compromised by the encroachment of technology or civilization. As Robert B. Ray argues in *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*, the wild hero must come to terms with developing society through a dubious friendship with a lawful

hero so that their common and higher goal—the cause of the good—supercedes all other tensions and brings forth a resolution. Yet the sad fact is that the rogue hero must ride off into the sunset because he cannot relinquish his untamed lifestyle. Movies like *Shane* and *Stagecoach* continually made use of this formula throughout the golden age of Westerns.¹ But with passage of time and the growing discontent of the 1960s, the formula itself underwent some changes. Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, for example, deleted the lawful hero and created a subjective point of view that took the viewer along on the last stand of an entire group of rogue heroes (who were now certifiable criminals) as the frontier closed in on them.

No doubt, this trend of pessimism continued and intensified throughout the seventies and into present time. Most bloody scenes studied in this work are basic symbolic renderings of the mimetic crisis inherent in capitalist competition—the desire for happiness, which can be bought or stifled by either money or social standing. Of course, several of our most famous and cherished films exalt the American Dream and all it represents. But the films in this dissertation seem bent on exposing the underbelly of the Dream and the capitalistic drive it entails. They seek to herald the disenfranchised, the disillusioned, and the poor by injecting cynicism into our movie mythos with the onslaught of violence. In addition, *The Godfather*, *Taxi Driver* and *American History X* contain horrible atrocities that run parallel with symbolic defacements of religious imagery. Those scenes I examined, such as Derek Vinyard's Christ-like pose or Michael Corleone's reversed renunciation of Satan, assist in denying and destroying any communal elements that the sacrificial act may ostensibly contain. Such ugly displays of anger and revenge cannot reverse the progress of reciprocal violence that seems inherent to the American spirit of competition.

Fatal Attraction is somewhat different. The eighties blockbuster contains no attempt to incorporate any overturning of religious signification. In fact, the only religious symbolism that the film proffers is a straightforward reference to hell in the neighborhood where Alex lives. Her apartment is a cold, sterile place in the meat district, where oil drums emit flames, underscoring the marginal quality of her locale. When the subjective camera sides with Dan and implores the audience to do the same, Alex's placement in hell only confirms that she is the wrong one to cheer for. These and other effects of the movie perpetuate an image of the American Dream as a kind of capitalist machine, one that simply annihilates any dissenters in its path. It is disturbing to discover that Dan represents the shocking force with which the Other must be eliminated. And although *The Godfather*, *Taxi Driver*, and *American History X* are films infused with a bit more ambiguity than *Fatal Attraction*, a legitimate question may ultimately be, what is the difference? They all show violence to be a catalyst for the Dream. Whether an individual dwells in the decaying underbelly of a city caught up in the crisis, or a person enjoys the boon of riches and the happiness of life in the suburbs, an exponent of both their worlds is the undercurrent of violence; someone must be brutally put down in order for the lucky ones to achieve the Dream.

The problem arises when we quickly examine the entire thirty-year period since the dropping of the Code. It reveals that some of the silliest, most exploitative, and un insightful uses of cinematic gore have issued from the projector to accomplish little more than action-laden fun. Particularly interesting about this phenomenon, when we examine film as a refraction of real-life situations, is that the mimetic crisis of the industry itself parallels the violence projected on screen. Becoming more and more expensive to produce and resulting from filmmakers' increasing need (desire) to compete for the market, films have unnecessarily become so numbingly violent that they reflect and imitate each other in an endless display of signifiers,

which no longer have social commentary as their objective. Instead, the frequency and superficiality of their bloodlust conveys the effect of mimetic saturation.

The films I selected for analyses, at the end of each chapter, are ones that I believe most clearly and emphatically resist this tendency. What is so extraordinarily unique about these films is that rather than wholeheartedly joining the melee, they enter the fray already critiquing it. They depict bloodshed because their directors believe it to be artistically necessary, while seeking to issue a statement against it. As mirrors of our society, however exaggerated, what these movies suggest, as we observe them across the decades, is that the sacrificial crisis inspired by capitalist competition continues taking prisoners, and only a privileged few are allowed to survive. Along with the obvious element of entertainment and fantasy indulgence, the purpose of films projecting such ideas is to keep audience consciousness in check. No one wants to believe that the American Dream has died altogether, but the inevitability that it is elusive for many is something that needs retelling from time to time.

Because they are so easily recalled as violent films *and* as artistic landmarks of the industry, the movies of this study are themselves scapegoats. Among all the aspects of René Girard's work, the pervading hope is to discover a purpose in our mythos that strives to repair human community in the restorative qualities of unanimous violence. As famous pictures that have endured through time often attracting controversy, these films reach that goal by adding a moral imperative to the bloodshed they are deconstructing in the audience ambivalence they provoke. They represent valiant attempts at purifying violence, while issuing a call for unity.

Note

¹Cited in previous chapters, Ray's *A Certain Tendency* is essential to understanding basic patterns of American film as Western myth. The point that I have made here constitutes a summary of the book's first half.

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Vita

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