"I Want You to Hit Me as Hard as You Can!": Screen Violence as a Reflection of Mass Reality

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Entertainment in the twenty-first century is monopolized by the audience's desire for reality. Reality and realism are relative terms, defined by each individual's own sense of the world around them. They represent what we understand, relate to, and identify with. Although this has the potential to vary greatly, there is a unifying reality, cultural conceptualization, and an innate sense of self that is shared by the mass. It is this portrait of reality that is used as the basis of modern film and television. Both mediums take this reality and present it in endless different scenarios and contexts that will entertain and connect with the audience on some level. Even in science fiction and fantasy, two genres whose trademark is often the dismissal of reality, there is always an underlying connection made between the story and the audience's emotions that, in turn, creates reality for the audience. One of the most pervasive and constantly increasing attributes of today's version of realism is violence. It is everywhere we look, in all countries, and in many different forms. Popular culture and, more specifically, modern film, are attacked for using violence as the groundwork on which a story is then developed. Such an attack was made on the film *Fight Club*, the tale of two men who experience a spiritual rebirth by directing their physical aggression on to one another. The critics who dismissed the film as an overtly "guy flick" failed to realize the accurate comment the film made about popular culture and the reality on which it operates, the mass reality. They claim that films are shaping a violent popular culture, causing us to perform in certain ways and do things only because we are shown them. However, we are innately violent and films like *Fight Club* do nothing more than point that out and provide us with the graphic elements it takes to entertain us. Violence is seen so openly on screen because the mass audience identifies with it and understands its role in society.

Popular culture is a term that is loosely thrown around by critics, many of whom lack the ability to correctly define it. Author John Storey, in his article, "What is Popular Culture," identifies

and examines six different definitions of popular culture. The most valid and reliable of these definitions aligns with the idea that popular culture is a reflection of our own behaviors and constitutes what will entertain the most people. Storey states that "popular culture is the culture which originates from 'the people'…. It is a culture of the people for the people" (Storey 13). Media critics attack depictions of sex and violence that now dominate everything from film to print advertisements, however, these critics are often entirely out of touch with the mainstream. Current films are not made for those who grew up on John Wayne and "Ozzie and Harriet," they are made for the generation who idealized Rambo and connected with the offbeat and exaggeratedly unconventional family dynamics of "Married with Children." Popular culture operates under the simple formula of increased need equals an increase in product, seeking to mirror and appeal to the mass population's reality. Popular culture media is involved in a very simple relationship with society; it gives us exactly what we ask for. This is the correct definition of popular culture.

In a sense, consumers are asking for violence, it is a prerequisite for the mass audience to approve of anything. Violence is part of reality, so there is almost a required realism in film that forces its inclusion. This is evident in the way that the same text has been altered on screen to include more graphic and real depictions of violence. Each of Shakespeare's tragedies contains extensive blood and appalling acts of terror, however, early film adaptations shied away from an open display of these moments in the plays. *King Lear*, considered by many to be Shakespeare's ultimate tragedy, contains a scene in which the eyes of the character Gloucester are plucked out on stage. An early 1970's film adaptation of the play by director Peter Brook shies away from showing the audience the horrific act and instead resorts to a completely dark shot when the moment comes, intended to link the audience to the newly blind Gloucester. In contrast is Richard Eyre's version for the BBC in 1997. In this production the blinding of Gloucester is shown as blatantly as humanly possible. Eyre takes time to show each eye being scooped out of Gloucester's head as he screams in agony (Cartmell 16-17). Although some believe that what is not shown can have a greater impact on the audience, the fact remains that what was once

purposely left out due to an overtly graphic nature was later put in. A scene that would have turned audiences away thirty years ago is now a necessity in modern film. Our sense of reality has now been transformed to include and expect such scenes to enhance the realism of a fictional product.

Graphic material fits in our current society. For years the film industry had hesitated to include realistic violence, fearing that such scenes would have to be edited out for the final release and only delay the film's opening. Now it strives to achieve levels of realism considered unacceptable in the years before. Critics argue that such detailed depictions of violence provide the audience with romanticized ideas of it and that these actions will ultimately be attempted. They believe that these films are shaping a malevolent generation devoid of value and ethical restraint. Leading the attack is Republican Robert Bork, former judge and friend of Ronald Reagan. In his book, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, Bork argues that the current state of popular culture is bringing us closer and closer to a complete societal collapse, likening it to God's fiery destruction of the sinful city of Gomorrah in the Old Testament. He writes, "Popular entertainment sells sex, pornography, violence, vulgarity, attacks on traditional forms of authority, and outright perversion more copiously and more insistently than ever before in our history" (Bork 126). What is most interesting about this selection is his use of the word "sells," implying that these elements have become part of our behavior only after popular media has given us the resources. As John Storey pointed out, popular culture is a reflection of our own behaviors or the behaviors that will entertain us. While I believe that, in general, Bork is wrong, I must acknowledge the possibility that, in a select number of cases, life will imitate art. Before someone yells "BOBO- doll" in opposition to my ideas let me agree here that children can be very influenced by what they see and violent media may have a severely detrimental effect on their behavior, yet, this paper does not address what is acceptable for children. I strongly believe that parents should be severely discretionary over what they allow their children to see. However, this is not a common phenomenon amongst the mass audience for which violent films are intended. Films are not selling violence to society, society has sold it to them, demanding its inclusion in entertainment. The

elements that Bork is attacking are the elements and behaviors society displays or connects with.

The behaviors seen in *Fight Club* represent both what we display and what we connect with. The film, released in the fall of 1999, was a screen adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's best selling novel about two men who seek to completely reject material possessions and societal conformity. They are in a search for the true self, not a version of it sold by mainstream advertisements. The characters find their vehicle in this search to be the release of built up, hostile aggressions. In plain English, they beat the hell out of each other until one of them either calls the fight to an end or is knocked unconscious. Others quickly join in and a phenomenon is born, a meeting of men who seek the same objective and form a club that gives the story its title. The fight scenes are carefully choreographed and as close to real as possible, filled with bloody victims and the brawls that created them. The group also goes around performing vulgar acts such as urinating into restaurant food that is about to be served, splicing pornography into family films, and intentionally setting off car alarms. Bork would argue that a film like *Fight Club* is dragging us closer to the societal collapse he prophesies. While the meaning behind the film may be difficult for the 70-year old republican to comprehend, it is understood by my generation as a story about the struggle to find the self. This generation looks through the violence and is more heavily affected by what lies beyond it. A reviewer for a popular online database stated about *Fight Club*, "Physical violence may give the initial sting, but it's the film's psychological violence that leaves the lasting impression" (Mr. Brown). Film violence is warranted by this generation in three ways: it connects to innate psychological urges, it speaks to us as a reflection of societal behaviors, and acts as a pacifier of our own belligerence.

The film taps into our internal psychological struggles that we rarely allow to be externalized in such a fashion. As Edward Norton's character states in the film, "Fight Club wasn't about winning or losing. It wasn't about words. The hysterical shouting was in tongues, like at a Pentecostal church. When the fight was over, nothing was solved, but nothing mattered. Afterwards, we all felt saved." (*Fight Club*). According to Freudian theory, there is an innate desire for the destruction of the self. A primal need to

challenge our identity and existence by attempting to destroy it. By surviving this attempt at identity annihilation we are brought closer to our own psyches. We can then accept that we truly exist as an individual because we have survived a self-inflicted assassination attempt, giving each man the power to be his own spiritual savior. The men in *Fight Club* are finding their identities by recognizing and addressing this universal psychological urge. The fights create a feeling of enlightenment, smiling and hugging when the fight is over. They find themselves by releasing this primal urge and testing the boundaries of their identity ("*Fight Club* and the Search for Self"). The men in *Fight Club* are not entirely aware that what they are really doing is fighting themselves and searching to fill a psychological urge, just as the audience is not fully aware of it either. Yet, a connection is made. The depictions of violence create realistic scenes that are just as real as the urges the characters are acting out. The violence grabs our attention, locking our eyes to the screen, and is then used as a psychological tool to offer the deeper meanings behind the fights. They are battles of being and consciousness, not of mere competitive or macho aggression. Bork argues that "What America increasingly produces and distributes is now propaganda for every perversion and obscenity imaginable" (Bork 139). *Fight Club* is not propaganda for violence, it is an open expression of the darker yet vibrant side of the human psyche, the side Bork is unwilling to acknowledge. We are drawn to such a film and accept its violence because of the psychological comment that we connect with; the search for identity through a destruction of the self.

The film and its violence not only appeal to audiences on a psychological level but also because much of Palahniuk's story is taken from everyday life. In addition to pounding on each other, the characters are also infatuated with vulgar acts such as soiling restaurant food, splicing pornography into cartoons, and setting off car alarms. Both Palahniuk and *Fight Club* director David Fincher received criticism for portraying these activities because some believed these acts would find their way into common practice. Palahniuk fired back at these allegations in a recent article for *Gear* magazine, confirming that what appalled many reviewers actually occurs in every day life. He writes, "I knew a movie projectionist who collected single frames from porno movies and made them into

slides…. Later, when they were shooting the *Fight Club* movie, some Hollywood big names told me the book hit home because they, themselves, had spliced porno into movies as angry teenage projectionists" (Palahniuk 110). Another ex-waiter told Palahniuk that tainting food was an everyday occurrence and that he, himself, had ejaculated into Margaret Thatcher's food "at least five times" (Palahniuk 110). Disgusting and sickening, especially if you're Margaret Thatcher, yet true.

The vast majority of the population does not consist of doctors, lawyers, or scholarly writers; most of the mass works at a nine to five job that entails menial tasks. A waiter that has been in the food service industry for a reasonable amount of time has most likely either performed a similar vulgar act or known someone who has. Another scene in the film, in which the lead character sits next to the emergency door on a plane and fantasizes about causing a crash, was given strong credence. Palahniuk states that "On every book tour, people told me how each time they sat in the emergency exit row of an airplane, the whole flight was a struggle not to pop that door open" (Palahniuk 110). Even the idea of a club of men who congregate just to fight each other is not a Palahniuk original and is rumored to have been going on for more than 10 years overseas. Our culture no longer has the innocent face it struggled to publicly maintain for decades. What films like *Fight Club* offer is a realistic depiction of the hidden thoughts that we are all guilty of. Even in the name of supporting my own ideas I hesitate to offer the malicious deeds I have wondered about because I, like most, feel guilty admitting them. Watching them on screen entertains us because we are sitting there thinking, "Oh my God! He's gonna' do it." Pornography, violence, and vulgarity are expressed freely in the film because it is thought of repeatedly in day-to-day interaction and, as proven by many of Palahniuk's fans, is practiced religiously by those with similar job descriptions.

In addition to the truth behind the film's actions and the psychological levels on which it makes a connection to the audience lies the possibility that the exact inverse of what critics argue may be true; violent films like *Fight Club* may be an outlet for audience aggression, providing us with the release that we often need. Evening news reports and morning newspapers are dominated by the atrocities occurring around the world. As a suicide bomber

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kills dozens in a crowded street a mother throws her newborn child into a dumpster. These things upset us and we become enraged by the realization that there is nothing we can do about it. Current society recognizes the need for some type of a "release," a way to let out the pressures and frustrations of our lives. Millions are currently in therapy, running in place at gyms around the world, and searching for a new drug to help us sleep at night. We are all searching for that next way to make our day seem a little less chaotic. Films like *Fight Club* may be the answer we have been looking for. I believe there is a strong possibility that film violence has become such a necessity because we are pacified by it, allowing us to alleviate stresses vicariously through the characters and the struggles we watch them go through. In basic terms, we are less likely to take our stress out on others in a hostile fashion because by viewing a situation in which a character goes from frustrated to aggressive to calm we go through these emotions with them. Their ultimate emotional state is also the viewers.   Essentially, we feel what they feel.

The more realistic the violence is portrayed the more it will affect us and connect so deeply that the audience will be less inclined to exercise aggressive behaviors.   If shown in a convincing way, a screen depiction of a physical fight or heated verbal disagreement may have the potential to cause a decrease in our built up feelings. Film theorist Dolf Zillman, in his article "The Psychology of the Appeal of Portrayals of Violence," states, "The notion that fictional violence helps us to control antisocial emotions and even to lose our fear of death is deemed plausible by most analysts" (Goldstein 188). Antisocial emotions exist within us all and if we were always masters of them the term "road rage" would not exist. In *Fight Club* the fighters sweat, hit, bleed and are then calmed by the struggle they have just been part of. Most of us are not so frustrated with the world that we will beat each other up to feel better, but screen acts that mirror that level of a release of hostility can give us the same feeling. Leading the opposing side is, once again, Robert Bork, stating that films like *Fight Club* are leading us towards a "chaotic and unhappy society, followed, perhaps, by an authoritarian and unhappy society" (Bork 139). Naturally, I entirely disagree and, instead, hold fast to my idea that the inverse of what Bork argues is the real truth behind film

violence. The audience can experience the characters emotions vicariously and, as is the case in *Fight Club*, become pacified by the enlightenment the members of Fight Club feel. Music has the ability to calm us and relieve emotional stresses so it is not that far-fetched that film violence may do the same.

Violence has become such a necessary tool because it grabs the attention of the mass audience before the film moves on to the implications of that violence. *Fight Club* is the perfect example of this. If it were just about fighting with absolutely no deeper levels then critics might have a legitimate reason to attack it. However, we understand that violence serves a purpose and then look for the meaning behind it. Brown states, "*Fight Club* is about submission, but not the bloody submission many men pummel each other into through the course of the film. It is, however, about a different type of submission—that of unique human identity to the homogenization of consumer-driven culture" (Mr. Brown). I believe that the mass audience has the unconscious, analytical ability of Brown and is able to see that the violence in the film, among the other functions I have discussed, serves as a beacon, drawing the audience along to the film's deeper meanings.

What has changed is reality. It has changed by our own vices, our own behaviors, and our own tendencies. Films cannot be blamed for tossing back a product with elements that we have pitched. We connect with the violence that is shown or are entertained by it because it is an accurate representation of the hostile world in which we live. Attacking popular culture and its films makes critics and politicians feel better about the current state of society because it gives them something and someone to attack, someone to blame other than ourselves. In his film review of *Fight Club*, reviewer James Berardinelli writes, "By blaming movies like *Fight Club* for real-life horrors, politicians want us to look through rose-colored glasses that they have tinted. Instead, Fincher offers a clear, uncompromising portrait that disturbs because it is perceptive and defies the facile answers proffered by elected officials. Movies are not to blame. Guns are not to blame. People and the society that has spawned and stifled them are"(Berardinelli). Bork is correct in that all the images he describes are presented in popular culture in an open and unbiased fashion, but how can they be "selling" something when we are the

ones who have sold it to them. Audiences expect violence, it adds
to this idea of required realism that it takes to get anyone to tune
in to anything. It connects with us psychologically, we understand
its relevance in the world, and we are calmed by these violent
expressions. This is *Fight Club*'s place in popular culture; we
connect with the characters because they are doing what we
pretend we never dream of. Society is violent, so is the media that
follows it, not the other way around.

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