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AESTHETIZATION OF VIOLENCE AND CONTEMPORARY CINEMA:

Death meets sensuality

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Abstract

This article discusses the aesthetization of violence in the contemporary scene and its reflection in cinema. Analyzing some similarities and differences on the way violence is shown in movies such as *300* (USA, 2006), *Kill Bill* (USA, 2003), *Lady Vengeance* (Korea, 2005) and *Sin City* (USA, 2005) , it studies the implications of media and its social mediations on the processes of violence aesthetization. It is important to stress that the term "aesthetization" is not used with a negative connotation, as something related to "falsehood"– as opposed to what would supposedly be "real". Considering that representation is, by its own definition, that which is different from "reality", the article treats "realism" as something utterly dependent on "interpretation contracts". From this perspective, aesthetization does not corrupt reality, not even "objective" reference to reality. What it does corrupt, or at least transform, are specific socio-cultural "contracts" based on the "reliability" of certain modes of representation. The "contract " under which movies such as *300* are watched, for instance, are based much more on sensibility than on credibility. Violence, in *300, Kill Bill* and *Lady Vengeance*, is valued by its aesthetic qualities– the vividness of the blood spilling on white snow, the texture of flesh freshly cut, the rhythm of falling bodies. And, through aesthetization, violence is made somewhat erotic, a blend that take us back to Bataille and the intimate connection he proposes between death and sensuality.
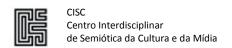
Our aim in this paper is to discuss the aesthetization of violence from the point of view of Communication, combining contributions from Anthropology and Philosophy. Because we will consider that violence can be aesthetically pleasing, it is important to state, from the beginning, that we are not discussing, generally, if violence can be beautiful. From a Kantian perspective, the question would not actually be a valid one,

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since only the particular can be judged beautiful – that is, a particular scene of violence, for instance, and not the generic "violence". It is not the "violence", classified as such – that is, conceptualized – that is beautiful, but the appearance we call violence itself as something particular. As Kant (2008) notes, it is not possible to find rational rules to say if any object will be beautiful without experiencing it sensorially:
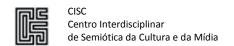
> The pleasure in judgements of taste is […] dependent doubtless on an empirical representation, and cannot be united a priori to any concept (one cannot determine a priori what object will be in accordance with taste or not–one must find out the object that is so) […].

What we want to discuss first, then, is if there is a contemporary tendency to approaching scenes of violence in an aesthetic – understood in its original sense, as related to sensibility – more than in a logical or moral way. This aesthetical approach to violence and the production of movies that lead to this aesthetical way of viewing are what we call aesthetization of violence.

Taking as an epistemological reference the effects of contemporary violence, both discursive and mediated, we want also to consider the play of symbolic forms within which social violence is constructed. We postulate the possibility of a narrative that takes for inspiration Lyotard`s principle of *anamnese*, defending, also, its localization in the theoretical framework of Critical Theory. Finally, our argument also intends to identify some dynamics of cultural consumption and aesthetic productions that, in Brazil, signal re-appropriations of violent scenes, either to affirm or contest it.

When relating aesthetics and violence, it is important to have in mind that to see violence in an aesthetic manner is not a novelty, and – despite the fact that the coining of the term "aesthetics" took place only in the eighteenth century – could be traced as further back as to tribal ritual of sacrifice. In fact, Bataille uses this very example to study the erotic nature of death rituals, and the erotic is closely related to the aesthetic – in

Nietzschian terms, we would say it is closely related to dionysian aesthetic experiences. About the ritual of sacrifice we mentioned, Bataille (1986, p.82) writes:

> The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the sacramental element. This sacramental element is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite [that is, aesthetically].
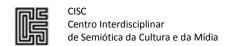
Coming back to more recent times, we want to point out a tendency to condemning this aesthetical dimension of violence. Our main interest is in violence in movies, and in that domain, as Bruder (1998) notes, critics tend to denigrate aesthetical considerations in benefit of a moralistic utilitarian view:

> Historically critics tend to fall into two categories on the subject. Those critics who see film violence as style, as superficial and exploitative, argue that it leads us to a "desensitity to brutality" and thereby increases aggressivity. Those who view it as content, as theme, claim it serves a "cathartic or dissipating effect..., providing acceptable outlets for anti-social impulses" (Atkins 4). Devin McKinney's theory separating weak from strong violence based in this style/content polemic is only one extreme example of this tendency to vilify a more formal type of violence while celebrating a thematically or narratively oriented kind.

It is not hard to notice that these two categories fall back into the traditional disqualifying of surface in benefit of depth. This disqualification would lead to this very Nietzschian question: why what is superficial is of reduced depth and not of amplified surface and what is profound is not of reduced surface but of amplified depth? The answer would be: that is only a problem of grammar, a grammar that disseminates and sustains a morality based, as would have the philosopher (NIETZSCHE, 2005), on many mistakes and lack of memory. The denigration of surface would be, then, no more than a kind of prejudice.

Also, it is clear that a violent scene cannot be profound or superficial in itself, since the same violent scene can be looked at "superficially" or "profoundly". Usually, of course,

we can presuppose a kind of tacit agreement between producers and audience as to how some kinds of movies or scenes should be looked at. But ultimately, there is always a creative dimension on the ways of looking at movies or anything else and a possible rupture from crystallized standards.
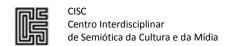
The creation, imagined by De Quincey (2004) in his *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*, of a "Society of Connoisseurs in Murder", exemplifies perfectly our position: though there is a tacit agreement in our society to see murder on a moral basis, it is nonetheless possible to see it on an aesthetic basis. As the president of this association states in the short piece:

> When a murder is in the paulo-post-futurum tense, and a rumor of it comes to our ears, by all means let us treat it morally. But suppose it over and done, and that you can say of it, *Tetelesai*, or (in that adamantine molossus of Medea) *eirzasai*; suppose the poor murdered man to be out of his pain, and the rascal that did it off like a shot, nobody knows whither; suppose, lastly, that we have done our best, by putting out our legs to trip up the fellow in his flight, but all to no purpose--"*abiit, evasit*," etc.--why, then, I say, what's the use of any more virtue? Enough has been given to morality; now comes the turn of Taste and the Fine Arts. A sad thing it was, no doubt, very sad; but we can't mend it. Therefore let us make the best of a bad matter; and, as it is impossible to hammer anything out of it for moral purposes, let us treat it æsthetically, and see if it will turn to account in that way. Such is the logic of a sensible man, and what follows? We dry up our tears, and have the satisfaction, perhaps, to discover that a transaction, which, morally considered, was shocking, and without a leg to stand upon, when tried by principles of Taste, turns out to be a very meritorious performance (DE QUINCEY, 2004).

The same way murder can be judged either morally or aesthetically, so can "represented" violence. But if the first seems unfit for aesthetic judgment – the reason why the president's statement above cited, though logically convincing, can hardly be taken seriously – the second is unfit to be judged on moral grounds.

The utilitarian view that Aristotle and, most of all, Plato, use on judging art is hardly defendable on any consideration that deserves to be called "aesthetic". Bayer

(1979), in his *History of Aesthetics*, is quite right in affirming that Plato and Aristotle's contributions to aesthetics are not to be found mainly on their considerations of art, but rather in their metaphysics. The brief cathartic argument of Aristotle, for instance, seems not only to be quite overemphasized when discussing violence in movies, but also, sometimes, to be used to subordinate aesthetic experience to the "purging" of violent drives and emotions understood as a kind of moralistic social utility, which leads to many problematic positions. De Quincey, in his short piece already cited, puts in evidence the laughable side of such a doctrine using it to justify the aesthetic superiority of the murdering of a good person against the murdering of a bad one:
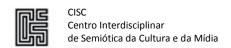
> Whenever that [the murdering of a bad person] is the case, or may be thought to be the case, farewell to all the genuine effects of the art. For the final purpose of murder, considered as a fine art, is precisely the same as that of tragedy, in Aristotle's account of it, viz., "to cleanse the heart by means of pity and terror." Now, terror there may be, but how can there be any pity for one tiger destroyed by another tiger? (DE QUINCEY, 2004).

By this argumentation, we can see the bizarre conclusions that can be taken from ethically justifying aesthetics and vice-versa. Should we say, then, that it is valid to murder a good person now and then for aesthetic purposes?

The consideration of whether or not violent films should be prohibited by their moral/utilitarian effects is almost as absurd as the above consideration. As Oscar Wilde (1997) would put it, "all the arts are immoral, except those baser forms of sensual or didactic art that seek to excite to action of evil or of good". That is to say, when it comes to violence in a murder, let us judge it morally; when it comes to violence in movies, with the exceptions mentioned by Wilde, let us judge it aesthetically.

Investigating violence nowadays is often an exercise of "un-acquaintment", and, at the same time, of engagement. How, considering violence's schizophrenic visibility, can
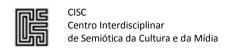
we find the eyes to view it and the words to speak about it? Both writing about violence and analyzing it require a conciliation of science and aesthetic production – it requires a fresh way of looking at things and a constant cohabitation with phantasmagorias.

On this articulation, writing assumes itself as an archeology of the vestiges, as a "perlaboration", revolving the aesthetics of social visibility and disappearance. This narrative is born from a field sensitive to eruptions but attentive to traps. The great challenge is to maintain our capacity of astonishment. This is the point in which the aesthetic approach we propose may face the discourse about violence as a diagnostic of potent social and symbolic diseases. Our amnesia, postulates Jean Baudrillard (1992), is of an image-based kind. The visual representations of violence might be experienced as real violence, argues Jean-Claude Chesnais (1982). It may be that both of them talk about the same problem. In the era of simulation, with the globalization of the visible, analyzing violence – aesthetically or morally – means talking about forgetfulness, about abandoned signals – socially, culturally or visually relegated to ostracism. *Anamnesis*, on these terms, involves the irruption of the forgotten, but also of the hyper-represented that, in this logic, could be finally forgotten, exterminated to their minimum vestiges.

In this sense, we propose an interface between communication and anthropology in order to offer an anthropo-aesthetic comprehension of the movies, a filmic analysis that may consider the ancestral dimension of our production and reception of cinema. It implicates, for instance, in perceiving cinema in its phenomenological and historical dimensions.

Having in mind the theoretical perspective explained above, we will, in a more empirically based part of this article, analyze violence related objects from an aesthetic point of view, focusing on a tendency of contemporary movies to give emphasis to the aesthetic experience of violent scenes in place of a more "logical" and "moral" understanding of the motives and consequences of these violent acts.

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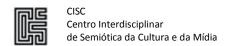**G**hrebh-

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Probably the best example of this shift is Snyder's movie *300* (2006). It is, above all, a bloody festival, a rhythmic and plastically beautiful carnage. The plot has, of course, a moralistic side to it, as the three hundred selected Spartan warriors stand for freedom against political decision of their own city and in the face of an army a hundred times bigger. But the plot is subordinated to the aesthetic power of the killing orgy, more or less the same way plot in erotic movies are subordinated to the aesthetic power of erotic scenes.

Those who negatively criticize *300* based solely on its basic plot do not judge its most important dimension – namely, the aesthetic one. This is not to be taken as a praise to the movie as a great achievement in every way, but a recognition of its ability on presenting aesthetically pleasing violent scenes. And those scenes also have an undeniable sensual appeal. In no other movie known to us is the connection – that was thoroughly analyzed by Bataille (1986) – between death and sensuality more evident than here. Studying this connection may be very enlightening to our position, considering that sensuality is, according to its own name, closely related to aesthetic experience.

Tarantino`s *Kill Bill* (2003; 2004) series of two movies is another work that arguably treats violence as "a fine art". But connections between death and sensuality here are much less evident than in *300*, even though the protagonist and all main antagonists, except Bill, are "sexy" women. The *femme fatale* is literally deadly on this movie. The Bride – as the protagonist is called – is like a Salomé that does not depend on her seductive powers of dancing and much less on the commitment of an all powerful Herodes to take her hate of John the Baptist to a bloody end.

But the power and independence of the female characters in this movie seems to "repress" their sexuality. The closest The Bride gets to a sexual relationship during the two movies of the series is during her coma, when her male nurse let a perverted man have fun with her unconscious body for a small fee. She is recently awaken, however, when the

man approaches for a kiss, at which moment she bites his tongue off and ends up killing him by smashing his head with the door.

This is the first small act of vengeance of the protagonist, an overture for the real vengeance for which some preparations are necessary. The ultimate object of her thirst for blood is Bill, her ex-boyfriend and ex-boss that shot her at her wedding rehearsal. The rest of the list is composed of his assistants that participated in the murder attempt.
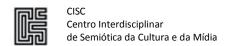
Returning to the question of a convergence between violence and sensuality, a more thorough look at *Kill Bill* might bring to the surface some correlations between the avenging pursuit and the passionate one. First, there is the obsession with the object of desire, second there is a tension between subject and object and third there is the liberation of the tension during the fulfilling of the pursuit, be it by an annihilation of the object or by a merging of subject and object.

In fact, on Bataille terms, it is quite reasonable to say that vengeance may lead to an erotic experience. Bataille understands "erotism" as a kind of dissolution of the self: "the end of erotism is to destroy the self-contained character of participants as they are in their ordinary lives" (BATAILLE, 1986, p.17).

Initially, the obsessive clinging to an individual object that vengeance and passionate pursuits presuppose may seem opposed to the erotic end, but it can as well be considered a first necessary step toward this end. As erotism is a subjective pursuit, the stressing of discontinuity by clinging to an individual might only make the merging with the object or its annihilation a more intense experience of discontinuity when it finally occurs.

Vengeance cannot always lead to erotism though: it will hardly do so, for instance, in cases similar to the one in Park Chan-Wook's *Lady Vengeance* (2005), another very violent movie that is often compared to *Kill Bill*. There, Geum-ja Lee, the protagonist, finds herself pregnant and, in despair, goes to live with an ex-professor of hers. The professor convinces her to take part in a kidnapping of a child, certifying to her that there would be
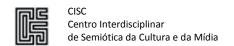
no violence involved, but he ends up killing the child. As the police finds out about the murdering, the professor kidnaps Geum-ja Lee's daughter in order to make her confess the crime and go to jail in his place. After thirteen and a half years in prison, she is released and goes after her revenge. But her revenge is tied to a profound sentiment of guilt for her having participated in the crime. As guilt – like all moral commitment – is a clinging to oneself as a discontinuous self, it is hardly able to lead to eroticism (on Bataille terms) except through suicide, but then death is a step further than erotism – erotism is something as death in life, or, as Bataille (1986, p.11) puts it, "erotism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death".

There is no denying that Geum-ja Lee's revenge is like a work of art: her very weapon is clearly chosen on an aesthetic basis; but, in Nietzschian terms, it is an Apollonian work, one that connects us with discontinuous and clearly shaped things. In contraposition, the battle frenzy of the Spartan warriors in *300* is clearly of a Dionysian nature – related to the dissolution of the self, as in states of inebriation. Geum-ja Lee, on the other hand, never loses her mind, never give in to the madness of unrestrained violence. She is always meticulous, always rational.

If plastically both movies succeed in constructing aesthetically attractive scenes portraying violence, *300* does it by using the abundance of rich colored blood, the texture of skin and of flesh freshly cut, the rhythm of blows and falling bodies. *Lady Vengeance*, on the other hand, constructs compositions more based on defined shapes and contrast of colors: one of the most beautiful scenes of the movie, for instance, attains its plastic interest by the blood spilling on the white snow.

Another movie that approaches violence in a more Dionysian way is Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller's *Sin City* (2005). It is a mix of violent episodes that take place at the so called Sin City and eventually cross each other but have no direct relation. The movie is mostly black and white using colors only on some details: for instance, pieces of clothes, eyes, blood.
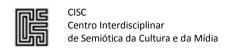
Sin City was originally a graphic novel/comic book, as was *300* – both of them were written and illustrated by Frank Miller. Though many other comic books have inspired movies, none we know of have, before *Sin City*, tried an aesthetic merge of cinema and comics. *Kill Bill* may be said to go in this direction also – and surely it is no mere coincidence that Tarantino is a guest director for *Sin City* –, as it aesthetically incorporates different references from pop culture – from comics, to anime, to kung fu movies. But there is a significant difference between Kill Bill's *bricolage* and the comics-cinema fusion of *Sin City*.

Sin City and *300* may be seen as two different aesthetic proposals for transforming comics into movies. Those aesthetic proposals were recently re-used for the filming of *Spirit* (*Sin City* aesthetic) and *Watchmen* (*300* aesthetic). They are based on photographic images but treated in a way to stress its plastic qualities, playing with the aesthetic of realism in very original ways.

We use the expression "aesthetic of realism" in order to make explicit that realism is nothing more than a group of aesthetic characteristics perceived in specific socio-historical conditions to represent objects as they "really look like" and events as they "really happened". Realism is a "naturalized" mode of representation: it appears to us as more similar to things as we perceive them, but it is utterly dependent on our "ways of seeing". Realistic representation is not closer to a transcendental object or to "truth". We believe there is no need for an extended argumentation in order to sustain this position since many different ones are available in many texts from different authors (Goodman, 1976; Mitchell, 1994; Kress and Van Leuween, 1996 etc.) and are well known.

Going back to our discussion of *300* and *Sin City*, we can now note that by subverting the aesthetic of realism from its own basis – the photographic image – they are very different from other movies that sometimes subvert realism by stressing the filmic apparatus: using perceivable cuts or using slow motion etc. If, for Bruder (1998), those elements characterize stylized violence, we might say that *300* and *Sin City* are hyper-

stylized. Evidencing its style, its surface, those movies seem to establish with their viewers a tacit agreement as to how to look at them that is much more based on sensibility than on credibility.

And the fact that both movies were produced roughly at the same time serves as a strong indication that the question we made in the beginning of this article should be answered positively: there is a contemporary tendency to approaching scenes of violence in an aesthetic more than in a logic or moral way. The other movies cited only confirm this claim.
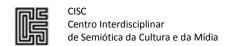
Also, as we showed above some of these hyper-stylized movies combine sensuality and violence, and do that by exploring not mainly the plot, but the qualities of its surface – the forms, colors, movement, music. *300*, as noted, is probably the one movie in which this fusion is more obviously achieved. One point of contact between violence and sensuality is their overwhelming and uncontrollable quality. They unleash the excess of human instincts, the *hybris* as Morin would call it.

It is evident, on the other hand, that *300* does not lead to an obscure Dionysian voyage into the dark recesses of humanity. As it is based on representative images and follows a plot, it deals with that excessive dimension in a more Apollonian way, thus bringing together those two opposed aesthetic drives the same way Nietzsche (2007) argues tragedy does.

Cinema as an art form would be rightly considered Apollonian. It is no mere coincidence that Morin defines the cinema apparatus as a machine that "transposes dreams" – and Nietzsche defines the Apollonian drive by relating it to the forms in dreams. Morin's definition may be used as a base to discuss some problems related to the main theme of this article in an original way. Those will figure as a kind of final consideration to this work.

We want to note, first, that the defined shapes apparent in dreams are transposed to the screen based also on a second transposition, that is, the transposition from
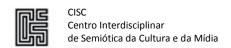
perceptual images ("reality") to graphic images ("movies"). Second, we want to stress the anthropological view of Morin and the relevance of his concept of the "double", based on which he observes a fundamental gap in the constitution of the sapiens. On the taking conscience of their finitude and on the struggle with this very conscience, men use images as fantastic mediators.

From this point of view, the widespread discussion about "banalization of violence" may be looked at in a fresh perspective. We can see it is closely related, for instance, to the aesthetic enchantment that banal everyday scenes gain when they appear on the screen. We can see here both the aesthetical power of what Morin calls *fotogenia* and the urgent human need to "domesticate" violence using symbolic material.

From this point of view, the aesthetic of violence refers to a symbolic field related to images located in border zones. The way we see it, they keep their own movement on the borders of filmic production and converse with a large field of domestic imagistic registers, interfaced by media's images.

Returning to the above mentioned notion of *fotogenia* – that is, the aesthetic power ordinary things gain by their transposition to an image –, it will be important to observe also that in Walter Benjamin and in Baudelaire we find this celebration, this epiphany of the banalities, of the everyday ordinary events. This derivation seems specially relevant to offer a pondered analytic interpretation of Adorno's point of view, that tends to consider cinema as a pernicious art, massive and ideological, focused on the anesthesia of the masses.

Focusing on the interfaces and tensions observed between daily-life images and filmic representation, it is possible, then, to analyze this "aesthetic of banalities", closely related to the "upgrade" of ordinary life to the status of spectacle. As violence gains autonomy as image, our experimenting of it as a strange and mysterious potency may shake our discourses. The codification of these discourses consists of an inglorious work, and with the crisis of Meta-narrative, violence may provide new forms of communication,

summary resolution of conflicts and even work as a constitutive part of our everyday life (ROCHA, 1998).

Studying the tension mentioned above, our analysis is driven away from a more strict aesthetic approach, showing that if, as we argued, it is absurd to ethically justify aesthetics and vice-versa, it is also true that these two domains are so intertwined it is impossible not to trespass the borders between them in more dense analysis.

Having said that, we want to finish this article with some more socially oriented considerations about a culture of violence, involving "represented" and "real" violence, that is taking a new face in Brazil. This culture, according to Freire Costa (1994), functions by despising common laws and acting according to its own rules. It transforms violence in a familiar pattern. Freire Costa argues that in the banalization of law infringement and in the amplification of the fear, social insecurity gains density. Violence, in this context, ascends to the status of an entity, of something palpable and familiar.

In this culture, violence associates itself with pleasure, consumption and identity, constructing, on the intersection with media and criminality, an intense and punctual glory. As is the case in De Quincey's "society of connoisseurs in murder", here "real" violence is faced aesthetically, supposing that word can still be applied to this brutalizing of the judgment of taste.

Analyzing the everyday life of adolescents immersed in the universe of criminal violence, both in the role of protagonists and of "amateurs" (to use De Quincey's term), Ventura calls attention to symbolic fractures and territorial struggles that mark their lives, and influence all urban life. The fascination with visibility and social recognition – anchored, as it is, both in mediatic fame and in the brute force of criminal actions – engender an odd "success barometer" based on power and possession.

We will not be the first to propose an untying – or at least an attenuation of the bonding – between a discursive and imaginary dimension of violence and an empirically based experience of violence. This gap between the two might be a starting point for a

critical pondered analysis of the relation between media and the culture of violence we are studying.

There is no correspondence between the effective existence of violent manifestations in the space-time framework of big cities and the conceptual and imaginary elaboration of the phenomena. In order to sustain this affirmation, we might mention the myriad of manifestations that in one context or another would now fit into the category of "violence".

Following this path – and we might as well make reference to our previous considerations about new forms of visuality related to ways of looking at violence in movies in order to sustain its fruitfulness –, the following proposition arises: violent discourses, perceptions and practices are, nowadays, irreversibly marked by a new regime of visuality. Violence, in our daily lives, progressively assumes a polymorphous quality, both in terms of its perception and in terms of its realization.

Violence, in its cultural conformations engenders a very flexible regime – visual and social. It is related to the new mobility of sensibility and to the aspiring to visibility. Those are linked to the organization and forms of apparition of collective acts of violence – lynching, conflicts among sport team's supporters, neo-Nazis activities – executed ritualistically, choreographically. The fictionalization and aesthetization of violence are not solely on the screens, they cohabitate with us in our daily lives and environments. They live next door.
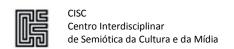
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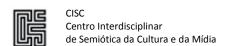_____. **Humano, demasiado humano**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2005.

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