

# VIOLENCE AND AMERICAN CINEMA



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violence american style:  
the narrative orchestration  
of violent attractions

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While writing on the cultural specificity of violence in the context of Spanish cinema, I was inevitably confronted by the question of what is culturally specific about Hollywood's violent representations. I avoided this question, partly because cultural specificity is far more difficult to perceive as an insider than as an outsider.<sup>1</sup> Yet I knew that whenever I did address this question, my starting point would be Sam Peckinpah: first, because his work provides a uniquely productive cross-cultural comparison with cinematic representations of violence in Spain; second, because his use of extremely violent representations in films like *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *Straw Dogs* (1971) generated intense cultural debates at the time of their release, which resonated with larger social debates then in progress over whether violence should be considered a legitimate means of social-political change; and third, because, as Stephen Prince points out in *Savage Cinema*, he is "the crucial link between classical and postmodern Hollywood, the figure whose work transforms modern cinema in terms of

stylistics for rendering screen violence and in terms of the moral and psychological consequences that ensue.<sup>22</sup>

### The Cultural Reinscription of *The Wild Bunch*

Sam Peckinpah presents us with an intriguing paradox. This filmmaker who came to epitomize American excess in cinematic violence—particularly within the most American of all Hollywood genres, the Western—had at least partially adapted that approach from a Spanish film that was not well known in the United States, Carlos Saura's *La caza* (*The Hunt*, 1965). Not only does John Hopewell quote Peckinpah as saying, "Seeing *La caza* changed my life!" but also, according to Ricardo Franco, the Spanish filmmaker who directed *Pascual Duarte* (1975), one of Spain's most disturbingly violent films of all time, after seeing *La caza* Peckinpah wanted to do a film version of Nobel Prize-winner Camilo José Cela's 1942 post-Civil War novel, *La Familia de Pascual Duarte*.<sup>3</sup> In 1992 when I mentioned these two facts to Spain's most distinguished film editor, Pablo del Amo, who edited both *La caza* and *Pascual Duarte*, he told me he found them surprising, for he knew *The Wild Bunch* very well (since he was the one who, at the behest of Spanish censors, had reedited it to tone down the violence for its release in Francoist Spain), yet saw no similarities to *La caza*.<sup>4</sup> I also raised the issue with Carlos Saura in spring 1999 when he was in Los Angeles for the American Cinematheque retrospective of his work. He said that when he had met Peckinpah several years before in Hawaii, Sam told him that *La caza* was a major influence on *The Wild Bunch*, an influence that Saura (like Del Amo) was unable to see in the film. These reactions made me all the more intrigued with the question of precisely what Peckinpah had learned from Saura's film and how he had managed to culturally reinscribe it with American specificity to the point that it was unrecognizable even to these two "insiders" from Spain.

In *La caza* Saura uses the ritualized violence of the hunt, a favorite pastime of Franco and his political cronies, to substitute for the Civil War and its reciprocal savagery, which were then forbidden topics in Spain. The story follows a group of men—three former Civil War buddies who had fought on Franco's Nationalist side and one of their nephews—who go hunting for rabbits on a game reserve that had been a bloody battlefield in the Civil War. Although the film never mentions the war directly, the hunt and its setting lead the three veterans to reminisce about their wartime experience and old betrayals, memories that ultimately lead to an insane shoot-out in which they kill each other, leaving only the young man, in freeze shot, as the sole survivor. The opening image behind the titles immediately creates an atmosphere of repressed violence. We see a pair of caged ferrets restlessly pacing back and forth in a cramped space and hear a loud, pounding, percussive music, which makes their entrapment feel all the more oppressive. The camera relentlessly moves in to a tighter shot that intensifies their desperation, links the close-up with entrapment, and marks the ferrets as surrogate victims for the violence to come. Everything in the film—its claustrophobic narrative, its sporadic and carefully modulated release of violent movements, its spare landscapes, its emotional

rhythms in dialogue and mise-en-scène, its percussive music and montage, its oppressive silences and ellipses, its interplay between extreme close-ups and long shots, and its blatant specularization of the violent gaze—move inexorably toward the final explosive shoot-out, heightening its intensity when it comes.

It was precisely this narrative orchestration of violence—with its varied rhythms, dramatic pauses, and cathartic climax—that had such a profound impact on Peckinpah rather than the number of thematic similarities that *The Wild Bunch* shares with *La caza*: the group of middle-aged male buddies as the focus, the gendering of violence as a sign of masculinity, the blatant specularization of the violence through visual apparatuses like binoculars and gun sights, the recriminating memories of past betrayals as a catalyst, the young outsider as the one whose impulsive shot unleashes the final suicidal battle, and the evocation of a war that is represented only indirectly (in Peckinpah's case, the First World War through the Germans and their war machines in the final massacre, and also Vietnam through the peasant resistance with which Angel is allied). While such thematic links ensured that Peckinpah could adapt this kind of orchestration to the Western genre, the life-changing lesson he learned from *La caza* (and applied not only to *The Wild Bunch* but to his other films that followed) was how to use violence to structure not merely an individual sequence but the stylistic and narrative design of the entire film—that is, to use representations of violence as a series of rhythmic eruptions that orchestrate the spectator's emotional response.

We sense it immediately in the syncopated sequence behind the titles, in which the wild bunch, disguised as soldiers, are riding into town for a bank robbery, and their movements, accompanied by a percussive drum beat, are periodically interrupted by a freeze frame that temporarily suspends the action and drains the color. Though we become impatient with those pauses—especially once we realize that these outlaws are heading toward a shoot-out with bounty hunters who await them in ambush—they give us more time to consider the moral ambiguities of the various groups assembled, not only the seemingly well-mannered bank robbers and the railroad's seedy bounty hunters (who are led by a former member of the wild bunch) but also the respectable hymn-singing townsfolk listening to a temperance union speech and the cluster of Anglo and Mexican children taking pleasure in torturing a scorpion, groups who may at first seem to be innocent bystanders but ultimately prove to be morally complicit. The pauses also lead us to become aware of our own complicity as spectators, for they make us realize how eager we are for the violent spectacle to be unleashed (which happens much sooner here than in *La caza* and with much more blood and slow-motion dazzle and with a richer orchestration of gunfire, screams, and shattering glass). The violence is unleashed by a clipped line of dialogue uttered by the outlaw leader, Pike Bishop (William Holden), just before Peckinpah's final directorial credit—a line that calls attention to the film's violent orchestration of motion and stasis: "If they move, kill 'em!" This kinetic dynamic—a temporary pause heightening the violent outburst—is repeated in both films just before the final massacre, when there is a strange



moment of nervous silence and stillness before the climactic violence erupts with an excessiveness that far exceeds our expectations.

Although the structural dynamics of violence in the two films are similar, their meanings and emotional effects are totally different. In *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), René Girard argues that the sole purpose of all sacrificial violence (whether in art, myth, ritual, or religion) is the prevention of recurrent reciprocal violence, a theory that makes violence essential to social order. Girard treats violence as a performative language that speaks through an elaborate set of conventions that are codified by the social order it seeks to uphold. From this perspective, the key question is what kind of social order specific conventions are designed to defend, a question that makes the representation of violence a crucial issue for exploring cultural specificity.<sup>5</sup>

As I argued in *Blood Cinema*, in Francoist Spain the representation of violence was suppressed along with sex, politics, and sacrilege. The most graphic violence appeared in the films made in the 1960s and 1970s by the leftist opposition, who were eager to expose the violent legacy of the Civil War that was aestheticized and disavowed by the fascists. Thus, in the final sequence of *La caza* the ritualized violence of the hunt, which substitutes for the Civil War, is suddenly transformed back into a brutal image of modern massacre. It is not the violence itself that is glamorized or even condoned, but rather the cathartic act of exposing it as the legacy of fascism.

Conversely, in *The Wild Bunch* the excessive violence is orgasmic rather than cathartic, erotic rather than revelatory, for Peckinpah positions the spectator to desire rather than to fear its eruption. After the "big bang" opening of the bank robbery, we are left wondering with anticipation whether any subsequent violence can possibly equal or surpass that initial rush—a spectator response that is somewhat analogous to a drug experience, in recognizing that we are already partially hooked on a guilty pleasure. Rhetorically it is closer to the reaction we have to the shocking shower murder early in *Psycho* rather than to the periodic emissions of increasing violence in *La caza* that build slowly like Ravel's *Bolero*, yet in contrast to both of these films *The Wild Bunch* is not constructed on a rhetoric of fear. The only thing that is frightening in Peckinpah's film is having to face our own visceral response to the violence, which is like that of the children caught in the shoot-out who are thrilled by the violence that surrounds, endangers, and permeates them.

The excitement is at least partly dependent on those frequent pauses, which are most fully elaborated in the idyllic sequence in which the wild bunch visits Angel's peaceful home village. Like the weary gunmen, despite the pleasures of this respite we soon find ourselves itching to move on to the action. Whereas Saura (and other Spanish filmmakers of the leftist opposition) could use such pauses to allude subtly to the cultural repression that existed under Franco (allusions easily recognized by most Spanish spectators), Peckinpah, who lacked this cultural context, tailored them to the rhetoric of the Western genre (those dramatic build-ups to climactic gun battles in classic Westerns like *High Noon* and *Shane*) yet making them sufficiently hyperbolic so that they would be experienced as a new kind of

narrative rhythm. Despite the stylization of its rhetoric, *The Wild Bunch* allows us no emotional distance; that's where Saura's rhythmic orchestration proves so effective, particularly when dialogized with conventions from another culture.

Unlike Saura, Peckinpah inflects the violence with a comic exuberance that can be found in American silent comedies, cartoons, and other popular forms of farce; for the violent outbreaks are repeatedly accompanied by an infectious laughter, which functions as another surrogate for sexual release. In the final sequence laughter is added to the mix of guns, music, and drum roll that accompanies the wild bunch on their final death march. The hearty laughter of Dutch (Ernest Borgnine, the character most strongly committed to the group) triggers the final blood bath and punctuates the final dramatic pause, which, like the idyllic visit to Angel's Mexican village, provides a brief moment to savor a nostalgic sense of belonging. His laughter initiates a knowing exchange of looks among the buddies, inaugurating a moment of masculine *jouissance* or expanded time that enables the wild bunch (and the audience) to look not only forward to the tragic massacre that brings their lives and narrative to an end, but also backward to earlier moments of laughter and male bonding (a movement actually visualized behind the final credits). This final movement reverses not only the structure of the narrative but also its meaning and tone, imbuing it with a comic resilience that disavows the finality of the violent ending.

With such changes, Peckinpah reinscribed Saura's orchestration of violence to address his own cultural context, justifying violence as a basic human response and the most honorable human choice in certain social-political circumstances. As he put it, "Those who have been too long oppressed by the violence of power are waking up, organizing and fighting for rights. Inevitably, the conflict can only resolve itself in violence."<sup>6</sup> In *The Wild Bunch* the question was not whether you die (for this is inevitable), or whether you kill innocent people (for no one in this film is innocent), but whether you are sufficiently committed to die for your own community. The film focuses on groups rather than individuals (the bounty hunters, temperance league, soldiers, Mexican army, peasant guerillas, and outlaws), an ethos visualized in the recurring signature wide-screen shot of the wild bunch riding four or five abreast toward the camera. Both Pike and Dutch claim that this kind of commitment is what distinguishes humans from animals—a position that had political resonance in the cultural debates of the period and in the wake of 1968. You can find it not only in the writings of Frantz Fanon, who argued that free men must earn their freedom through violent revolution,<sup>7</sup> but also in actual choices then being made in the United States as to how to oppose the Vietnam War, racism, and other forms of social injustice—through militant action or passive resistance. As Prince points out:

By 1968 when Peckinpah . . . was working on *The Wild Bunch*, the Vietnam War was at its height, . . . with mass mobilization against the war producing crowds of 100,000 at demonstrations in New York and Washington, D.C.

During the first nine months of 1967, urban riots erupted in 128 cities. . . . From 1963–1968 more than two million persons participated in social protest. Civil rights demonstrations mobilized 1.1 million, anti-war demonstrations 680,000, and ghetto riots an estimated 200,000. Nine thousand casualties resulted, including some 200 deaths.<sup>8</sup>

Similar questions about violence were also being addressed in several European films of the late 1960s, such as Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967) and *Weekend* (1967), Joris Ivens's anthology film *Far from Vietnam* (1967), and even Ingmar Bergman's *The Shame* (1968)—reflexive films that generated controversy over issues of realism and representation. In contrast to these European films in which the links to current wars and political issues were explicit, the most violent American films addressed them within popular genres, with stories set in the past. By defining the Western as "a universal frame within which it is possible to comment on today,"<sup>9</sup> Peckinpah helped lead contemporary critics like Marilyn Yaquinto to conclude, "By 1969 director Sam Peckinpah gave us *The Wild Bunch*, supposedly a Western about a bygone era but the slaughter-on-screen was as fresh as anything ever filmed before."<sup>10</sup>

By now it should be clear that I am using this cross-cultural comparison between *The Wild Bunch* and *La caza* not to suggest that the former's narrative orchestration of violence was solely derived from Spain but as an entry into distinguishing how it functions with cultural specificity in American cinema of the late 1960s and beyond. For, despite differences in genre, the changes Peckinpah made in Saura's model are consistent with conventions found in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and these are precisely the characteristics that Del Amo and Saura found so alien to Spanish cinema and that made these films seem so vitally new to American audiences at the time of their release.

### American NOVA: The Narrative Orchestration of Violent Attractions

What these two films share with *The Wild Bunch* is a narrative orchestration of violence in which action sequences function like performative "numbers," interrupting the linear drive of the plot with their sensational audio and visual spectacle yet simultaneously serving as dramatic climaxes that advance the story toward closure. Because these violent numbers are so excessive, their rhythmic representation so kinetic, and their visceral pleasures so compelling, their cumulative effect provides a rival mode of orchestration that threatens to usurp the narrative's traditional function of contextualization through a seriality and an exuberance that render the film comic, no matter how painful, tragic, or satiric its narrative resolution may be.

The narrative logic that underlies this pattern of orchestration is perhaps most familiar (and innocuous) to us in musicals. Yet it has also been extended to other cinematic genres and regimes—perhaps most relevantly for our purposes by Linda Williams in her groundbreaking work on pornography, in which she persuasively shows how sex scenes function like musical numbers; and most powerfully by Tom Gunning in his influential

work on the “cinema of attractions” as an alternative mode to narrative in early cinema, a mode that continues to survive not only in avant-garde texts (as he argued in that first formulation) but also in mainstream film genres like animated cartoons, musicals, disaster films, action films, and other hybrids.<sup>11</sup> Whereas Gunning claims that “the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself,” Mary Ann Doane argues that in early execution films (a popular subgenre of actualities) one finds a tension between narrative and violent attractions, which was intensified by the subject of death. In describing *Electrocuting an Elephant* (Edison, 1903) and *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (Porter/Edison, 1901), she notes both their “intense fascination with the representation of death” and their narrativization of these killings as an “orchestration of guilt and punishment.”

The direct presentation of death to the spectator as pure event, as shock, was displaced by its narrativization. Technology and narrative form an alliance in modernity to ameliorate the corrosiveness of the relation between time and subjectivity. Perhaps death functions as a kind of cinematic ur-event because it appears as the zero degree of meaning, its evacuation. With death we are suddenly confronted with pure event, pure contingency, what ought to be inaccessible to representation (hence the various social and legal bans against the direct, nonfictional filming of death). Such a problematic is possible only where contingency and meaning, event and structure are radically opposed.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the singulative “ground zero” of death, the representation of violent iterations suggests a proliferating series that moves both forward and backward in time, as if denying the finality of death—a disavowal that is essentially comic. I am arguing that the tension between these rival orchestrations of violence—a rhythmic accumulation of discrete, serial events (beatings, murders, executions) versus their narrativization (in a unifying story of guilt and punishment)—is generated by a comic hybridization that is central to the American representation of cinematic action. Instead of the story merely anchoring the meaning and binding the emotional impact of the violence it contains, these recurring disruptive events resist narrative closure through a rhythmic orchestration of violent spectacle that infects the story with a resilient seriality and comic exuberance until it is no longer certain whether the narrative is orchestrating the violence or whether the violent events are orchestrating the narrative.

The disruptive power of this tension is palpable in Prince’s fascinating discussion of *The Wild Bunch* in which he blames the “kinetic montage” for undermining the narrative. After casting “Bloody Sam” as the “seminal practitioner” of a “savage” postmodern cinema, Prince earnestly tries to redeem him by distinguishing his moral vision from that of the “pernicious” postmodern films he helped spawn. To perform this feat, he celebrates Peckinpah’s “melancholy framing of violence” in narratives that

focus on suffering, a reading that unfortunately does not apply to *The Wild Bunch*. Thus, despite claiming that it and *Straw Dogs* are "Peckinpah's two films of hard brilliance and crystalline control in their cinematic design," Prince curiously concludes that *The Wild Bunch* is "an anomaly in Peckinpah's screen treatment of violence."<sup>13</sup> This torturous logic shows Prince struggling with the contradiction between traditional narrative contextualization and those violent "montage set pieces" it fails to tame—sequences that he acknowledges to be the most influential and innovative parts of the film but that he feels morally compelled to condemn. What I am arguing is that it is precisely this disruptive tension between the unifying narrative and these proliferating, comic violent attractions (rather than the attractions themselves) that is so characteristic of the American orchestration of cinematic violence.

*The Violent Orchestration of Hybridization and Hysteria  
in Bonnie and Clyde*

Preceding *The Wild Bunch* by two years, *Bonnie and Clyde* was the film that first popularized this violent narrative logic with mainstream American audiences. Like Peckinpah's Western, it had strong European influences. As is well known, screenwriters David Newman and Robert Benton had tried to get François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard to direct the film before turning to Arthur Penn, for they were partly inspired by the innovative use of the gangster genre (in films like Godard's *Breathless* [1959], *Band of Outsiders* [1964], and *Pierrot le fou* [1965], and Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* [1960]); by the fast-paced, exhilarating motion of their characters, camera work, and narratives; and by the unpredictability of their violent events.

While exploring the mythic roots of the American gangster film, a genre that flourished in the 1930s and justified violence as a common social response to the impotence imposed by the Great Depression and by the economic inequities of capitalism, *Bonnie and Clyde* blatantly combines this form with conventions from the musical (another popular American genre of the 1930s that offered a different model for orchestrating violent attractions). The mixture is most blatant in the scene when, after committing their first murder, the Barrow gang escapes into a movie theater that happens to be showing Busby Berkeley's "We're in the Money" number from the classical American musical *Gold Diggers of 1933*, in which a chorus line of showgirls dance in front of huge gold coins bearing the words "In God We Trust." The film presents these two popular genres from the 1930s as opposite sides of the same coin: violent confrontation versus total escape. Both genres appealed to our nation at a time when it was deeply polarized and in extreme political crisis, which was also the situation in 1967 (the year of the film's release), when the nation was sharply divided over the Vietnam War. After quoting one of the film's screenwriters, Robert Benton, as saying that spectators at the time frequently speculated that the film was "really about Vietnam . . . really about Lee Harvey Oswald, really about police brutality," Yaquinto concludes:

Within a year of *Bonnie and Clyde* real-life violence made the film's screen

blood look contrived. As the war in Vietnam continued to mushroom and antiwar sentiments reached an equally theatrical pitch, bloodshed was a nightly news event. Then came the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King as well as the street rioting outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. It must have looked as if no amount of screen violence could ever seem like overkill to a public feeding off a daily diet of carnage.<sup>14</sup>

This feeling of excessive violence in the film is intensified by the way it is combined with a driving comic energy. As in *The Wild Bunch*, the fusion of violence and laughter is orgasmic, for both function as surrogates for sex; but here that point is explicitly narrativized as compensation for Clyde's sexual impotence, which complicates the masculine gendering of violence and makes it more vulnerable to subversion by Bonnie and her parodic posturing with phallic guns and cigar. Instead of being confined to the exclusively male realm of the traditional gangster movie, farcical violence is all in the family, equally accessible both to the Barrow brothers and their wives. The combination of violence and laughter is amplified by the exuberant bluegrass banjo music of Flatt and Scruggs's "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," which pushes the comic exuberance to new extremes, turning this road movie into a Road Runner cartoon in which characters resiliently bounce back after every violent episode. After one successful bank robbery, there is even a brief cut to a farcical Keystone Cop-type chase scene in which harmless police cars roll over and nearly collide while the gang escapes across the state line. When the music is absent, the tone grows ominous and the violent consequences more serious, as in the playful bank job that ends with the first murder and in the hilarious encounter with Eugene and Vilma, which ends with the gloomy discovery that he's a mortician. When the situation and tone grow desperate, the laughter and violence become hysterical, which makes the action appear aberrational. The rhythmic alternation between silence and shrieking contributes to the film's sustained tension, implying that hysteria is always just below the surface of the action. The hysteria is amplified by Blanche, whose terrified screams run throughout the film and are as disturbing to the audience as they are to Bonnie.

The hysteria is most intense in the two-part shoot-out in which Blanche is blinded and Buck killed. Evoking the war film genre, an armored tank cautiously approaches the small motor cabin in which the Barrow gang is sheltered for the night (as if the police were troops entering a war zone held by the enemy). The gang escapes this confined space and flees to their cars, desperate to get back on the open road. Their flight is accompanied not by the comic banjo music but by a terrifying cacophony of orchestrated hysteria: the racing engines, the staccato firing of machine guns, Buck's painful moans, Blanche's blood-curdling screams and prayers, and C. W. Moss's quiet weeping. Finally they escape the noise and stop for the night in an open field, tumbling out of the car like toons. At dawn this brief interlude of darkness and quiet is ruptured by the police, shrieking like animals and setting the Barrow car ablaze, resuming the cacophony of gunfire, car



crashes, and agonizing screams. When Buck Barrow finally dies, it is a welcome relief.

The alternation between silence and hysteria intensifies the violence of this sequence and of the entire film. Hysteria becomes the norm, punctuated only by moments of stillness and slow motion. Like the visit to Angel's village in *The Wild Bunch*, Bonnie's visit with her mother at the family picnic is a symbolic respite steeped in nostalgia, a utopian vision of the lost community to which the Barrow gang can never return. Like Peckinpah's Western outlaws, she and Clyde can find lasting solace only in the film's final massacre, which functions both as orgasmic climax to the series of hysterical violent events that precede it and as the pivotal point in the narrative where the hyperviolence turns tragic. The formal dynamics are reminiscent of the final danse macabre of Toshiro Mifune's Macbeth figure in Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), in which this tragic villain is killed by an army (who pierce his body with scores of arrows) and, despite his defeat, both the excessiveness of the overkill and the use of slow motion help imbue the murdered figure with an almost supernatural power. Similarly, the final massacre of Bonnie and Clyde by an army of lawmen (who riddle their bodies with scores of bullets) and its balletic representation in romanticized slow motion help transform these outlaw lovers into mythic figures worthy of tragedy, even though their own violent deeds are rendered comic through the accelerated rhythms of editing and music.

It was partly this mythic approach that led William J. Free to observe, "We recognize the subject—a gangster film—but the values presented on the screen are so different from our stereotyped expectations that we see the subjects in a new light," but it was also the way the violence rhythmically structured the narrative that led spectators to this difference in perception. Whereas Yaquinto concludes, "The film enabled the genre to use violence in a more literal manner—not just for the punctuation, but also to explore the brutality of violence itself,"<sup>15</sup> I am arguing that it was precisely this orchestration of violent punctuation that enabled the brutality to have such strong emotional impact and that made spectators feel the film was so "new."

Although *Bonnie and Clyde* combines familiar elements of the gangster genre and musical, this mythic ending helped it spawn a new subgenre of violent road movies featuring a heterosexual outlaw couple in search of justice, thrills, or fame—a genre that could be traced back to Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937), Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948), and Joseph Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1949) but that owed its violent orchestration to *Bonnie and Clyde*. This was the subgenre that launched the careers of both Terrence Malick and Steven Spielberg in the early 1970s, with *Badlands* (1973) and *The Sugarland Express* (1974) respectively;<sup>16</sup> that was subsequently subjected to subversions of gender and sexuality both here and abroad in films like Alain Tanner's *Messidor* (1977), Margarethe von Trotta's *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1977), Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (1992); and that reached a new level of hyperviolence in the 1990s in films like Tony Scott's *True Romance* (1993) and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*

(1994), both based on screenplays by Quentin Tarantino. All of these films—and the critical discourse around them—look back with nostalgia to *Bonnie and Clyde*.

*A Futuristic Vision of Violent Representation  
in A Clockwork Orange*

The third film to become part of the raging debate over cinematic violence in this period was Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), which was bound to be compared with *The Wild Bunch* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. In contrast to the visceral complicity we experienced in response to the violence in those two earlier genre films, here we enjoy the ironic distance of satire, which mocks any easy identification with brutal popular heroes. In the opening shot the camera glides backward from a facial close-up of the punkish protagonist Alex (Malcolm McDowell) to a safe emotional distance, revealing the futuristic kitsch aesthetics of the Korova Milk Bar. The film is not personally threatening because we are not turned on by the violent spectacle or longing for its return, even if Alex is. Instead of functioning as a surrogate for sex, violence merely heightens or blocks Alex's erotic pleasure.

To orchestrate the violence, the film uses both nondiegetic musical scoring (as in its violent predecessors *The Wild Bunch* and *Bonnie and Clyde* and Kubrick's own *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968]) and also fully staged song and dance sequences of rape and violence, which make the hybridization with the musical more corrosive. The fighting and ultraviolence are literally transformed into dance through musical orchestration, and the elegant pull-backs to long shots not only keep us from seeing any blood but also enable us to savor the artfully designed irony. The violent attractions are unified more by the music than by Alex's voice-over narration, particularly through the music's continuing incongruity with the brutal actions it accompanies. The film uses both slow-motion and speeded-up footage to heighten not the emotional intensity (as in *The Wild Bunch* and *Bonnie and Clyde*) but aesthetic stylization (particularly in the comical soft-core scene in which Alex has sex with two young girls to the accelerated strains of the William Tell Overture). Such scenes reveal how dependent all representations are on the modulation of rhythm. These blatantly contrived manipulations of the image helped lay the groundwork for a reliance on special effects and multitrack sound design in the violent action films of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly once they were augmented by the increased compositing capacities of computer graphics and digitization.<sup>17</sup>

The film is not about the use of violence for social change but about the representation of violence and its consequences for subjectivity. The themes don't emphasize allegiance to a group (for all groups in the film are equally corrupt—Alex's gang of droogs, his family, the police, the church, political parties, and so on), but rather the freedom of an individual to make moral choices, even when spawned in a violent, dehumanized culture. This larger scope of political-social corruption makes distinctions of law and order appear as deceptive as the artificial lines drawn between genres, which means all purebreds are suspect and all hybrids valued for their

unique combination of choices. In this case we find a unique generic brew of political satire, science fiction, the musical, and the juvenile gang film, in which comic exuberance is not a matter of resilience but a scathing black humor to which virtually everyone in the film is subjected. The film evokes not a nostalgic sense of loss for values from the past, but satiric irony about utopian visions of the future.

Unlike the other two films, the nationality of *A Clockwork Orange* is also marked by hybridity. Although directed by Stanley Kubrick (a well-known Jewish-American filmmaker who emigrated to England) and financed and released by Warner Bros. (a major Hollywood studio), it was filmed in England with a predominantly British cast and was based on a popular British novel by Anthony Burgess (who spent many years working as a colonial in Malaya). Its protagonist is a marginalized Londoner who was later adopted as a cultural icon by a global youth culture.

In Burgess's 1962 first-person novel, the reader's experience is filtered entirely through the language of Alex (the brutish fifteen-year-old narrator), who, along with the droogs in his gang, speaks a strange patois that combines Russian and English. In learning Alex's vocabulary, we internalize his language and are inevitably drawn into complicity with his ultraviolent point of view. He literally puts his words in our mouth—a dynamic that merely exaggerates what happens in the process of reading any novel and thereby exposes the subversive potential of the first-person narrative. This process does not survive in the film because verbal language is no longer the dominant means of transmission in this medium. The patois sounds like merely another one of those British dialects or teenage jargons that are difficult to understand but not impossible to decipher, particularly with the aid of strong visuals and action.

As an alternative, Kubrick moves to reflexive commentary on cinematic spectatorship, where the audience's complicity is linked to the pleasure experienced while consuming violent audiovisual imagery. This process is particularly strong in the prison sequence, where in exchange for shortening his sentence, Alex agrees to undergo an experimental behavioral therapy (the Ludovico treatment) to eradicate the pleasure he takes in performing ultraviolence. Although this treatment is described in considerable detail in the novel, it is actually dramatized in the film, so that we spectators also partake in the experience. As Alex sits strapped in a strait-jacket with his eyes held open by "lid-locks," a torturous contraption (worthy of the horror genre) that prevents him from shutting his eyes, he is subjected to a cinematic montage of "nasty bits of ultraviolence": realistic violence from a Hollywood-type action film with high production values and lots of hyperrealistic blood; a gang rape of a young woman from a teen-pic; and Nazi war footage showing Hitler, air battles, and bombings while Alex's beloved Beethoven's Ninth Symphony swells in the background. Unlike Alex we still have the freedom to close our eyes and are not conditioned to associate these images with a deathlike paralysis and nauseating terror; nevertheless, we are still forced to perceive other disturbing connections that make the noblest art complicit with evil. We are reminded that the same culture that created Beethoven also spawned

Hitler, who knew how to aestheticize brutality. And we are led to see how easily the cultural connotations of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" and Gene Kelley's "Singin' in the Rain" can be modified and contaminated through montage, narrative recontextualization, and sound-image relations—a point Kubrick earlier demonstrated with Strauss's "Blue Danube" in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Such reinscriptions across different cultures, media, and periods show the power of editing and meaning production at the point of exhibition and reception (rather than merely during production), a realization that potentially empowers not only fanatical Beethoven fans like Alex but also postmodernist artists who specialize in sampling and pastiche. This reinscription process also applies to Burgess's novel, whose story and language are retained but whose meaning and structure are reorchestrated through Kubrick's violent representations.

The film's shift of focus from violent behavior to representation, from social engineering to artistic reception, can best be demonstrated in the way Kubrick changes the murder that sends Alex to prison. This sequence is crucial because of its central position in the narrative, which is bisected by Alex's retraining in prison, with the second half mirroring the first and with each violent episode converting Alex's former role as perpetrator into that of victim, a reversal that shows us how easily our feelings toward a character can be manipulated even with emotional distance from the events. This structure positions the violent episodes as a series of discrete attractions, like guideposts along a narrative journey that can be recognized by a traveler moving in either direction. It also marks the murder that sends Alex to prison and the retraining he undergoes there as the two key points of narrative rupture, which are both pivotal to how the violent attractions should be read. Thus it is hardly surprising that these two central episodes are so explicitly focused on retraining spectators in how to respond to art. While this was also the case in the novel with respect to the prison episode, it was not so with the murder, which Kubrick ingeniously transforms.

Whereas in the novel the victim is a pathetic, lonely old "baboochka" living in a house in Oldtown swarming with cats and antiques, Kubrick turns her into a rich, skinny proprietor of a fashionable health farm who happens to be a collector of modernist art and who happens to specialize in sado-masochistic images that dehumanize the body. We first see her doing yoga exercises in leotard and tights, surrounded by her cats, who stand in for "pussy" in the sexual battle that ensues—a gendered duel in which artistic prostheses substitute for sexual parts. Alex and his droogs wear extravagant codpieces and long obscene phallic noses, radical costuming that not only prefigures the punk aesthetic but also parodies erotic high art. When the woman attacks him with a bust of Beethoven, he defends himself with her huge white sculpture of a detached phallus (which she calls "a very important work of art") and transforms it (rather than the small silver statue of a young girl used in the novel) into a deadly weapon. By being bludgeoned to death with her own pricey art piece, she is forced to face the material consequences of her own complicity with an elitist phallogentric culture. Although she uses the same language as did the old lady in the novel

("Wretched little slummy bedbug, breaking into real people's houses") and belongs to the same social class, here the elitism is intensified by her snooty upper-class accent and linked more directly to her taste for modernist high art. When the actual death blow is struck, there is a momentary substitution of a cartoon mouth for the scream we never hear, as if the murderous consequences are being aestheticized and thereby disavowed. But once outside the mansion, we are back in a male-driven Oedipal narrative, where the murder leads to Alex being temporarily blinded by his droogs and left alone between two sphinx statues to face the police and narrative consequences—exile in prison and a satiric redemptive return.

Unlike *The Wild Bunch* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, which are both set in the past, *A Clockwork Orange* looks forward not only because the story is set in the future but because it prefigured so many cultural trends to come. Although *Bonnie and Clyde* is still invoked in most critical reviews of recent outlaw road movies and a restored version of *The Wild Bunch* was rereleased in 1995, their representations of violence now seem relatively mild when compared with the hyperviolent movies of the intervening years. Yet Kubrick's film continues to attract new generations of fans who see it as a prime source for the punk aesthetic, the postmodernist sensibility, and a long line of bad-ass juvenile gang movies in which stylized costuming, speech, and gestures are an accepted mode of political action.<sup>18</sup> As Yaquinto puts it succinctly, "Kubrick's futuristic criminal meltdown, *A Clockwork Orange*, remains the nightmare vision about gang violence on either side of the Atlantic."<sup>19</sup>

### Fast-Forward to the Super-NOVA of the 1990s

At this point I would like to leap ahead to the 1990s to consider how Hollywood's narrative orchestration of violent attractions has reached the point of super-NOVA, where violent spectacle is increasingly noisy and explosive, more blatantly stylized and parodic, more wildly humorous and energetic, and more specifically tailored to an adolescent male mentality. This rhetoric of violence has become increasingly dependent on expensive special effects, whose pyrotechnics rely on high-powered technology both in front of and behind the camera. The ability to afford and manipulate these concrete technologies of violence—both the weapons in the story and the cinematic apparatus on the set and in post-production—has become a sign of masculine mastery and comic empowerment. Here is how an outsider, French theorist Christian Metz, described the trend in the early 1990s:

A considerable portion of American production tends to be combined with cinema for children. Very often, these films have a deep-seated and shrill vulgarity, a profound silliness, a disturbing attraction to violence. But . . . these films testify to an astonishing vitality of visual invention and of technological ingenuity, and to a vivacity of spirit in concrete things which is, as many continental people like to forget, a real form of intelligence.<sup>20</sup>

I want to examine how this super-NOVA comic intelligence functions in two hyperviolent films that generated as much controversy in the 1990s as the earlier ones did in the 1960s and 1970s—Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp*

*Fiction* (1994) and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), based on a Tarantino screenplay). Though clearly linked to the earlier three films, both carry the orchestrated violence and comic exuberance to a new level of stylization, hybridity, and reflexivity and increasingly address the social consequences of living with violent representations. This reflexivity thereby enables them to comment on recent trends in the way violence is represented in action films of the 1980s and 1990s. 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.

### *The Spectacle of Violent Subjectivity in Natural Born Killers*

*Natural Born Killers* is a super-NOVA gone ballistic! It rivals the mainstream action movies of the 1980s and 1990s in sheer noise and thrills, but with an artistic brilliance that is both exhilarating and disturbing. This kaleidoscopic collage—of slanted angles, staccato cuts, jerky camera movements, distorting lenses, discordant voices, clashing styles, heavily layered soundtrack, subjective inserts, demented flashbacks, and abrupt shifts between black and white and color and live action and animation—creates a richly embroidered surface that unifies the film as pastiche. It also derails the fast-driving linearity of its plot, which moves forward as relentlessly as the Santa Fe train pictured in the opening montage. This paradoxical duality of constant flow and compulsive interruption is a defining characteristic of television, which the film targets as a primary source for our pathological subjectivity. The film also presents a rival cinematic form for that duality: the recurring shot of the outlaw couple (driving, fighting, or fucking) in one of their many vehicles, which instead of racing forward like the getaway cars of the Barrow gang, are strangely suspended (usually at a slanted angle and with artificial lighting) in front of a fake backdrop or dream screen on which a wild mélange of images from their cultural and personal reservoir of memories are rear-projected. Like thrill rides in an amusement park, these narrative vehicles may promise to put us “on the pathway to Hell,” but the trip is visceral and interior.

The film addresses the question: What does it mean to grow up in a culture that is saturated with a constant flow of violent images from personal memory and media and constantly remixed into new kaleidoscopic combinations? This question is seen with respect not only to the film's notorious outlaw couple Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis) but also their legions of teenage fans all over the world, who are increasingly homogenized by the same corrosive images. As one of them puts it in a TV interview, “I don't approve of mass murder but if I *were* a serial killer I would choose to be Mickey and Mallory.”<sup>21</sup> This violent subjectivity is also shared by the media and cops on their trail. In fact, the flashback to the violent childhood of the murderous cop Jack (Tom Sizemore) features the same boy who consistently stars in Mickey's own recurring flashbacks to his painful childhood experiences, suggesting that the personal memories of both killers have been mediated by the same



movie images. This process makes the word *natural* in the title ironic, inviting us to substitute the term *naturalized*.

In dramatizing this process of naturalization, *Natural Born Killers* alludes to all three films previously discussed: to *A Clockwork Orange* in its focus on violent subjectivity, to *Bonnie and Clyde* in its choice of the outlaw couple road movie as the primary genre, and to *The Wild Bunch* in specific allusions to the scorpion, which appears in the opening sequence of both films (and evokes the image of violent children) and to Peckinpah's final massacre, which is seen in excerpt in one of Stone's many montages of reprocessed violent imagery.

Like *A Clockwork Orange*, *Natural Born Killers* focuses on violent subjectivity in a totally corrupt culture yet grants us less emotional distance, for we are deeply immersed in the same cultural dream pool in which the film's homicidal lovers are spawned. This poisonous reservoir is comprised not of esoteric selections chosen by a discriminating yet brutal consumer like Alex, but an anarchic mixture of images broadcast daily to the masses with a volume and speed that make them far more dangerous and give new resonance to Alex's favorite term, *borrowshow*.

We are immediately confronted by this cultural reservoir in the montage behind the opening credits. While listening to Leonard Cohen's apocalyptic "Waiting for the Miracle," we see a chain of discrete images of Americana whose meanings are narrativized by different genres: black-and-white shots of a desert, a coyote, and a rattlesnake suggest the iconography of the Western, whereas color images of a cup of coffee, a Santa Fe train, an American eagle, and a coffee shop sign evoke the road movie. These specific images (particularly the rattler) snake through the rest of the film, their meanings constantly recontextualized in the scenes that follow.

Once inside the coffee shop, we see a black-and-white TV set, with the stations being changed by the waitress, evoking a more common form of montage that we daily experience on television: the images range from vintage series like *Leave It to Beaver* and *77 Sunset Strip* to monstrous facial close-ups of Nixon and Dracula. Once the actual story begins, the bombardment of choices continues: in Mickey's opening line, "What kind of pie do you have?"; in Mallory's selection of a song on the jukebox to accompany her erotic dance with the cowboy that literally morphs into murder; in her use of "eenie, meenie, miney, mo" to choose which of the two remaining victims they will murder; and in the alternation between black and white and color to represent this escalating massacre. The editing pace is so fast and the pastiche so overwrought that we don't have time to shut our eyes or think about what we are seeing and hearing; we only have time to experience the exhilarating rush, to free-associate with the images, and to bounce between humor and horror.

The Kubrick sequence closest to this effect is the one in which Alex is subjected to the Ludovico treatment, but in *Natural Born Killers* the process is no longer experimental, and its effect is precisely the opposite—to enhance rather than extinguish the pleasure taken in violent imagery and to desensitize rather than arouse any discomfort over its consequences. Kubrick's retraining sequence was also replayed in Nicolas Roeg's satiric

sci-fi film, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), in the scene in which an alien, played by David Bowie, sits in front of a bank of television sets that bombard him with an accelerating montage of violent images, as he screams, "Get out of my mind!" Perhaps the British sources of these two movies make their marginal protagonists more resistant to these brutal media images, most of which hail from the United States, but in *Natural Born Killers* we're on home turf, where there's no way out.

Nowhere is this entrapment demonstrated with greater comic brilliance and horror than in the flashback sequence when Mickey and Mallory first meet and then murder her parents, not only her obscene, sexually abusive father (played by comedian Rodney Dangerfield) but also her apathetic mother, who is oblivious to the domestic incest and violence that permeate the household and who is brutally burned to death in her bed. Considered generically, this sequence plays like the obligatory scene in the outlaw couple movie where the young woman cuts her family ties so that she can run off with her lover on the road. Yet when compared with Bonnie Parker's nostalgic visit with her mother at the family picnic, it shows how far the genre has moved toward the horror film. Stone's sequence is more similar to the patricidal scene in Malick's brilliant outlaw road movie, *Badlands*, only here Stone substitutes outrageous humor for visual beauty as the antidote to the horror. Titled "I Love Mallory" and played like a TV sitcom, the sequence evokes *Married with Children* more than *I Love Lucy*. What is so uncanny about this flashback is that we seem to be seeing it from the inside—that is, viewing it through the shared subjectivity of Mickey and Mallory that has been shaped by television and sees everything, no matter how horrific, as a sitcom with an audience track, which (in case you're too numb or dumb) tells you exactly how and when to squeal with terror or delight. Yet the wild humor competes with the grotesquery of the violence, making us feel guilty whenever we laugh.

Though this double bind is a long way from *The Wild Bunch* (where it was visceral engagement with the violence rather than a humorous reaction that aroused our guilt), the fusion of laughter and violence can be found in many films of the 1990s—most offhandedly in Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall* (1990), in which Schwarzenegger is left holding the bloody arms of the villain that are ripped off in an elevator fight scene (a scene that usually draws laughter from the audience); most disturbingly in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), in which a long, drawn-out torture sequence (Michael Madsen cuts off the ear of his captive and dowses him in gasoline to burn him alive) is rendered hilarious through the dance number he teasingly performs for his victim—the 1970s hit tune "Stuck in the Middle with You"; and most brilliantly in Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas* (1990), in which Joe Pesci tells Ray Liotta a violent story that may or may not be intentionally funny and purposely makes both him (and us) uncertain as to whether it's dangerous to laugh. Like Scorsese, Stone puts us in this double bind to show how the incongruous reaction is increasingly pervasive within our desensitized culture, particularly when the lines between all genres, tones, and feelings dissolve. This occurs very frequently on television, where with the zap of a button, you can jump from the TV movie of

the week that deals with a social problem like incest to a serial comedy that plays the same domestic situation for laughs.

In the sequence where Mickey and Mallory go to a cheap motel with a kitsch log cabin interior, the film conveys their entrapment within this contaminated subjectivity, which is simultaneously bombarded by two screens compounding the violence: the little television screen (which Mickey manipulates with his joystick) and a blank white dream screen visible through the window on which violent sequences from films like *The Wild Bunch*, *Midnight Express*, and *Scarface* are intercut with personal memories from Mickey's abusive childhood. Substituting for the exterior, this reservoir of reprocessed images is the cultural landscape through which all other experiences are mediated; nothing exists outside it. What is so horrific is not the individual images themselves but the effect of their accumulation and inadvertent collisions within culture and consciousness—an assumption basic to montage (at least according to Eisenstein, who saw it as an alternative to narrative), where the primary resource is conflicting “attractions” and where the effect of the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. Within this cultural dream pool all media, genres, and memories converge in pastiche, making it difficult to distinguish between inside and outside, subjectivity and culture, fact and fiction, good and evil, perpetrators and victims, exploitative complicity and satiric commentary.

This erosion of boundaries endangers not only the film's characters and viewers but also its director, who was subjected to the same kinds of attacks he was leveling against his exploitative TV journalist Wayne Gale (Robert Downey Jr.), whose live episode of *American Maniacs* sparks a prison riot and helps Mickey and Mallory escape. Although media exploitation was also depicted in *Bonnie and Clyde*, there it was still possible for Bonnie to manipulate the gang's image. But here, as in *A Clockwork Orange*, the media are part of a totally corrupt culture. As in *The Wild Bunch*, the only characters who escape the corruption are the indigenous Native Americans, but here no alliance with the protagonists is possible. Like the corrupt journalist Gale, the old shaman (Russell Means) joins the growing ranks of the couple's murder victims, with the only glimmer of hope being Mallory's emphatic refrain “Bad! bad! bad!” and Mickey's brief pangs of regret. Yet, in recognizing Mickey as the demon sent to kill him, the shaman lends credence to the killer's later insistence in his TV prison interview that murder is a form of “purity”—or in Doane's terms, a “pure contingency” with “zero degree of meaning.” This “cinematic ur-event” resists being tamed not only by the shaman's dream and Gale's exploitative prison story, but also by Stone's satiric narrative.

The moral ambiguity in this film is very different from that in *The Wild Bunch* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, where it was more a matter of taking sides and remaining loyal till the end. Although Mickey and Mallory brag about their total commitment to each other, both their betrayals and hyperbole expose this position to ridicule, even during their improvised marriage ceremony, which is a weird mix of inventiveness and clichés. Symbolically set on a bridge with a sublime view, the ritual consists of Mallory transforming a long, diaphanous white scarf into a wedding veil, which gracefully

floats down into the gorge below, while Mickey turns the ceremony into a blood wedding that unites them for life: the droplets of their hybridized blood morph into cartoon images of entwined snakes, which follow the white veil into the abyss and animate the graphic design on their wedding rings. Before we get too carried away by the beauty of the sentiment or ingenuity of the graphics, the mood is comically deflated by a passing truck full of screaming rednecks, who make the bride substitute "Fuck you" for "I do." Yet the film's ironic happy ending shows Mickey and Mallory still together on the road, cozily nested with their growing brood of kids in a comfy mobile home, an image of the American family that may be as terrifying as their earlier mayhem and murder.

Still, there is something invigorating about the film's comic exuberance, which reflects not only on Mickey and Mallory, who are as resilient, amoral, and wily as Road Runner and his pursuing coyote, but also on the breathtaking inventiveness of the film, with its richly textured cartoon aesthetic and its frenetically orchestrated violence. As if building on the cartoon cutaway from the central murder of the art dealer in *A Clockwork Orange*, Stone turns it into an aesthetic strategy that destabilizes every image, character, and moral position in his movie. It is these qualities that make the film celebrate the very culture it supposedly decries—a charge that was also leveled against all of the earlier films I have been describing.<sup>22</sup>

### Pulp Fiction as Database Narrative

*Pulp Fiction* demonstrates how violent attractions are narrativized through genre and other paradigmatic choices. It does not merely "use" a combination of generic conventions (like the earlier films described) but is more about the process of hybridization itself. Although it reworks many ideas, images, characters, and lines from Tarantino's original script for *Natural Born Killers*, this film avoids Stone's directorial choice of an overwrought pastiche of convergence and instead relies on ellipses and segmentation to derail the linear drive of the narrative. By constructing a violent nonlinear narrative full of ellipses, Tarantino cracks open traditional genres to show how original variations can still be generated within the gaps. Building on the experimental elliptical narratives from the non-violent films of Jim Jarmusch, his nimble narrative jumps present a low-tech form of compositing that stands in marked contrast to the expensive high-tech blockbusters of the 1990s. Black fades mark these temporal ruptures, emphasizing the story's segmentation; instead of syncopating the action (like the pauses in *The Wild Bunch* and *Bonnie and Clyde*), they become black holes in the narrative that give generic clichés new life.

This process is immediately introduced in the opening, when we are presented with a choice between two dictionary meanings for the word *pulp* that help define the film's approach to genre: "a soft, moist mass of matter," suggesting the malleability and contingency of Tarantino's basic material; and "a magazine or book containing lurid subject matter and being printed on rough unfinished paper," indicating the conventions of the genre and medium that help give it form. This word game is later resumed (with amusing cross-cultural inflections) in banal conversations

about the gendering of the word *garçon*, and the distinctions between an American quarter-pounder and a Parisian "Royale with cheese." Such games show how the database structure of the dictionary can serve as an alternative to traditional narrative for contextualizing the meanings of words and images.

Once the pretitles teaser cuts to the diegetic world of a coffee shop, where a contemporary outlaw couple, Pumpkin (Tim Roth) and Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer), are "plotting" a holdup, we are positioned within what appears to be a regular "story" but are once again presented with the process of making a selection from a database of choices: the target of their holdup (liquor store, bank, gas station, or restaurant), the ethnicity of their victims (Vietnamese, Koreans, or Jews), the tone of their scene (romance or terror), the intertexts that help define how we read it (*Bonnie and Clyde* and *Natural Born Killers* rather than *A Clockwork Orange* or *The Wild Bunch*), and the punctuation that brings it to a close (a freeze signaling ellipsis and segmentation). At the end of the credits, we hear what sounds like someone turning a radio dial, speeding across an array of stations and musical selections until (like a DJ) finding exactly the right song ("Jungle Boogie") that sets the film's emotional rhythms in motion (a process that dramatizes the way the film's vintage musical score was actually put together). Both sets of choices evoke *Natural Born Killers*, particularly the scene when Mickey lovingly calls Mallory his "Honey Bunny bride" and the opening coffee shop massacre where the waitress switches the TV set from one program to another and where there is a similar set of choices. But whereas Stone's embroidered visual texture and multilayered audio track evoke the pulsating cultural dream pool, Tarantino exposes its ulterior database structure.

"Jungle Boogie" is still playing when Tarantino's narrative jumps to the interior of a 1974 Chevy Nova carrying two killers—Vincent Vega (John Travolta) and Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson)—to their next encounter with violence, a new narrative vehicle that continues to offer more paradigmatic choices: not only in their dialogue regarding quarter-pounders and Royales with cheese or in their choice of weapons for their next hit, but also in the shift of genre from outlaw couple to gangster film. The rest of the film is structured as if Tarantino kept his hand firmly on that dial, constantly selecting from his personal archive of film-viewing memories which genre, character, setting, music, and dialogue to use for each elliptical pause in the narrative and precisely when to return to the stories already in progress on the syntagmatic plane.

What this implies is that database and narrative are not really alternatives (as Lev Manovich has argued<sup>23</sup>) but two sides of the same process, which is usually hidden from view: the databases are the normally unseen paradigms from which specific items are chosen and then combined (as a syntagma) to generate a specific sentence or narrative. But in this film both the paradigms and the process are blatantly apparent. According to Roland Barthes, this kind of "extension of a paradigm onto the syntagmatic plane" is a form of "semiotic transgression" around which "a great number of creative phenomena are situated" (particularly in the works of experimental

nonlinear filmmakers such as Luis Buñuel, Peter Greenaway, Chris Marker, and Raul Ruiz).<sup>24</sup> But one rarely finds it used so blatantly in a successful mainstream film, especially one as violent as *Pulp Fiction*.

These dynamics grow complex in the sequence in which Vincent and Jules try to recover their boss's briefcase from a group of young thieves. We are confronted with a choice of whether to judge these characters by their dialogue or their actions (a choice equally relevant to the whole film, which could be judged by its innovative tone and orchestration or by its conventional plot and thematics). Although the drug war and resulting murder are familiar, Jules's steady stream of talk is not, for it ranges from amusing banter about fast-food to a long biblical quote about the path of the righteous man being beset by the tyranny of evil. Confronted with this contradiction, we must decide whether to force a synthesis, in which case Jules might be seen as "an exterminating angel" worthy of Buñuel. The consequences of this unique combination prove miraculous, for when we later cut back to this scene the fourth young thief (another member of the same paradigm, who had been hiding in the bathroom) fires bullets that pass right through the bodies of Vincent and Jules without drawing blood. Jules declares it "divine intervention" and decides to retire from his murderous trade. That is why it is Vincent rather than Jules who is later (in a subsequent sequence that precedes this flashback) murdered in another bathroom by the white boxer Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis). Given the structure of this segmented narrative that frequently lurches backward and forward in time, another reason for getting rid of Vincent is that he is the brother of the white character named Vic Vega from Tarantino's earlier film *Reservoir Dogs*, whereas Jules looks forward to the African-American focus of his later crime film *Jackie Brown* (1997), in which Jackson has another juicy role as a killer, and Pam Grier replaces Travolta as the kick-ass comeback queen. For a reflexive filmmaker like Tarantino, his canon is merely another database that recontextualizes the meaning of any specific work.

The way this database structure is used to orchestrate violent events is perhaps best revealed in the sequence in which Butch the boxer is leaving town after having failed to throw a big fight for the black mobster Marcellus (Ving Rhames) but literally runs into him in the street. After both are hurt in the collision and the violence that follows, Butch flees into a pawnshop run by a twisted hillbilly sadist named Maynard and his red-neck accomplice Zed (who both look like emigres from the back woods of *Deliverance*). Together with their leather-hooded love slave, the Gimp, they try to subject both Butch and his wily black pursuer to torture, rape, and murder. After managing to escape, the boxer gallantly goes back to rescue his former nemesis from, as they say in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, "a fate worse than death" and, after subduing the kinky captors with a weapon chosen from their own pawn shop, leaves the murderous vengeance to Marcellus. Like the film's opening, this mind-boggling, hyperplotted sequence bombards the spectator with a series of multiple choices drawn from conflicting paradigms: the generic contextualization of the violence moves fluidly from boxing movie, to gangster film, to horror; the nature of the violence lurches from car crashes, to shootings, to torture,



rape, and murder; and the weapons range from cars, to hammers, chain saws, baseball bats, swords, and guns. The forms of emasculation consist of a series of binary choices: betrayal or beating, feminization or dehumanization, rape or rescue, castration or killing. The sequence of rape victims is chosen by the same racist rhyme, "eenie, meenie, miney, mo," that Mallory used in the coffee shop massacre to decide which of the remaining victims to murder. But whereas she changed the offensive word in the concluding line from "nigger" to "redneck," Tarantino evokes it visually through the selection of Marcellus. The discursive register (against which all of these violent attractions are to be read) also keeps shifting from class to sexuality, gender, regionality, and race. By thrusting the boxer and gangster into this new homoerotic context, we are forced to consider them and their posturing hypermasculinity in a new light—particularly Willis's nickname "Butch" and Rhames's powerful black stud stereotype.

In Tarantino's film, moral issues comprise another handy database. Deciding which characters to root for is simply a matter of style and of how they are positioned in the narrative. Whereas similar dynamics in *A Clockwork Orange* made us question those narrative conventions, here they make us question moral distinctions. For, no matter how terrifying the situation gets for the characters, the comic excess of the reflexive hyperplotting renders the horror humorous for us spectators. The film provides an encyclopedic approach to violence that dazzles our senses with its spectacle of brutal and erotic attractions and tickles our fancy with its dialogue, but still grants us emotional distance. This film in which anything can happen (even miracles!) is more about narrative than about blood and guts, or good and evil. Its comic exuberance reassures us of the survival not of its resilient characters (not even Harvey Keitel's wily "Wolf," who specializes in "cleaning up" violent consequences, or "the comeback kid" Travolta, who is resurrected in flashback) but of popular genres that are still capable of generating innovative pulp fiction. As David Ansen put it, "The miracle of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* is how, being composed of second-hand, debased parts, it succeeds in gleaming like something new."<sup>25</sup>

This sense of "newness" is particularly strong on the register of race, where *Pulp Fiction* puts black and white characters in a range of oppositions—not only Vincent and Jules as contrasting partners and Butch and Marcellus as antagonists, but also Vincent and his boss Marcellus as rivals in a racialized Oedipal triangle involving his white wife, Mia (Uma Thurman). As Stanley Crouch argued in his *Los Angeles Times* review (which so pleased Tarantino that he asked this controversial African-American writer to accept his Best Director Prize for him at the 1995 National Board of Review Awards), his films show "the many miscegenations that shape the goulash of American culture and . . . how powerfully the influence of the Negro helps define even those whites who freely assert their racism" (an issue Tarantino has dealt with in other films he has written or directed, such as *True Romance*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and *Jackie Brown*).<sup>26</sup> What interests me here is the way Tarantino acknowledges how cinematic violence is increasingly used as an arena in which rival racial and ethnic masculinities vie for power.

## Muscling in on the Action: Ethnicity and Masculine Violence

The link between ethnicity and masculine violence is hardly new. As Robert Warshow observed in the early 1950s, a violent genre like the gangster film provided an effective means for various ethnicities (Italian, Irish, and Polish) to negotiate issues of power as they made their way into American mainstream culture.<sup>27</sup> A similar dynamic was also operative in the 1970s for ethnic minorities who were not recent emigres but were still struggling to get their share of the action.<sup>28</sup> The African-American community enjoyed considerable success with the emerging popularity of black independent action films, including Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), Gordon Parks's *Shaft* (1971), Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Superfly* (1972), and their blaxploitation sequels. This dynamic was also operative for later waves of immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s, but tended to be used as fresh material for individual auteurs rather than as a power move for an ethnic community, as in Brian De Palma's ultraviolent remake of *Scarface* (1983), with Italian-American actor Al Pacino as Cuban emigre mobster Tony Montana; in Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* (1985), which many Asian Americans accused of being racist; and in James Grey's directorial debut, *Little Odessa* (1994), a marvelous film about the Russian mafia in Brighton Beach, with a stellar international cast including Tim Roth, Vanessa Redgrave, Maximilian Schell, and Moira Kelly, but no ethnic Russians. In the late 1990s, more challenging experimental auteurs like John Sayles and Jim Jarmusch would address the ideological implications of these issues by exploring how masculine violence is inflected with a diverse array of rival and hybridized ethnicities in popular Hollywood genres: white, Latino, African-American, and Native American ethnicities in Sayles's Western/melodrama *Lone Star* (1995); white and Native American violence in Jarmusch's philosophical Western *Dead Man* (1995); and African-American, Italian, and Japanese inflections in Jarmusch's gangster/martial arts hybrid *Ghost Dog, the Way of the Samurai* (1999). But to understand the full resonance of this hybridization, we need to turn back to the Reagan era of the 1980s, when Hollywood's action heroes appeared mostly lily white.

In the 1980s, as Hollywood action films grew more expensive and their cultural reach more global, "white" masculinity reasserted its dominance, even if some of the most popular new action heroes were Americanized imports—Arnold Schwarzenegger from Austria, Jean-Claude Van Damme from Belgium, and Mel Gibson from Australia, whose ethnicities disappeared as they were transformed into international superstars. Along with white home-grown action heroes (like Harrison Ford, Bruce Willis, Woody Harrelson, Tom Cruise, and even little Macauley Culkin in those *Home Alone* comedies in which ultraviolence was performed against bumbling ethnic villains strictly for laughs<sup>29</sup>), these white imports and their Italian-American counterparts (Sylvester Stallone, John Travolta, Nicholas Cage, Al Pacino, and Robert De Niro) helped Hollywood perpetuate its cultural colonization of the world. It is unlikely that either Van Damme or

Schwarzenegger could have achieved superstardom in their respective native homelands of Belgium or Austria, because of the powerlessness of those national cinemas in the world market. The potency of American representations of violence is as dependent on economic penetration of the global market as it is on technology.

As the stakes grew higher and global competition more intense in the 1990s, there were new attempts by underrepresented minorities to muscle in on the action. Independent Latino filmmakers made their mark with Edward James Olmos's *American Me* (1992) and Richard Rodriguez's miraculously low-budget debut feature *El Mariachi* (1993) and its equally violent, more expensive mainstream sequel, *Desperado* (1995), which accelerated the successful Hollywood crossovers of two popular Hispanic imports—Spain's Antonio Banderas and Mexico's Salma Hayek. Functioning as both sequel and parodic remake, *Desperado* used myriad forms of doubling to amplify its cartoonish violence and ethnic stereotypes. In the opening bar sequence, when Steve Buscemi tells how he almost got killed in another town, he sets up the film as a hyperbolic retelling full of inset narratives, flashbacks, and performative numbers that literally double as music and violence, and wallow in the same kind of complicitous humor that Scorsese interrogated in *GoodFellas*. Arousing our expectations for Banderas—as the film's superviolent hero and primary object of desire—Buscemi authorizes us to enjoy his glamorized singing and killing without remorse. Carrying his guns and guitar in the same case, Banderas is positioned on-stage next to the unknown Chicano actor (Carlos Gallardo) from *El Mariachi*, whom he now replaces as star. He also replaces Peckinpah's Latino Angel, who, in this musical Western, no longer plays sacrificial victim but actually gets the guns, girl, and glory in the final massacre.

Augmented by the mainstream popularity of black superstars in hip-hop culture and basketball, the biggest ethnic challenges in cinematic violence in the early 1990s came from independent African-American filmmakers. Spike Lee's controversial crossover film *Do the Right Thing* (1989) pitted African Americans against Italians, a racial combination with box office appeal to most ethnic communities. It was followed in the 1990s by three powerful films by young independent black filmmakers that focused almost exclusively on black gangsta culture: Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City* (1991), which launched Wesley Snipes as a star; John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), which advanced the movie careers of Cuba Gooding Jr., Larry Fishburne, and Ice Cube; and the Hughes brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993).

### *The Elliptical Verbal Rhythms of Menace II Society*

Of these African-American films from the 1990s, *Menace II Society* performed the most original orchestration of violence—a stuttering, staccato structure comprised of brief flashes of elliptical scenes punctuated by black fades. The narrative is as distinctive as the highly stylized rhythms of African-American speech that drive and define it, a connection the Hughes brothers learned partly from Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *Do the Right Thing*.

Three of the film's murders are triggered by single lines of dialogue that are perceived as violating the masculine pride of the killers. In the opening liquor store shoot-out, which instantly turns the narrator Cain (Tyron Turner) into an accessory to murder, the Korean proprietor's casual remark "I feel sorry for your mother" prompts O-Dog (Larenz Tate) to impetuously kill both him and his wife. In a flashback to a card game in the late 1970s, which functions as Cain's primal scene, an insult mouthed by one of the players, "Suck my dick!" leads Cain's father (Samuel L. Jackson) to shoot him point blank. And later a homeless man's desperate plea for a handout, "I'll suck your dick" (a variation on the previous mortal line), leads O-Dog to a similar homophobic overreaction, and he shoots him on the spot. These acts of murder—as well as the symbolic names of the characters (Cain and O-Dog) and the film's unifying voice-over narration—make us pay careful attention to the talk. In fact, the whole film is framed by the rhythm and stylization of speech. In the opening, before we see any images we hear a riff of black street talk, and at the end as Cain lies dying, with his syncopated heartbeat as back-up, his voice-over continues to define the structure and thematics: "You never knew what was going to happen or when." As we see pulsing flashbacks to brief excerpts from earlier scenes punctuated by black fades, we hear a replay of an earlier conversation: "My grandfather once asked me whether I wanted to live. . . . Yeah, I do—now it's too late." Not only do these final lines and flashing images imbue Cain's death with a tragic dimension (the way the stylized slow-motion massacre did at the end of *Bonnie and Clyde*) but they also make us realize that this film is all about timing.

While most of the violence is unpredictable, senseless, and almost incoherent in narrative terms, it plays as significant on the historical register, making the violent events in Cain's brief elliptical life seem almost inevitable. That's why the two flashbacks that immediately follow the opening liquor store murder are so telling: the first is to historic radio and TV coverage documenting the 1965 Watts riot, in which we see armored tanks rolling into the urban war zone, and the second is to the late 1970s, when Cain witnesses murder for the first time, committed by his drug-dealing father as his junky mother shoots up in a back room. Throughout the narration, Cain constantly calls our attention to the ironic timing of events: the drive-by shooting that kills his cousin occurs only a week after graduation, and his own murder happens just when he was leaving for Atlanta with his girlfriend Roni (Jada Pinkett) and her son Anthony and when the LAPD was closing in on him and O-Dog for the opening liquor store murder. With hindsight, the interruption of Cain's trip was predictable, for it was simply a matter of timing as to whether the gangbangers or the cops would get him first.

Yet the only specific act of violence that we are allowed to anticipate is the revenge killing against those who murdered Cain's cousin. And even there the "Love and Happiness" promised by the song they hear on the way to the drive-by (presumably the love for his cousin and the happiness in avenging his death) are not fulfilled. Instead, Cain tells us he merely learned that he was capable of murder and can do it again if he has to. This

scene makes us realize that in this unending cycle of violence, the vengeful murder will also be done unto him when he least expects it. Thus, violent actions that might seem random and unpredictable in the short run of the brief elliptical scenes prove inevitable within the larger historical narrative.

As in *Pulp Fiction*, another American independent with a violent elliptical narrative, there are no expensive explosions or special effects. But unlike Tarantino's film, the violence here is never humorous or hysterical but rather a matter of history and survival, and the ellipses are not about narrative invention but about capturing the distinctive quality of life in a culture marked by violent, premature deaths. This elliptical structure is also reflected in the broken families—for Cain is raised by his churchgoing grandparents, who eventually reject him because of his violent behavior. More important, the recurring ellipses help emphasize the intense yearning for continuity across the truncated scenes and generations. We hear it from the women who are worrying about their children—both Eileen, whom Cain impregnates in a casual encounter, and Roni, who urges him to leave South Central with her and her son. We see it even more strongly in a few father figures who try to help the next generation to have a better, longer life. We hear it in the speech of Mr. Butler (Charles Dutton), who tells Cain, "Being a black man in America isn't easy, the hunt is on and you're the prey . . . all I'm saying is survive!" We see it even more powerfully in Cain's surrogate father Grenell, who, while serving life in prison, authorizes Cain to replace him as Roni's husband and Anthony's father: "Teach him the way we grew up was bullshit." And we even find it in Cain's final act, when he shields Anthony from the bullets. Both Grenell's unpredictable blessing and Cain's act of sacrifice radically rupture the traditional Oedipal narrative, for instead of a murderous rivalry between father and son they present a transgenerational male bonding, which is as romanticized as the one in *The Wild Bunch* and which represents one of the film's few glimmers of hope.

This male bonding is even extended across ethnicities, in the scene when, after badly battering Cain and his Muslim friend Sherif, two brutal white cops dump their bodies into territory controlled by a violent Latino gang, but instead of taking them out as the cops expect, they take them to the hospital, for they see them as moral allies struggling to survive the onslaught of the white man's violence, oppression, and exploitation. One can try to escape the violence, like Roni and Sherif, or totally embrace it without giving a damn for the consequences, like O-Dog (who is "white America's worst nightmare"), or waver between these two choices like Cain and still get caught in the crossfire. Yet none of these choices makes violence fun, as it is in *Pulp Fiction* and in most violent blockbusters of the 1990s.

The yearning for continuity is also seen in O-Dog's self-destructive obsession with duplicating, selling, and replaying the surveillance tape that recorded his liquor store murder. Although this obsession reflects the entrapping cycles of violence in the hood and ultimately can be used as evidence to capture and convict him, it also becomes a way of acknowledging and memorializing his brief life. Like the historic documentary footage of the 1965 Watts riot and like *Menace II Society* itself, it comes closer to doc-

umenting this segment of American life than does Frank Capra's maudlin classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, which Cain's religious grandparents, along with the rest of America, repeatedly watch every Christmas. Capra's film may be the source for the grandfather's question that Cain repeats at the end—Do you want to live?—but *Menace II Society* provides a far more compelling answer, especially for those living in South Central L.A.

### *Hong Kong's Choreographed Crossovers to Hollywood*

In the 1990s new rhythmic orchestrations of violence were also provided by Hong Kong action stars—Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-Fat, and director John Woo, who were trying to muscle their way into Hollywood actions genres and the North American market to make their stardom truly global, particularly in the face of economic and political uncertainties raised by Hong Kong's restoration to communist China. Unlike Schwarzenegger and Van Damme, they were already celebrities within one of the few national cinemas that had succeeded in challenging Hollywood's dominance worldwide and even had a cult following within the United States (particularly with film buffs and college students). Unlike Banderas and Gibson (who also had American fans for earlier performances within their own national cinemas), before making the crossover their names were already synonymous with an orchestration of violent attractions. But, unlike the American films discussed thus far, whose narrative rhythms are based primarily on editing, music, and explosive special effects, the orchestration in Hong Kong action films relies heavily on the choreographed movements of the performers.<sup>30</sup>

*Jackie Chan as Crossover Hero.* This shift is easiest to see in the work of Jackie Chan, whose phenomenal mastery of martial arts (like that of his famous predecessor, Bruce Lee) is central to his films, while other characters merely function as back-up ensemble or chorus, like the props in the *mise-en-scène* that this dancing bricoleur mobilizes as weapons to vary the action.<sup>31</sup> Because of the uniqueness of his talents as an acrobatic performer who does his own stunts, it is impossible to imagine any of his movies without him, which is not the case for the stars in the American films we have been discussing, no matter how brilliant their acting may be. The down side is that this limits the range of the characters Chan can play, for, despite his dazzling physical mobility in performing "impossible" feats, he is stuck in this persona that spectators follow from film to film. The only American film stars with this kind of uniqueness are Buster Keaton, Fred Astaire, and Gene Kelly, whom Chan acknowledges as key influences because they were primarily dancers rather than actors whose every move was choreographed.<sup>32</sup> In fact, Chan was rigorously trained as a dancer from the age of seven in the Peking Opera School and, according to him, "at 18 . . . became the youngest stunt coordinator in Asia."<sup>33</sup> As a result, the musical structure of his action films is blatant, perhaps most delightfully in *The Miracle* (1989), a gangster/musical hybrid written and directed by Chan that one critic describes as "a Hong Kong style remake of Frank Capra's *Pocketful of Miracles*" and that presents his best violent "numbers" as part of a dazzling night club performance.<sup>34</sup> The connection with comedy is



also apparent, yet the laughter he evokes is not one of hysteria, irony, or orgasmic release as in the American films I've been describing but rather of comic delight in sheer mastery—the ability to perform seemingly impossible human moves before your eyes.

Chan's first American crossover film, *Rumble in the Bronx* (1996), was only a moderate box office success. Though directed by Stanley Tong and produced by Hong Kong production company Golden Harvest, Chan acknowledges, "we thought it was an American film but it was not."<sup>35</sup> Trying to tap into the African-American market, the film includes a cartoonish marriage between Chan's Chinese Uncle Bill (who had been living in the Bronx for thirty years) and his fat African-American fiancée. When Jackie is astonished to discover she's black, Uncle Bill says, "Welcome to America, my nephew," as if implying that racially mixed couples are a distinctively American phenomenon. Despite her friendliness, Jackie remains dubious and remains committed to his Chinese identity, which is immediately reinforced when he meets the first of his two Asian-American love interests. The emphasis on multiculturalism as an American characteristic is extended to the antagonists, an unrealistic rainbow assortment of bikers that includes a blonde named Angelo, a Latino, two whites, and two Chinese-Americans in need of reform.

Though Jackie and his producers were on the right track with the Chinese/African-American alliance, it was still relegated to a subplot; like his Hong Kong films, this movie was structured almost entirely around his martial arts action. After the film's release, when Jackie appeared as one of the presenters at the 1996 Oscars, he was paired with a huge African-American basketball star who teased him about his size and made him look dwarfish. If we was going to make it in Hollywood, Jackie still needed to find the right partner, for even Fred Astaire had his Ginger.

Jackie found that partner in Chris Tucker, his African-American costar in *Rush Hour* (1998), which made over \$100 million dollars in the first month of its release, becoming the tenth top grossing film of the year.<sup>36</sup> He had finally mastered the North American market with a winning combination partly inspired by the success of mixed-race buddy-cop movies like *48 Hrs* and the *Lethal Weapon* series (in which Hong Kong action star Jet Li made his American debut, as a villain). Tucker and Chan imbued this action film with two contrasting modes of comic exuberance, which helped it appeal not only to Jackie's growing body of American fans but also to mainstream audiences. This successful combination of black verbal humor and Hong Kong martial arts action inspired not only the writing of a *Rush Hour* sequel but also the immediate addition of black comic Arsenio Hall as Samo Hung's black buddy on CBS's popular TV detective series *Martial Law*.

When asked to explain the success of *Rush Hour*, Chan emphasizes cultural specificity: "What made the movie so popular in America was that Chris Tucker did the verbal comedy, I did the action comedy."<sup>37</sup> And unlike *Rumble in the Bronx*, "the way it looked, the photography and the dialogue . . . everything was American."<sup>38</sup> Yet unlike *Lethal Weapon 4* (which it outperformed at the box office), *Rush Hour* featured Hong

Kong— rather than American-style action, for its young director, Brett Ratner, was a Chan fan who let him choreograph the fighting. Chan explains:

In *Lethal Weapon 4* all the fighting scenes are similar to American movies—BOOM BOOM BOOM—big explosions. So when the movie started—*Rush Hour*—I went to the director and said, “Look, you have to promise me. Fewer explosions. Less violence. Fewer gunfights. Even if you have the gunfights don’t show the blood. We want no special effects.” . . . So the audience really can see something different than the typical American action movie. . . . American action movies have a lot of special effects, big explosions. . . . But they don’t know how to choreograph all the fighting scenes. Everybody knows how to fight, I am proud of myself for knowing how to choreograph.<sup>39</sup>

Chan was keenly aware of not only the sharp contrast in “national” styles of violent representation, but also the fierce cultural competition in the lucrative action genre.

I train very hard because I cannot use special effects. Even if I know how to use them, they will not be as good as Steven Spielberg or James Cameron . . . the only thing we can compare to America is action. People say, “Wow, Jackie’s action is better than American.” This is why training for me is very important.<sup>40</sup>

Even the nationality of the archvillain in *Rush Hour* is telling, for the mysterious Boss turns out to be British—a choice that not only alludes to Hong Kong’s postcolonial legacy but also serves the marketing of the film: sufficiently Anglo to contrast with the Asian and African-American cultures being celebrated, yet sufficiently foreign to avoid alienating whites in the mainstream American audience.

The cultural alliance between Asian and African-American ethnicity is best dramatized in the comical scene outside the restaurant (where some of the most brilliant fight scenes will later be performed). Jackie and Chris exchange insider tips about the stylization of their respective ethnic moves (whether it’s wordplay and dance or martial arts and cuisine). This exchange is like a dialogic dance between two cultural styles of orchestrating violent attractions—both very different from white mainstream culture, which is partly what makes them so appealing.

*Wooing Hollywood.* With John Woo’s crossover, the situation was more complex. He already had his ideal partner in his signature hero Chow Yun-Fat (with whom he had been working since 1985), and his films already included American-style action with guns and explosions. However, they are still brilliantly choreographed, with cars, motorcycles, and actors moving fluidly between the balletic and the ballistic and with his expressive camera gliding from long shots and sweeping pans that highlight hyperviolence to static, dramatically lit close-ups that reveal complex homosocial relations within the equally excessive realm of melodrama and romance. Here is how Woo describes the nostalgia for a medieval Chinese chivalric code that he shares with Chow Yun-Fat in their creation of this hero, who

is compatible not only with Bruce Lee's and Jackie Chan's optimistic martial arts mastery but also with the chivalric heroism that underlies the American pulp fiction of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammet (but not Tarantino) and the Japanese samurai ethos of Kurosawa's action films of the 1950s and 1960s (a formative influence on Lucas's *Star Wars* saga):

We both have the same kind of strong belief that we can make it . . . the same kind of hope, the same kind of heart, so we put this kind of feelings into the character. . . . We truly believe that even though we live in an evil world, if you can stand up with a stronger will, then you can't be beaten down. That's the true spirit of the Chinese knight.<sup>41</sup>

Woo was the first to cross over—moving to Hollywood in 1992 and making *Hard Target* in 1993 (a title bound to evoke his 1992 Hong Kong classic, *Hard Boiled*). Though the film advanced the Hollywood career of its Belgian-born star, Van Damme, it still left Woo in limbo. In his next film, *Broken Arrow* (1996), costarring John Travolta and Christian Slater, he was able to retain some of the homoerotic magic and moral ambiguity between the good guy and villain, but both narratively and stylistically it moved more toward Hollywood with less of his own Hong Kong stylization. Although his signature shot (of two guys sticking their guns in each other's faces) had already entered the language of American action plots (from Tarantino to popular TV series like *New York Undercover* and *The X-Files*), the verdict on Woo's bankability was still out. This changed with the Paramount release of *Face/Off* (1997), his first big Hollywood hit, which pitted two Italian-American superstars, Travolta and Nicholas Cage, against each other with the same kind of "emotional delirium" and homoerotic subtext that Chow Yun-Fat usually had with his closest buddy, a quality achieved here more through the plot (hero and victim actually trade faces) than through the camera moves or performance of the actors. Although the plot strained credibility, the film had the violent excess and the destabilizing of good and evil that complicated the best of Woo's Hong Kong films.<sup>42</sup> Now that he was established in Hollywood, it was time to bring on Chow Yun-Fat, but the debut had to be carefully orchestrated.

*Chow Yun-Fat as Replacement Killer.* The vehicle for Chow Yun-Fat's American debut was *The Replacement Killers* (1998), with Woo functioning as an executive producer rather than director (perhaps so that any box office success could be credited to the actor). Chow Yun-Fat plays a hired killer named John Lee, who refuses to assassinate the seven-year-old son of a cop, even though it puts his own family back in China in danger. The contract is a revenge killing since the cop killed the grown-up son of a Chinese crime lord named Wei during a drug bust in Los Angeles's Chinatown. Although the "replacement killers" of the title refer to the two assassins Wei hires to replace Lee, the title also reflexively refers to Chow Yun-Fat, who is being groomed to replace the Hollywood actors who have replaced him in Woo's Hollywood action films. But the film was a disappointment at the box office, grossing only \$19 million and just making the one hundred list of top-grossing films of the year (in ninety-third place).<sup>43</sup>

As in the case of *Rush Hour*, the producers chose a talented young first-

time director—Antoine Fuqua, who had established a reputation for visual pyrotechnics in directing music videos. And, as in *Face/Off*, they relied on an Italian-American costar, Mira Sorvino—perhaps thinking that the Italian connection could serve the same crossover function for the gangster genre that the African-American connection performed for Jackie Chan in comedy. Sorvino plays Meg Coburn, a female action figure who specializes in making forged IDs. Wearing a bare razor blade around her neck and always packing a gun, she substitutes for the male antagonist who usually is the homosocial object of Chow Yun-Fat's romanticized delirium. When the villain first sees Chow Yun-Fat with Sorvino, he tells him, "You picked the wrong partner," but also has to admit, "You two make a cute couple." Sorvino also substitutes for those Hong Kong female action stars who remain subordinate to heroes like Chow Yun-Fat (and Jackie Chan) but help affirm their heterosexual desirability within these homosocial plots. These actresses are increasingly used to energize and update Western action films—as in Olivier Assayas's stylized *Irma Vep* (1996), in which Maggie Cheung plays a postmodernist version of a notorious female phantom from French silent cinema,<sup>44</sup> and in the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), in which Michelle Yeoh is his strongest female playmate. Though Chow Yun-Fat never kisses Sorvino, she is obviously sexually attracted to him, and her unrequited desire helps ensure that this romanticized knight errant is the film's (and presumably our) primary object of desire—one that can be fulfilled only in future Hollywood features.

From the opening shots behind the credits, the film focuses on eroticizing Chow Yun-Fat's persona. He first appears as a man in black striding through a club full of dancers gyrating to a techno beat. Though his face is in shadows, the fragmented shots and distinctive stylization of his movements mark him as lead performer in this choreographed number, particularly when we see his triple image in a mirror shot. After shooting several Latino gangsters, he leaves Wei's marked bullet behind as a signature to the killing. Evoking a similar explosive shoot-out that he performed in the opening of Woo's *Hard Boiled*, this teaser might lead us to see an ironic shadow relation (like the one in *Face/Off*) between Woo and Wei, the good and bad controllers of the master plot who repeatedly cast Chow Yun-Fat in this role as killer.

Three scenes later Chow Yun-Fat is recoded as a good guy, for here we see him dressed in a light gray suit walking through Chinatown to get his next assignment, the one he fails to perform on moral grounds, with full awareness of the consequences. He goes to Sorvino to buy a fake passport for his transport back to China so that he can save his family from Wei's vengeance. The narrative is driven by a series of questions about his identity that also comment on the crossover: his morality (is this killer a good guy or villain?), name (is "John" an homage to Woo and "Lee" a link back to Bruce, associations that might help his acceptance in Hollywood?), and primary motivation (saving the American family or his own family back home?). Frequently posed in close-ups against artful Chinese backgrounds with a Hong Kong aesthetic or in heroic upward angles, he is defined primarily by his image and moves, and he says very little, which puts him in

the Western tradition of strong silent heroes (like Gary Cooper and Clint Eastwood) and downplays the actor's limited English.

This verbal minimalism makes the fast-paced narrative more like a music video or electronic game—one structured by the syncopated rhythms of the violence, music, montage, and changing mise-en-scène rather than by plot or dialogue. Once this relentless pace is established, spectators know that violent action is never more than three brief scenes away. In most sequences we watch figures threading their way through visually rich, atmospheric interiors—sometimes filled with smoke, steam, incense, or fireworks; frequently lit in red or green; and usually shot in upward angle or in depth so that we can more fully savor the art direction. Providing the backdrop for the action, these spaces include a Buddhist temple, a photographic darkroom with dangling ribbons of drying film, a steamy car wash in motion, a movie theater showing animated violence, and an East L.A. tunnel covered with graffiti and filled with gangbangers. From the opening sequence, when Lee kills the gangsters in the club, the plot drives toward violent serial encounters with killers whose deaths never evoke a single flicker of emotion or regret. As in most violent video games, the primary goal is to exterminate as many bad guys as possible, without wounding innocent bystanders, an issue central to two of Woo's best-known films—*The Killer* (1989), in which Chow Yun-Fat is totally dedicated to the female singer he accidentally blinded in the film's opening shoot-out, and *Hard Boiled*, in which he carries a newborn (safely tucked under one arm) through the apocalyptic final battle with gangsters. In *The Replacement Killers*, this motif is reduced to a single incident in the garage shoot-out, when the bad guys mortally wound an anonymous woman in white who gets caught in the crossfire. Instead, the plot turns on Lee's refusal to assassinate the innocent child—the one good deed that licenses him to kill all the others.

The film targets young males whose masculinity was processed through those Manichean plots of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* franchise (and who thereby already respect the Hong Kong film industry and its aesthetic) but who have subsequently moved on to more violent fare in cyberspace. At times the connection with electronic games is quite explicit, as in the video arcade scene in which the imported assassins are posed against the violent action of *Altered Beast* on the video screen. The film evokes the choreography of these violent games that rely primarily on continuous kinetic movement—running, jumping, rolling, kicking, punching—to create a visceral identification with the action, despite the comic hyperbole of its bloody consequences and its total lack of emotional resonance. These dynamics are perhaps best illustrated in one-on-one serial combat games like the notorious *Mortal Kombat* series, with its comic dismemberments, decapitations, exploding bodies, fountains of blood, and Vader-like voice-overs demanding "Fatality!"—a combination played out on a different comic register in those ultraviolent *Itchy and Scratchy* cartoons that make Bart and Lisa Simpson squeal with laughter.<sup>45</sup>

On the registers of ethnicity and gender, *The Replacement Killers* puts computer hardware in the hands of ethnic females (both African-American

and Italian) but still assigns the mastery of guns primarily to males (which makes Meg all the more exceptional). This male mastery, however, is shared with other ethnic masculinities: with the Latino gangbangers from whose arsenal Coburn and Lee select weapons for their final battle against Wei; and with the tough Russian-American cop Zeedo (Michael Rooker), whom the plot sets up as Chow Yun-Fat's potential emotional antagonist but who is displaced by Sorvino. The homosocial relationship between Lee and Zeedo is drained of all homoerotic traces, for crossover action heroes must prove their desirability on the heterosexual front (a shift probably most blatant in the case of Banderas).<sup>46</sup> At one point, when Lee asks Meg whether the treacherous Latino, Loco, is her boyfriend, she replies, "I try to stick to my own species"—a line probably meant to convey her availability to Chow Yun-Fat, who (unlike the low-life Loco) is more than her equal in class, intelligence, loyalty, and fighting power. Yet, like Jackie Chan's reaction to his uncle's black bride in *Rumble in the Bronx*, this remark has racist overtones, for it elevates Chinese imports over home-grown domestic minorities.

In the final battle sequence in Chinatown, the film mobilizes the full arsenal of Chinese heroic connotations to imbue Chow Yun-Fat with greater global power. In preparing their getaway to Shanghai, Wei and his mob pile into their cars, but when the garage door opens, they face Chow Yun-Fat, who stands alone waiting to confront them. This shot evokes the lone Chinese student facing the tank in the Tianenmen Square massacre—an extraordinary image of Chinese heroism that was memorialized worldwide via satellite TV.<sup>47</sup> In the battle that ensues, Chow Yun-Fat literally performs like a dancer, using his whole body to imbue the two guns he is firing with greater gestural force. Like an action figure in a video game, he runs, jumps, leaps, spins, and rolls and makes other graceful acrobatic moves, discarding his weapons when they run out of bullets instead of pausing to reload. In this multitiered space of the Chinatown alley (which allows both horizontal and vertical camera sweeps to simulate the scrolling moves of a video game), he is backed up by Sorvino, who rides into the action in a fast-moving van, and the two of them alternate in one-on-one mortal combat against archvillains of their own rank and ethnicity. While Sorvino outstalks and outshoots Wei's chief deputy down in the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant, Chow Yun-Fat confronts the Boss on the more elevated tier of a fire escape, which enables the dead body falling in slow motion to be displayed against a dynamic background of flashing light and falling rain. As if to remind us that Chow Yun-Fat is still the good guy, just before being shot, Wei tells him, "The boy will die, John . . . and your family." To which Lee replies, "Not in your lifetime," before blowing him away.

Despite its limited box office performance, *The Replacement Killers* is fascinating because of the way it reorchestrates diverse strategies of violent representation to ease Chow Yun-Fat's Hollywood crossover. Yet the pressure is still on Chow Yun-Fat, for, although he has made more than seventy movies in Hong Kong since 1976, he has not yet proven his box office appeal to Hollywood. He plays a character with greater range in his second Hollywood action film, *The Corruptor* (1999, directed by James Foley), an

ultraviolent cop film that simulates the moral ambiguity, homoerotic subtext, and playful tone of Woo's best action films. But what distinguishes this film is its emphasis on ethnicity. Not only does Chow Yun-Fat play the first Chinese detective in New York's Chinatown—one of the bravest and toughest on the force—but he is also a “dirty” cop who is paid by the Chinese ganglord to watch out for his own ethnic community. We spectators are positioned to identify with his white buddy (Mark Wahlberg), a young cop who at first seems to idolize him for his prowess as an action hero but who turns out to be an undercover Internal Affairs man sent to investigate and entrap him. Accusing Wahlberg of suffering from “yellow fever” (idolizing anything Asian, an accusation familiar to the film's executive producer, Oliver Stone), Chow Yun-Fat at first rejects him, both on racial and generational grounds (“He's worse than white, he's green!”), but (as in *The Replacement Killers*) he ultimately becomes the “maternal” nurturing hero who sacrifices himself to save the white boy. Despite the greater complexity of Chow Yun-Fat's character, *The Corruptor* was another box office disappointment, as was the big-budget *Anna and the King* (1999), which tried using Chow Yun-Fat's ethnic authenticity, glorious Asian locations, and Jodie Foster's feisty feminism to update a remake of a tired colonialist romance. We may have to wait until Chow Yun-Fat is reteamed with Woo for his Hollywood crossover to be complete.

All of these ethnic crossovers reveal cultural reinscription in action. Like the comparison between *The Wild Bunch* and *La caza* with which this essay began, they help us see more clearly what is distinctive about the American inflection of cinematic violence, and how transcultural borrowings between Hollywood and other so-called national cinemas move in both directions. For, like the black independent films of the 1990s and the generic hybrids of Sayles and Jarmusch, these Hong Kong crossovers show how the pairing of ethnicity and masculinity can destabilize the nationalizing of violence in the American action genre, preventing any such characterization from becoming monolithic and making room for a wider range of cultural inflections. They also highlight the rich stylistic variations that already exist within this narrative orchestration of violent attractions and challenge us to confront their complex cultural reverberations.

## Notes

1. See chapter 4, “Sacrifice and Massacre: On the Cultural Specificity of Violence,” in *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).
2. Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 2.
3. John Hopewell, *Out of the Past: Spanish Cinema after Franco* (London: BFI, 1986), 76. Quoted in Carlos Balagu, “Entrevista con Ricardo Franco,” *Dirigido por . . .*, no. 37 (October 1976): 14–15.
4. For more information about Del Amo, see Manuel Hidalgo, *Pablo G. Del Amo: Montador de sueños* (Festival de Cine de Alcala de Henares, 1987).
5. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (1972; reprint Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 1–34.
6. Peckinpah, as quoted by Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 30.
7. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968).



8. Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 28.
9. *Ibid.*, 34.
10. Marilyn Yaquinto, *Pump 'Em Full of Lead: A Look at Gangsters on Film* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 116.
11. See Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991); and Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction(s): Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, nos. 3–4 (1986): 63–67. In his marvelous annotated filmography (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), Charles Musser describes many such early violent attractions— including barroom brawls, boxing matches, bullfights, battles scenes, lynchings, and executions (both of real-life criminals like St. Louis murderer William Carr actually documented on film and of historical celebrities like Mary, Queen of Scots, Joan of Arc, and Jesus Christ in "realistic" historical reenactments).
12. Mary Ann Doane, "Screening Time," in *Language Machines: Technologies of Literary and Cultural Production*, ed. Jeffrey Masten, Peter Stallybrass, and Nancy J. Vickers (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 142, 144, and 152.
13. Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 226.
14. Yaquinto, *Pump 'Em Full of Lead*, 114–16.
15. *Ibid.*, 117.
16. For a discussion of these films and the genre, see my essay "The Return of the Outlaw Couple: *Badlands*, *Thieves Like Us*, and *The Sugarland Express*," *Film Quarterly* (summer 1974). Although the war film is beyond the scope of this essay, it is intriguing to consider that both Malick and Spielberg should return to ultraviolence in the same year (1998) and genre with *The Thin Red Line* and *Saving Private Ryan*. As in their earlier outlaw road movies of the 1970s, Spielberg's realistic representation of violence is still used to test what Americans are willing to sacrifice to salvage a fractured family, whereas Malick's stylized meditation on violence is more concerned with the interiority of those confronting fear and the unpredictability of death. While Spielberg's most stunning violent action scene is the Normandy landing that occurs right at the beginning of the film before we are sutured into emotional identification with any specific characters and can therefore be watched as pure horrific spectacle, Malick's comparable scene occurs after we have tuned in on the subjectivity of several characters through multiple voice-overs, which makes the unpredictability of the action more terrifying. While Spielberg's orchestration of his brilliantly realistic sequence makes full use of the soundtrack, whose base literally makes us tremble in our seats (at least in those theaters that are wired for digital surround sound), Malick's musical orchestration of the emotional motifs and visual imagery functions as an alternative to traditional narrative and, as a consequence, I find his film more innovative and ultimately more powerful.
17. For a brilliant analysis of the impact of developing multitrack digital technology and innovative concepts of sound design on aural spectacle and sound-image relations, see William Brian Whittington, "Sound Design and Science Fiction," (unpublished dissertation, University of Southern California, 1999). Whittington discusses films from the same period covered in this study—from groundbreaking works of the late 1960s and early 1970s like Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and George Lucas's *THX 1138* (1971), to the proliferating *Star Wars* and *Alien* series launched in the late 1970s, to the two versions of *Blade Runner* (1982 and 1992) and *The Terminator* series of the 1980s and 1990s. Although he focuses specifically on science fiction, he claims that one can find a similar pattern in other popular Hollywood genres, including action films (from *Rambos* to *Die Hards*) and war films (from *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* to *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*).

18. When the rereleased version of *The Wild Bunch* recently played at the Cinerama Dome in Hollywood, I stood in the long line of Peckinpah enthusiasts with my son Victor, a video game fan who was then fifteen and had never seen the film before. Though he basically liked it, he thought the representation of violence was surprisingly mild. This Halloween he chose to be Alex, and he and several of his friends have *Clockwork Orange* posters hanging on their bedroom walls.
19. Yaquinto, *Pump 'Em Full of Lead*, 231.
20. Christian Metz, *L'Énonciation impersonnelle, ou le site du film* (Impersonal Enunciation, or The Site of Film) (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1991), 161.
21. Those interviews came to mind when I read an account of Michael Fortier's testimony as star witness for the prosecution in the murder trial against Timothy McVeigh in the Oklahoma City bombing: "Well, if you don't consider what happened in Oklahoma, Tim is a good person. . . . He would stop and help somebody that's broken down on the side of the road. " Yet when Fortier went on to describe why McVeigh decided to detonate the bomb at 11 A.M. "because everybody would be getting ready for lunch," I thought back to the final massacre in *The Wild Bunch* even though McVeigh apparently had another action movie from the 1970s in mind—one that is generally not considered excessively violent. According to Fortier, "McVeigh used an analogy from the movie *Star Wars*, and characterized federal employees as 'individually innocent.' But because they are part of the evil empire, they were guilty by association." "McVeigh Ready to Die in Blast, Ex-Friend Says," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1997, A13.
22. While Prince claims that Peckinpah changed his aesthetic strategies for representing violence as a consequence, Kubrick's response was even more extreme. According to Eric Harrison, "he yanked *A Clockwork Orange* out of theaters in England after it had shown for only a couple of weeks because critics said it glorified violence and an attorney used it to defend a client who had beaten up a tramp, saying the client had just seen the movie. . . . After that, it was shown only in film and theater schools." Eric Harrison, "Film Director Stanley Kubrick Dies at 70," *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1999, A18.
23. See Lev Manovich, "Database as a Genre of New Media," *AI and Society*, special issue on databases, ed. Victoria Vesna (forthcoming); and "Database: Semiotics, History, and Aesthetic," *Convergence*, special issue on cinema and new media, ed. Ross Rudesch Harley (forthcoming).
24. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 86. See also Susan Suleiman, "Freedom and Necessity: Narrative Structure in 'The Phantom of Liberty,'" *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3 (summer 1978): 277–95; Suleiman was the first to note how this principle as theorized by Roman Jakobson could be applied to Buñuel's narrative innovations. For a discussion of how this operates in Buñuel's films, see chapter 6 of *Blood Cinema* and my essay, "The Nomadic Discourse of Luis Buñuel," in *Luis Buñuel's The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, ed. Marsha Kinder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17.
25. David Ansen, "The Redemption of Pulp," *Newsweek*, October 10, 1994.
26. Stanley Crouch, "A High Point in a Low Age," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 1994, 5.
27. Robert Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero?" in *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962).
28. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to deal with representations of violence performed by women, I must note the parallel challenge posed in the 1980s and 1990s on the register of gender by glamorous female stars playing non-monstrous, kick-ass roles in traditionally male-gendered action genres, usually directed by male auteurs—a role pioneered by Faye Dunaway in *Bonnie and Clyde* and by Pam Grier in the blaxploitation films of the 1970s.

- Some of the most notable examples are Gena Rowlands in John Cassavetes's gangster film *Gloria* (1980) and Sharon Stone in Sidney Lumet's disappointing 1999 remake; Kathleen Turner in John Huston's comic gangster film, *Prizzi's Honor* (1985) and in John Waters's violent sitcom *Serial Mom* (1994); Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis in Ridley Scott's outlaw road movie *Thelma and Louise* (1991); Jodie Foster in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991); Sigourney Weaver and Winona Ryder in the *Alien* sci-fi series; Linda Hamilton in James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991); Angelica Huston in Stephen Frears's noir thriller *The Grifters* (1990); Lena Olin in Peter Medak's gangster thriller *Romeo Is Bleeding* (1993); Demi Moore in Ridley Scott's war film *GI Jane* (1997) and in Brian Gibson's thriller *The Juror* (1996); and Jamie Lee Curtis in Kathryn Bigelow's cop movie *Blue Steel* (1990). In many of these films the violent behavior and buff bodies of these women are further eroticized by their male directors—a dynamic that is pushed to the point of parody in Oliver Stone's direction of Juliette Lewis in *Natural Born Killers*, particularly in her opening erotic murderous dance.
29. For a fuller discussion of these comedies, see my essay "Home Alone in the '90s: Generational War and Transgenerational Address in American Movies, Television, and Presidential Politics," in *In Front of the Children*, ed. Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham (London: BFI, 1995).
  30. The only Hollywood action genres with this kind of orchestration are swash-bucklers and action musicals (like *West Side Story* and Michael Jackson's music video parody, *Beat It*), in which the moves of the performers are choreographed but the violence is stylized rather than excessive.
  31. After Lee's death in 1973, Jackie Chan was groomed as his replacement, particularly in the early Hong Kong action film *New Fists of Fury* (1976), the sequel to Bruce Lee's *Fists of Fury* (1971). Chan literally replaces the kung fu master formerly played by Lee (whose huge facial close-up is prominently on display) by helping his sister restore their karate school to its former glory. At this point in his career Jackie Chan had not yet developed the inimitable comic persona that would dominate his future action films, soon enabling him to become as inimitable as Lee.
  32. Two other possible exceptions are comics Jerry Lewis and Jim Carrey, whose cartoonish plasticity of voice, face, and gestures make them as unique as Keaton, Kelly, and Astaire.
  33. As quoted by Rone Tempest in "Rolling with the Punches," *Los Angeles Times*, Calendar section, December 27, 1998, 39.
  34. Tempest, "Rolling with the Punches," 38.
  35. Quoted by Tempest, "Rolling with the Punches," 38.
  36. *Daily Variety*, December 5, 1998, 74.
  37. Tempest, "Rolling with the Punches," 39.
  38. Ibid.
  39. Ibid., 38.
  40. Ibid., 40.
  41. R. J. Smith, "The Coolest Actor in the World," *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, March 12, 1995, 14.
  42. Treating Woo as a follower of Peckinpah, Prince acknowledges that he "has generated tremendous fascination among Western critics because of the sociological complexity of his work, a striking amalgam of Eastern and Western cultural, religious, and cinematic traditions and styles," yet Prince fails to take this moral vision seriously, dismissing Woo's representation of violence as "at best, an exercise in stylistic pyrotechnics." (Prince, *Savage Cinema*, 230).
  43. *Daily Variety*, December 15, 1998, 76.
  44. Although France has never successfully challenged Hollywood in the realm of male action heroes, that nation produced Luc Besson's phenomenal *Femme Nikita* (1990), an international hit movie that featured a manmade, high-tech female assassin, and that subsequently spawned a successful TV spin-off

- (now on American cable TV) as well as a character in Raul Ruiz's multinational meta-narrative thriller *Shattered Image* (1998).
45. For a discussion of the cultural specificity of violence in video games, see my essay "Contextualizing Video Game Violence: From Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 1 to Mortal Kombat 2," in *Interacting with Video*, ed. Patricia M. Greenfield and Rodney R. Cocking (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1996).
  46. For a discussion of Antonio Banderas's crossover to Hollywood, see my essay "Refiguring Socialist Spain: An Introduction," in *Refiguring Spain: Cinemat/Medial/Representation*, ed. Marsha Kinder (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 1997), esp. 5–8.
  47. For a discussion of the cultural context of Woo's Hong Kong action films and their relationship to the changing political status of Hong Kong, see Tony Williams, "Space, Place, and Spectacle: The Crisis Cinema of John Woo," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 2 (winter 1997): 67–84. For a discussion of Woo's representation of masculinity, see Jillian Sandell, "Reinventing Masculinity: The Spectacle of Male Intimacy in the Films of John Woo," *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (summer 1996): 23–34; and Julian Stringer, "'Your tender smiles give me strength': Paradigms of Masculinity in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer*," *Screen* 38, no. 1 (spring 1997): 25–41. For a fuller study of Woo, see Kenneth E. Hall, *John Woo: The Films* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1999).