The Digital Aesthetics of Violence: Introducing the Special Issue

By Stuart Bender & Lorrie Palmer

This special issue presents five scholarly perspectives on the aesthetics of digital violence in contemporary media. Why dedicate study to the purely aesthetic properties of violence, and why the specifically digital character of this? After all, as William Brown notes: "it is no doubt beneficial for academia to respond only slowly to new developments in any field; it is important properly to perceive whether or not the changes wrought by computers on cinema are real or simply media-inspired fads" (Brown 226). However, we should recall David Bordwell's indication that there are some quite subtle influences on media aesthetics from the digitalization of editing, which enables the editor to work quicker and thus enables frames to be "shaved" much more easily (see "Intensified Continuity"). In addition, it is worth recalling that the earliest digital manipulation of film is the cyborg vision in *Westworld* (Dir., Michael Crichton 1973) as Yul Brynner's psychotic cowboy hunts for prey (see Prince). Thus digitally manipulated images have their origin in images of violence.

It is also possible, as some of the papers presented here show, to identify some very specific alternatives to photorealistic representation that are afforded to contemporary cinema thanks to digital tools. Against this background we believe that it is significant to consider the impact of digital technologies on the production and post-production practices and aesthetics of violent narrative media. Certainly, on the one hand it may seem to be a purely academic question in our contemporary context where popular attention to violence is often focused on whether or not our media is too violent, or whether the MPAA ratings board is too permissive on violence in contrast to its strict position on sex. But on the other hand, such arguments ought to be grounded in understandings of the actual appearance and depiction of violence.

Therefore, we want this issue to critically engage with the aesthetic patterns of violence in popular media. The intention here is to move beyond generalized comments of film and televisual style often conducted in service of the kind of ideological readings of texts, in the tradition referred to by David Bordwell in *Making Meanings* as "Interpretation, Inc." We include here some new developments in the theorizing of action performance in digital cinema, the impact of visual effects and compositing technologies on the aesthetic possibilities, as well as what may be called the legacy of traditional film visual texture within our current post-photochemical milieu.

In "Digital Mayhem, Optical Decimation: The Technopoetics of Special Effects," Garrett Stewart revisits Christian Metz's theory of *trucage* (trick effects) to update its application to the peculiarly digital milieu where the presentation of violence against humans is now so digitalized and pixelated that "the threat of inurement applies more to its aesthetics than to its ethics". In revisiting *trucage*, Stewart defines what he calls *digitage* by drawing upon examples from the pixilation which is only fleetingly visible in the lethal alien ray of *War of the Worlds*' (2005) to the collision of digital technique and narrative rendered as inevitable in *Transcendence* (2014) and the title character's abilities in *Lucy* (2014) to interfere with the optical representation of time and space. Thus the first essay of this collection lays the foundation for the following papers by foregrounding that movies, and the violence presented within them, "are now *made* on screen, in computer rendering, not just viewed there".

In "Digital Visceral: Textural Play and the Flamboyant Gesture in Digital Screen Violence," Lisa Purse examines the contemporary move away from photorealism to a digital amplification that goes beyond textual, temporal, and spatial cohesion to instead celebrate its own artifice. In films such as *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014), *Machete Kills* (2013), and *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010) there is an intensified focus on the visual textures of violence and its bodily consequences in shape, movement, and viscosity, particularly in the aesthetics of blood and gore. Purse notes that these "flamboyant gesture[s] of violence" relate to previous histories of screen violence while also remediating more recent exploitation aesthetics through special effects and the contexts of digital media proliferation and production in which they have emerged.

In "Blood in the Corridor: The Digital Mastery of Hero Run Shoot-outs in *Kick-Ass* and *Wanted*," Stuart Bender and Lorrie Palmer present an aesthetic analysis, attuned to film production contexts and to a theoretical framework drawn from the poetics of David Bordwell and Stephen Prince, of a uniquely contemporary phenomenon which the paper identifies as the Hero Run. These violent sequences are a normative characteristic of many digitally-enabled action films in which a single character moves at speed through a confined field of battle against numerous antagonists whom they dispatch with creative accuracy that puts the aesthetic focus on them rather than on their victims. The essay explores the tripartite structure of this precise mastery and control that unites the shooter characters, the directors, and the visual effects artists through the expansive digital toolkit available in the production of action cinema.

In "Life Out of Death: Violent FX and Its Vivacious Power," Paul Johnson negotiates the visual effects in the cinematic violence of *300* (2006), *Sucker Punch* (2011), *Watchmen* (2009), and *Sin City* (2005) to show how vivacious visual life is created

concurrently at the moment of spectacular character death. Indeed, the formal properties of digital FX composited into the mise-en-scène uniquely activate spectator perceptions of violence in recent comic book, graphic novel, and superhero adaptations. The visceral onscreen aesthetic of such films, Johnson argues, is concretized by the digital techniques and stylistic devices used to create it. The mediation of life and death by digital technologies (speed ramping, blood effects) extends post-production practices of animation to onscreen characters through graphic possibilities and purpose.

In "Virtue Through Suffering: The American War Film at the End of Celluloid", Tanine Allison tackles the topic of how World War II combat films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and the television series *Bands of Brothers* (2001) invoke a nostalgia for the past via their dependence upon digital filmmaking tools to create this celluloid documentary-like aesthetic. The paper argues that the digitally augmented combat in these texts enables them to "explore the impact of violence on two bodies: the body of the American soldier in the text, and the body of the cinematic text itself, existing now on a continuum between celluloid impression and digital file."

We thank all of the contributors for their diverse yet cohesive contributions to this exciting special issue. Writing about onscreen violence at the point where it intersects with offscreen digital technologies while acknowledging the past and the future of cinema (as well as other media formats), these scholars have mutually framed a vital discussion. The papers here contribute to on-going discussions of digital mise-en-scene, recalling the challenge posed by film editor and sound designer Walter Murch when he asks: "The frame at the time of shooting, is that sacred? Or is the word now, instead of 'shooting' it's 'acquisition'? We are 'collecting stuff' that then we'll do something with later?" (Murch). We hope that this issue suggests a productive direction for future research in addressing the protean aesthetics of the digital.

Works Cited

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