

Directions:

1. Mark your confusion; annotate with questions and comments. Show close reading.
2. Mark any/all of the five rhetorical devices we have been studying. Mark for ethos/ logos/pathos.
3. Write a one-page reflection in response to the article.

“Critic's Notebook: Movie violence must not be stopped”

By Betsy Sharkey

Source: Los Angeles Times, February 15, 2013

I abhor violence. As a rookie police reporter years ago I saw the damage guns, knives, broken bottles, metal pipes, hands — humans — can inflict. From the terrifyingly premeditated to the unfortunately accidental, those images still have the power to shake me to the core. They will never leave me.

I don't, however, believe the movies are to blame for these acts. As good as Hollywood is at reimagining the intrinsic brutality that roams our streets, burrows into twisted minds, plays havoc with our world, nothing I've seen in movies comes close to what I witnessed firsthand.

Perhaps that is why movie violence doesn't offend me. I may be unsettled by it, but no matter the saturation level, I rarely turn away.

I *want* to ride the superhero roller coaster. I want to cheer as the bad guys bite the dust. I like the line between good and evil sharply drawn by a super sleuth like James Bond or blurred by an everyman like Michael Douglas in "Falling Down."

I want Steven Spielberg to keep reminding me in "Lincoln," "Saving Private Ryan" and "Schindler's List" what evil looks like and the fortitude it takes to face it down. I want Kathryn Bigelow to continue assessing the psychological cost of global conflicts in "The Hurt Locker" and "Zero Dark Thirty." And yes, I want Quentin Tarantino to keep spraying the canvas with blood, even when it is just in fun.

Whatever else the movies make me feel — horror, hubris, humor, humanity at its best and worst — I know it's real life, not Hollywood, that's the killer.

You can't tell that to the politicians or the talking heads on TV. They see in Hollywood an easy, highly visible — and disturbingly simplistic — target after tragic events like last summer's slaughter during a showing of "The Dark Knight Rises" in Aurora, Colo., and the more recent killings of children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. Like history, the argument keeps repeating itself.

When bullets tore through bodies in Sam Peckinpah's "The Wild Bunch" in 1969, there was shock. When Arthur Penn kept the camera running for the ballet of death that ended "Bonnie and Clyde," there was outrage. When Tarantino began his paean to blood-drenched movies with "Kill Bill," he was condemned; his latest, "Django Unchained," with its defiant blast at antebellum slavery, kicked up more furor. And when Bigelow showed the bloodless but chilling waterboarding of prisoners thought to be Osama bin Laden operatives in her Oscar-nominated "Zero Dark Thirty," public anger fueled congressional hearings.

To denounce movies for the violence of our times, when unimaginable atrocity has been with us since the dawn of mankind, is at best misguided, at worst damaging.

Hollywood is not the reason for the wreckage made by madmen with guns. The troubled will always be with us.

To fault films for forcing us to consider that humans commit atrocious acts, that evil exists in far too many hearts, is to blame the messenger. It's classic displacement theory. "Zero's" Beltway brouhaha echoes the backlash that hit Michael Cimino's fabled "The Deer Hunter" in 1978 for its portrayal of Vietnam-era American POWs forced to play Russian roulette.

I'm not suggesting filmmakers have no responsibility for what they make — they do. But that responsibility is to the art as well as the audience. Within the mayhem, there is nearly always a message. Movies are our cautionary tales, fictional reminders of the true nature of humanity's baser basic instincts. And moviemakers — by that I mean every name above and below the title, for it takes a village — are the seers, the interpreters, the illusionists, the entertainers.

They are not the instigators.

The topic has been a hot button for so many years that we don't even know how to discuss it rationally anymore.

Consider 1994's "Natural Born Killers," a provocative, satiric indictment of mass media's glorification of savagery and the way violence so often overtakes the TV news cycle. The controversy "Killers" triggered was about the movie's images — extremely graphic in showing the execution-style cross-country killing spree of the lethal lovers played by Juliette Lewis and Woody Harrelson — not its messages about the sometimes outrageous lengths the media uses to capture footage of real-life violence for mass consumption and the audience's appetite to watch it. Directed by Oliver Stone and with a story by Tarantino, it was still, 15 years later, among the top 10 on Entertainment Weekly's list of the 25 most controversial films ever.

Positive force

One question that always surfaces in the debate: What possible good can come from any depiction of the horrific on screen?

Let's start with the obvious. A good deal of movie violence is designed as a way for us to experience it vicariously. Whether the topic is war, high-flying superheroes, cops and robbers, comedy or Freddy Krueger — films are packed with plots whose main purpose is to deliver payback.

That is why "Taken" had such mass appeal. It was easy to empathize with Liam Neeson's desperate father, his anguish when his daughter is kidnapped by ruthless international sex slavers. It was easier still to forgive the brutal swath he cut getting her back. Take that raw revenge and put a superpower at the other end of the barrel and you find a steady stream of good guys with guns we want in our camp — Bourne, Bond, the Terminator, Transformers, G.I. Joe.

For the vast majority of moviegoers, fantasy, fairy tales, the hyper-realized worlds of comic books, even the darkest of parables, offer a safe escape from modern problems — not an excuse to create more. If anything, playing with metaphorical extremes is a platform for the medium's artistic possibilities — exotic character designs, extraordinary special effects, all the arsenals of technology and no earthbound restrictions. It's exhilarating to watch Peter Parker scale buildings, Clark Kent leap them, Batman zoom around them. Even as the buildings crumble and the bodies of their adversaries pile up, the consistent take-away is that there are repercussions for breaking the rules.

What tends to get lost in the rhetoric is how many film classics have risen from the machinations and the muck. The list of the legendary is long, but I can't imagine a film library without Francis Ford Coppola's "The Godfather" or "Apocalypse Now." Or Jonathan Demme's unsettling masterwork of the macabre in "The Silence of the Lambs." The disturbing visual eloquence of Brian De Palma in "Scarface," or "Carlito's Way."

Tarantino — arguably Hollywood's current blood-splatter expert — always strikes me as his own creature when it comes to brutality. There is an excess of the red stuff in virtually every movie he makes, but that very excess is what turns it surreal.

In his Oscar-nominated "Django's" final showdowns (yes, plural), Jamie Foxx's bounty-hunting freeman is about to take retribution on the South's most egregious slaveholder. By this point, a runaway slave has been torn apart by dogs, countless backs have been lashed into bloody ribbons, and there has been a string of other punishments so brutal they almost defy description. The gun battles that ensue seem appropriate in their excess, a relief and a release — an exclamation mark on the director's dissertation on slavery written in bullets and blood.

It is when movies turn realistic that the brutality is the most difficult to watch — and to forget.

Why not encourage filmmakers to make it less gruesome, less graphic? To me, this is the scariest proposition of all.

Consider Jodie Foster's rape victim in "The Accused." Her desecration, her humiliation, is searing. Or the chilling examination of a twisted criminal mind in the farmhouse killings captured by "In Cold Blood." Oliver Stone's brilliant "Platoon" exposed in gruesome detail the many ways war scars soldiers. In "The Godfather's" dissection of mob machinations, there is a treatise on power's corruption as well as organized crime's devastation.

Why should any of that be softened? None of it is pretty. It takes more than a few blows on a face for skin to give way to bones and viscera. When gunshots end a life, bones shatter, blood pools, the dying cry out. I don't want the impact squeegeed away. Revenge, and justice, is too often written in pain. I don't want Hollywood to clean up the mess. I don't want it to silence the screams.

Reflection idea:

- Do you agree or disagree with the author: Should Hollywood curb violence in films and television? Why? Use support to prove your answer.
- Are humans (specifically Americans) today numb to the realism of violence? Is this an effect of violence in film and television? Use support to prove your answer.
- Are the author's arguments for the positives in film violence legitimate? Why? Use support to prove your answer.