

ART, VIOLENCE + SOCIETY: A FEW NOTES

STONE AND FUNCTION: ART AND RITUAL:

violence

Function: noun

1 a : exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse (as in warfare effecting illegal entry into a house) b : an instance of violent treatment or procedure

[...]

3 a : intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force <the violence of the storm>

b : vehement feeling or expression

ritual

Function: noun

1 : the established form for a ceremony; specifically : the order of words prescribed for a religious ceremony

2 a : ritual observance; specifically : a system of rites b : a ceremonial act or action c : an act or series of acts regularly repeated in a set precise manner

. Ingmar Bergman is quoted as having said that film is a perfectly legitimate way of ritualizing violence in society.

. Mind you - ritualize, not glorify.

. [Bergman is also quoted as having said: "When we experience a film, we consciously prime ourselves for illusion. Putting aside will and intellect, we make way for it in our imagination. The sequence of pictures plays directly on our feelings."]

. The ritualistic aspect (among other things) has to do with creating a substitute, a mock-up, a representation of a particular experience.

. This representation, re-creation provides the experience of the real thing without the necessity to face the consequences. More importantly - it also allows one to deal with the meaning of the real thing, the thing that is being represented.

. For example, riding the roller-coaster is a mock-up of a particular experience – falling down. The fear is real, but the danger is not, as we know the contraption is supposed to be safe.

. Film is often like a roller-coaster for the mind, the gut and the heart: experience without the danger, experience without the consequences. (“...we consciously prime ourselves for illusion.”)

. Even though the viewer knows perfectly well that the film/painting/story/play is a lie (“When we experience a film, we consciously prime ourselves for illusion.”), she still desires to respond as if it were real. This is simply because the lie is - at the same time - a truth.

. As the hero fires his gun, he really does fire a gun, even if it is one loaded with fakes.

. As an actor at the receiving end of this shot falls down, playacting, we know that he is pretending he has been hit. Yet, we also know that he really fell down, cried in anguish, writhed in the dust.

. Playacting or not, all of these actions really did take place. And they suggest what the filmmakers wanted to suggest and what the audience has agreed to assume - that the actor is dead.

. The meaning has been put together.

. That is part of the contract (“...we consciously prime ourselves for illusion.”) - the viewer knows full well that the actor is not dead; yet the viewer accepts that these more-or-less realistic symbols and gestures say “I am dying/dead.”

. More importantly, the viewer’s heart and gut respond to these as if they were real.

. Ultimately, as the piece wraps up, the viewer has accepted the emotional, narrative or philosophical point; the meaning that the artist wanted to communicate has traveled via the work of art.

. One aspect of contemporary rituals is not that different from ancient rituals. Experiencing it without really doing it.

. How much do we fill in the blanks? Is the actor’s death realistic without our participation and without our acceptance of the rules of the game? Will an unsuspecting viewer who doesn’t know that this is a piece of fiction think the actor has really died?

. Is this any different from the experience in the syncretic art?

. Is it different from the experience during a ritual around the bonfire thousands of years ago?

. Is it different from what the audience of the oral storytellers experience? The audience of Homer, bhopas (bards and shamans, oral storytellers in Rajasthan) or guslars (musician/storytellers of the Balkans)?

. Society’s survival depends on its ability to pass on information.

- . In other words - to teach.
- . What would happen if every generation had to discover anew the fire? Or the wheel? Or electricity?

- . Society facilitates the transfer of information from the teacher (the one with the experience or knowledge) to the pupil (the one without the experience or knowledge).

- . The cornerstone of this activity is the potential for the pupil to absorb information without having to personally experience it.

- . The narratives are one way to teach.
- . The Bible teaches its students how to behave.
- . Even the less overt instruction manuals do so by providing templates of behavior (if Zeus can cheat on his wife Hera, why shouldn't I?)

- . The narratives were only oral at first.

- . Speech, written language, mental concepts.

- . Art is non-verbal conscious communication. ("Putting aside will and intellect, we make way for [art] in our imagination.")

- . Rituals - and, by extension, art: experiencing (and exploring) it yourself without the consequences. Participating and experiencing the emotional impact. Learning - or at least feeling.

- . Do the technological developments make the experience more convincing? Is a bhopa listener in Rajasthan less convinced of the "realness" of the story she's experiencing than a kid at an IMAX theater in New York with its gigantic screen and sophisticated surround sound? (A standard IMAX screen is 22m wide and 16 m high (72.6 x 52.8 ft), but can be larger.)
- . Were the 3-D films too realistic, or were they irrelevant?

- . Is the intensity of the experience relative to the personal investment, or do the technical attributes add to the experience? Is it relative?

- . I remember reports of adults in cultures unexposed to film who were confused when they had their first experience with film. They were confused by many conventions of the form that we take for granted: editing - changes in shot size, time compression, parallel action...

- . the movie theater obituary had been composed several times - with each new technological

discovery affecting film exhibition - and always prematurely. The film industry itself has certainly contributed to this with its own paranoia. (Anyone who uttered the word "television" on a Hollywood movie set in the 40s was fired on the spot; Universal sued Sony over the invention of the Betamax video recorder. Today film studios make more money off TV or video than at the cinema box office).

. In spite of the convenience of TV, pay-per-view, video, ti-vo, people still go to the movie theaters by the millions. Is it the collective experience?

. Film is experienced alone - we usually don't talk much while watching a film, we don't chant, don't boo, nor hiss (unless in Cannes). Still, we usually prefer company while engaging in this solitary experience. Even when we rent a film, we often invite friends or significant others to see it with us.

. Does the collective aspect of this solitary experience resemble the experience of participating in a ritual?

. In this respect, how much does a movie theater resemble a temple?

. The first time I saw John Carpenter's Halloween, I was blown away by the effect the film had on its audience. It was profound and it was visceral. The viewers were so terrified that it was almost palpable. I saw the 6 o'clock show, and then decided to stay for the 8 o'clock as well. The new audience reacted in much the same way, screaming, shrieking, shouting at the screen and covering their eyes - at the same places.

. Halloween kick-started the renaissance of a venerable old genre (going back via Hitchcock, Frankenstein and Dracula to The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and way beyond). There were half a dozen sequels to Halloween alone, as well as a series of other scary sequel-spinning films. Over the following couple of decades these scary films evolved into films of gore. Horror no more, gore now.

. Yet, there was not a drop of blood nor gore in the first Halloween. Only masterful manipulation of the cinematic elements and the Freudian subtext to cause a pure visceral reaction in the viewers.

. All of this on top of a rudimentary narrative. A strategy that only enhanced the mastery and the subtext.

. Marshall McLuhan has reportedly said that the characters at the movies are like gods - big and powerful, while the characters on TV are like friends - accessible.

DIALOGUE: OF DONKEYS AND ZOOLOGISTS

. The emotional, visceral and intellectual responses to art are only personal. They are ultimately in the eye of the beholder.

. It seems absurd to discuss the experience of experiencing art. It is like discussing the experience of experiencing love, or fear.

. In spite of how absurd it seems, we do discuss those, as we are social animals. It may even help us deal with the experiences themselves.

. Art provokes what's inside the beholder.

. The force of the emotions stirred is an indication of the powerful effect the work has on the beholder. The root is often in the taboo and is triggered by the tone of the work of art.

. If the beholder lies to himself/herself, then a reminder of the lie in the form of art feels like a provocation.

. Art functions on a personal level. It is a proto-emotional, sur-philosophical one-on-one meta-communication.

. The arts deal with the personal needs - and by extension with the social needs - of the society as reflected in the individual (as no man is an island). The plane of communication of the arts is personal: emotional, by extension philosophical, sometimes conceptual.

. The social reaction to art has everything to do with society, and nothing to do with the art: Guernica, The Wild Bunch, Lolita, Damian Hirst...

. A public debate of the personal experience is bastardization of the experience; yet the impulse to discuss and judge is understandable as homo sapiens is zoon politicon.

. The public re-telling of the beholder's personal experience with art is not unlike pornography.

. This public re-telling may be relevant to the teller or even to some listeners, but it is irrelevant both to the work of art, and to future works of art.

. The loudness of the voice debating the work of art has no correlation to the work of art. Even its relation to the experience itself is often doubtful. Yet, it has everything to do with the

societal structures.

. Mass-media treatment of the arts (film, but also other arts).

[. Picasso is said to have said: "Computers are useless. They can only give us answers."]

. Society responds/reacts to art that deals with taboos.

. Art is equipped (and indeed expected) to deal with taboos.

. The representation of violence is a taboo in contemporary society.

. The hypocritical nature of social attitude towards art is reflected in society's attitude towards the representation of violence.

. The reactions to works of art in other representative arts (painting) and narrative arts (literature) dealing with violence seem less vitriolic nowadays. This might be due to the fact that film (rightly or wrongly) appears to be more convincing. One often hears that film is the most "realistic" art.

. What is realistic? It is often taken for granted that what we find convincing or what "seems" realistic or "reflecting reality" is realistic.

. Is a real-time eight-hour film of a man sleeping realistic?

. And what if there is a cut in the middle? Does it make it less realistic?

. What if the eight-hour experience has been condensed to two hours? Five minutes? Ten seconds? Do these interventions make the film less "real"?

. In film is it realistic to hear music as the hero and heroine finally consume their relationship on the beach (more music preceding this at their first encounter, perhaps)? Where is the orchestra?

. Realism is just another form of stylization.

. Like Expressionism or Cubism or Impressionism.

. Realism is a form of stylization which convention has declared closer to our desired perception of physical reality outside the plane of the work of art (outside of the movie theater).

. What is realistic changes with the times. Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* was once deemed too realistic/naturalistic. His acting today feels highly stylized, not gritty.

[. It is said that a graduate student once asked Daisetz T. Suzuki whether he spells reality with a small or a capital "r." professor Suzuki nodded, then closed his eyes, went on nodding, and - it seemed - thinking. Ten seconds passed, then a minute, then five. As it started to look that he fell asleep, he finally opened his eyes and answered the student's question. "Yes," he said.]

. Still, if the artist wants to have a dialogue with society or with those who have declared

themselves its spokespersons, s/he is compelled to take the art critics into account. As inspiration and as the object of (sociological?) (anthropological?) analysis, not as a guide in creating art.

- . The artist needs the critics as much as the donkey needs the zoologists.

- . Debates about art often center on the "representation" of the world, as perceived in a work of art.

- . There are several issues here:

- . The artist deals with her or his world, not with the world outside. The outside "real" world comes into play as something to be refracted through the artist and the work of art, and as the host of the final result, the work of art.

- . The way the beholder sees the world "portrayed" has more to do with the beholder's perceived (or ideal) world, not with the aspects of the scraps of reality refracted through a work of art.

- . It is more likely that a disturbing "portrayal" is disturbing or undesired not so much because it "shows" an outside world that the beholder does not like/appreciate, but rather because the "portrayal" awakens an inner world in the beholder which disturbs the beholder, upsets him/her, angers her/him, leading him/her where s/he consciously would not want to go, regardless of whether the work of art is dealing with a taboo at all or not.

- . It is not that important what/how the work of art "portrays." It is much more important what is the goal and - even more importantly - what is the tone.

- . Ultimately, the dialogue about and through art is an intimate experience and it has to do with the individual's experience of the him/herself and the universe around.

TONE, OR GOD IS BETWEEN THE LINES:

- . Thousands of painters could have painted Mona Lisa. Some possibly did. Including Leonardo. It is his touch that made her "portrayal" what matters, not the thing/person he was painting.

- . Picasso and Braque painted the same still lifes in the same studio, often painting together, each on his easel. Even though the paintings were done in the same style, they are very different.

- . Several directors have worked from the same scripts, most notably from the classics. Each film is distinctly different. Do Polanski's, Welles's and Kurosawa's Macbeth even have similar tone? How about Zeffirelli's and Luhrman's Romeo and Juliet?

- . So, it's not the text.
- . It is between the lines.

. Humanistic, reflective...?

. An often-heard complaint about the mainstream studio and independent films is that the stories are all the same.

. I don't think that this is the main problem with the mainstream studio and independent films.

. I think the main problem with them is that the tone is always the same.

. Open endings, mixed feelings, fractured feelings, shifting feelings, unpredictable tone, tragedy, and especially - doubts are big No-Nos.

. Even though the outside ("corporate," "committee," "money") control over the film works of art centers on the story, it is actually more concerned with the tone of the work. This control, however, is more subtle and involves several layers of controllers and middle-men.

. If the tone is what's between the lines, what kind of tone does the social art critic like in his/her work of art?

. What about violence in art?

. Does s/he like gleeful violence?

. Is it supposed to be dismissive and easy? Like Arnold Schwarzenegger? (In one film, his character promises a minor movie villain that he would let him go if he gave him the information he needed; once he gets it, he throws the petit villain into an abyss, saying "I lied.") Like Sylvester Stallone (the vehicle for the stunning transformation of the bottled-up Rambo from First Blood into a killing machine in Rambo 2 and 3)? Like Michael Bay, Simpson/Bruckheimer + Co, the Hollywood blockbusters of Ronald Regan's 80-90s?

. Sadism might be an explanation for this tone, but somehow that doesn't seem to be the real answer, as these films seem to suggest an emptier, less affected, less involved tone than that of a sadist.

. The tone of psychopaths?

. It is easier for the suburban and the politically correct latter-day transfigurations of the Mayflower and Salem judgmental spirit to focus on measurable quantities like minutes than on empirically imperfect elements like tone and intention. Tone is not a scientific, nor a statistical category.

. Professor Charles Harpole mentions in his lectures that in Hollywood films of the 40s and 50s, a character would shout "Darn," after being shot in the knee. Not "Damn!" or more appropriately "Fuck!" After being shot in the knee.

. Desensitizing the viewer to the impact of (both real and filmic) violence has more adverse social consequences than portraying violence in its full glory.

. Types of violence: which is worse: a wounded soldier, a dead dog or an employee laid off after 20 years of service?

. How influential is film?:

. On one hand, little Roma kids coming out of the Napredok or Karpos Cinemas, jumping and air kick-boxing a'la Bruce Lee.

. On the other hand neither Genghis Khan nor the Inquisition watched violent films.

. Check a report that the U.S. Air Force pilots watched porn films before going on air raids.

. Press briefings from the NATO bombings in Kosovo and Serbia.

. Ditto the First Gulf War.

. The view of real death and destruction as seen from 30,000 feet eerily resembles the gleeful victory accomplished in a video game. A cloud of white smoke. Game over.

. Detached, fun.

. Getting desensitized to violence.

. If one hopes for a work of art to have a social function (and it is not meant to have a direct social function by any stretch of the imagination), then one should certainly hope that exposing violence in its despicable and repulsive brutality - if not absurdity - is one of the socially beneficial side-effects of art.

. Thus, society is better served by gross "portrayal" of violence than by sanitized studio fare. A matter of tone.

. What is the tone of snuff? Real-life violence. Does it begin to matter only if we know that this is portrayal of real violence?

. Yet, it has been mediated/transfigured to a new place/new meaning.

. The God is in the detail.

. The art is between the lines.

. It is not the "what"; it is the "how."