

## VIOLENT RUPTURES

by Marsha Kinder

### Chance Encounters

When I went to my local multiplex theater on the weekend following the attack against the World Trade Center, I was approached by two different strangers who apparently didn't know each other but who asked me the same questions. They wanted to know whether I had already seen any of the films being screened there that night--*Our Lady of the Assassins*, *Deep End*, and *The Others*--and if so, what kind of violence they contained and how disturbing I thought they might be in light of the traumatic events of September 11th (or what people are now calling "9-11"). These two women had no idea I was a media scholar who frequently writes on violence; for them I was merely one of several strangers they were consulting at random for an updated rating of violence. Their questions presumed that we were all part of a community which is immersed in mass media and which reads films and television programs through a shared body of conventions.

Both of these women assumed that experiencing this recent historical trauma would dramatically change the way they and their fellow moviegoers reacted to violent imagery--a logic that was apparently shared by studio, television, and game executives who were busy cutting potentially disturbing images from their violent narratives (especially those that depicted terrorist villains and New York skyscrapers under attack) or at least postponing their release. While I don't know how long the women expected these changes would last, the producers seemed to assume they would only be temporary. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "the world's largest independent game publisher, Electronic Arts Inc., temporarily halted its online conspiracy game, 'Majestic,' and yanked another game, 'Red Alert 2,' from store shelves because the boxes depicted a New York skyline with the World Trade Center ablaze," yet 'Majestic' producer Neil Young clearly assumed it was only a matter of time before they could get back to business as usual: "At some point, it will be the responsibility of artists and storytellers to tell these stories. Does it happen in six months or 60 months? I can't tell you."

Instead of speculating on when we would return to our "normal" delight in violent imagery, I began to wonder whether our previous cultural condition of producing and exporting exhilarating violent spectacle wasn't the temporary anomaly--a condition that has led us Americans to perceive violence as synonymous with action and to see its antonym not as peace but boredom. Perhaps, our distinctive way of representing violence in America mass media--its cultural and historical specificity--was partly shaped by the fact that nothing like this had ever previously occurred on American soil. Sure, there was the massive carnage of the Civil War, but that was before the emergence of powerful mass media like movies, television, and electronic games; it was recorded only in still photographs and journals, which Ken Burns had recently revisited in a moving documentary series for PBS. But the trauma of 9-11 was the first time we had ever experienced such violence on this scale, and with such devastating effects to buildings that were icons of American power--like Washington's Pentagon and New York's World Trade Center. Maybe that's why the American representation of violence--regardless of genre and medium--tends to be structurally comic and exuberant--characteristics that are difficult to find in violent representations produced anywhere else in the world.

This question made me reconsider earlier positions I had taken on violence (both in electronic

games and action movies), where I had described representational conventions but had not really addressed their historical determinants, at least not in the context of the USA. In the early 1990s, I was simultaneously writing two books on what seemed like totally unrelated topics--*Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1991), a study of children's media culture in light of moves toward a global economy, and *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (1993), a work that explores the cultural specificity of Spanish cinema and the ways it helped refigure that nation during periods of dramatic political change. Despite their dissimilarities, both books examine the representation of violence and its historical, cultural, and media specificity. In trying to define what was culturally specific about the representation of violence in Spanish films from the Francoist and post-Franco eras, I couldn't help wondering what was culturally and historically specific about the representation of violence in American movies, television and video games, especially those addressed to kids. These questions stayed with me, even after both books were published and continued to inform my subsequent work. And the answers I eventually came up with were affected by a strange period of empirical research, which I didn't actually design but in which I was invited to participate. Sega made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

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### Disruptive Ratings

In May 1993 I received a letter inviting me to participate as a member of Sega's new voluntary video game rating system. From July 1993 through January 1995 (when an industry-wide rating system was adopted), I rated a total of 135 games, including notoriously violent ones like *Mortal Kombat 1 and 2*, *Fatal Fury*, *Altered Beast*, *Double Dragon*, *Body Count*, *Desert Strike*, *Terminator*, *Street Fighter*, *The Punisher*, *Robocop versus Terminator*, *Mutant League Hockey*, *Beast Ball*, *Lethal Enforcers* and *Night Trap*. Of course I was paid for my time, but I was drawn to participate primarily because it would enable me to see the thinking on violent representations from inside the industry and I knew I wasn't done writing on this topic.

This is how the system worked. After being sent a "guidelines fact sheet" to study, I began receiving groups of videotapes (sometimes two to ten tapes a week, other weeks none). These tapes contained not the whole game but only excerpts showing the most violent and potentially most objectionable images. What I would see in the tape was the game being played by someone; I could see the hand on the joystick and sometimes the back of a shoulder or head, as in *Mystery Science Theater*. Occasionally a tape was accompanied by a written text, but only if the dialogue were considered potentially objectionable. Sega expected me to evaluate the game that same day (claiming it should take only two or three minutes per tape), then come up with a rating from one of the following four categories: GA (appropriate for a general audience of any age), MA-13 (appropriate only for mature audiences of age 13 or older), MA-17 (appropriate only for mature audiences of age 17 or older), or Non-Approval. I would be called by my Sega contact the next day for my vote and would submit a written confirmation the following day.

To improve the so-called 'efficiency' of the rating process, in December 1993 the "Non-Approval" option was eliminated so that this rating would be given only under the most extreme circumstances--a category I still continued to use on several occasions. Also omitted from the rating form was the space for "Additional Comments," where I frequently wrote what I considered to be my most important feedback, even though I realized these remarks probably would never get

back to the game designers or producers. Instead, we were requested to give a list of detailed changes that must be made for the game to receive the next lowest rating (that is, to move up from MA-17 to MA-13, or from MA-13 to GA). At the end of the first stage of the process (in December 1993), we were also asked to evaluate the rating system, and here are a few of the things I wrote at that time.

1) I think that evaluators need more information for they are now rating these games out of context. It would be important to know how many evaluators rate each game, what happens at every step, what is the exact process for changing the rating of a game, at what stage in the production and marketing process is a game rated, how are these ratings implemented in the retail outlets, what kinds of guidelines are provided to product publishers, etc.

2) There is a need for more guidelines. Under the Non-Approval category, A.4 specifies cruelty to animals but not cruelty to humans, which certainly occurs in many of the most violent games involving cruel modes of violence or death (such as the final moves in "Mortal Kombat"). There are no guidelines here for rating the very games that have caused the most furor in the general population and press. [In fact, we were told to ignore such considerations.] Guideline B.1 for the MA-17 category focuses entirely on modes of representation (whether it is overly graphic, detailed, or realistic) and ignores issues of content (who is inflicting it against whom and with what motives and in the service of what values). These issues become important in games like "Third World War."

The reliance on video excerpts almost ensured a lack of contextualization, yet I still tried to consider the political implications of how the player was being positioned, and how perpetrators and victims were defined, particularly in global war games like "Third World War" and "Desert Strike: Return to the Gulf," whose dehumanized depictions of violence are very scary in light of 9-11. Here, for example, are my critiques of these games, which were usually posted under "Additional Comments," a section I continued to add to the rating form:

#### Third World War (12/7/93)

Whole premise of the game encourages game like attitude toward war with cavalier use of nuclear and chemical weapons for goals of world domination and with no realistic regard for human consequences. Death reduced to statistics and abstract graphics as in representation of Gulf War by U.S. government and mass media. Plays to existing racial and religious prejudice by positioning Libya, Indonesia, Panama, Ivory Coast as enemies rather than Eng., France, Canada, etc. Title ambiguously suggests not only World War III but also a US war against the Third World nations who are positioned as America's enemies.

#### Desert Strike: Return to the Gulf (6/14/94)

Violence is central, graphic and fairly realistic and it is linked to specific political positions that demonize our political opponents and encourage a warlike attitude. This game implies that war is fun and justified even when it involves the inadvertent killing of "friendly troops" and that we should be eager to support other wars like the recent war in the gulf.

Even in the domestic sci fi and horror genres, player positioning (as cyborg or human, perpetrator or voyeur, male or female) was still crucial. For example, in "Robocop versus Terminator," I argued:

The game is built on a central contradiction. Though the words tell us that Robocop is fighting "to save humanity," the game seems to promote the dehumanization of violence. The "hero" with whom the player identifies is represented in a totally dehumanized form (in contrast to the *Robocop* movies where he is humanized as Peter Weller); the only exception is his final close-up where we see the resemblance to Weller. On the other hand, most of his Terminator victims look very human--especially his first opponents, the scantily clad women whom he blows away with his huge phallic weapon. Yet by naming these victims "Terminators," the game dehumanizes and demonizes them, thereby justifying not only their murder but also the pleasure that the player takes in killing them, in hearing their screams, and in seeing their blood. Moreover, the hostages he is supposedly saving also appear dehumanized--they are grey males like Robocop.

In "Night Trap," a vile game about vampires attacking a sorority house, the sexual dynamics are equally disturbing:

When the characters speak directly to the player, the male character says something like, "What were you thinking?" and "I can't believe what I just saw," implying that he is a "spectator-in-the-text" and that he and the player are fellow "voyeurs"; but when the female character addresses the player as "control" and pleads, "You've gotta help me, please!" and "You're the only one who can save me," or asks "whose side are you on?," it suggests that the player has the choice of whether to save her (or other female victims) and whether to side with the vampires or the victims. Thus, the player position is coded as male, despite the actual gender of the real-life player, and the implication is that any power position is decidedly male, not female. These assumptions are consistent with our patriarchal culture and with most Hollywood horror movies and thrillers, but it's too bad to see the same sexist stereotypes being carried over to a new cutting-edge medium--interactive games with live action footage. In some ways, the transference of these sexist assumptions to an interactive medium may be even more harmful than in other media because players are positioned to gain pleasure in having a female's fate in their hands. I find this denigrating to women.

Increasingly, the issue I zeroed in on was realism, since the presence or absence of blood and groans, and "overly graphic, detailed, or realistic representations" was one of the primary guidelines for distinguishing the MA-17 from the MA 13 rating, where violence was supposed to be unrealistic or humorous. On most of my rating forms, I tried to problematize the simplistic assumptions that were basic to the rating system. Here are a few examples:

In July 93, on a realistic boxing game: "Realistic" is a relative term that shifts historically. While the representation of violence in this game is more realistic than that of most video games, it is still a

long way from the brutal realism of a brilliant R-rated boxing film like *Raging Bull* or of actual boxing matches broadcast live on cable television."

In July 93, on an action game: "When most of the characters die, we hear screams and see lots of blood. Even though the representations are not very realistic, they seem designed to generate pleasure and excitement at the sight of blood, which is hardly admirable for players of any age."

In Jan. 94, on the realistic screams in one sci-fi game: "If the screams were omitted, then there would be no acknowledgment of the "human" consequences of this warfare, which would be worse."

After watching over a hundred of these excerpts, I came to believe that the unrealistic and humorous presentation of violence (a mode also pervasive in movies, cartoons and television) may not turn youngsters into killers but it makes them see violence as synonymous with action and makes them experience non-violence as boring. This dynamic is central to the brilliant episode of *The Simpsons*, where Marge leads an earnest campaign against the hyper violence in those "Itchy and Scratchy" cartoons that Bart and Lisa so dearly love and ends up making them boring and causing them to lose their loyal audience. The broader cultural implications of these dynamics become especially apparent in sports games like *Mutant League Hockey*, which takes a sport already notorious for violence and turns it into a supposedly humorous game about killing where coaches advocate murder and mutilation of the opposing team in order to please their fans.

Gradually I came to realize that the comic tone of the violence is also based on the seriality with which it is structured. That is, being able to play the game over and over, with new trials, new deaths, new lives, in an arena where death is never final, reassures players that there are no real consequences for their violent actions, for, the next time you play, characters can always bounce back like Wylie Coyote in *Road Runner* cartoons.

It was this focus on seriality and structure that finally enabled me to write an essay about the cultural specificity of violence in American cinema--something I had wanted to do since publishing *Blood Cinema*. In considering the relationship between these violent excerpts from video games and the wider patterns of violent representations in movies, cartoon, television and sports, I began to see it as a wider system that was pervasive throughout our culture. In *Violence and the Sacred* (a text that was seminal for my treatment of violence in the Spanish context), 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.

### Violence American Style

In a recent essay titled "Violence American Style: the Narrative Orchestration of Violent Attractions," I focus not on games but on films--both hyper violent films from the 1960s and 70s (such as, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch* and *A Clockwork Orange*) and what I call the more recent super "NOVA's" from the 1990s like *Pulp Fiction*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Desperados*,

*Menace to Society* and *Replacement Killers*. I argue that despite their considerable differences, what is culturally specific about the representation of violence in all of these films and in American cinema and culture more generally is its comic orchestration, the same dynamics that drive most cartoons and video games and (I would now add) that were dramatically de-railed by the events of 9-11. My argument went something like this.

All of these films have 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 explosive and 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 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, where 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 which 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. Whereas Gunning claims, "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 helps us see how these dynamics take on a new dimension when dealing with the specific subject of violent death.

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"--a duality that was also operative in the recent TV coverage of the attack on the World Trade Center and its aftermath.

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.

In contrast to Doane who focuses on the singulative "ground zero" of death, I am more interested in the representation of violent iterations, which create a proliferating series that moves both forward

and backward in time, as if denying the finality of death--a disavowal that is essentially comic. In my essay, I argue that the tension between these rival orchestrations of violence--a rhythmic accumulation of discrete, serial events (beatings, murders, executions, explosions) 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 inflects 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. It is precisely this disruptive tension between the aggressively unifying narrative and these proliferating, comic violent attractions (rather than the attractions themselves) that is so characteristic of the American orchestration of cinematic violence.

This essay was written in February 2000 and published in early 2001, long before the recent traumatic events of 9-11. What it failed to ask was: what historical reasons could account for the development of this particular pattern of violent orchestrations, and could this pattern now be transformed by an historical trauma such as this. Reconsidering that essay with hindsight, I am now intrigued with three additional questions.

First, did the TV network's constant replaying of the airplanes' collision with the World Trade Center and the towers' subsequent collapse fall into the pattern of comic seriality--where the constant repetition denied the finality of the horror? This is the kind of comic seriality that is even more structurally central to violent action games, no matter how gruesome the carnage, where players are explicitly offered new lives, each time they play.

And secondly, given the gradual unfolding of the full horror of the tragic consequences--not only the painfully slow revelation of the ultimate death toll but also the dire predictions that it had already instantaneously transformed the world as we knew it by introducing a new kind of war, which is expected to go on for decades--have these effects of violent seriality and their conventions been transformed? That was the assumption of those two women at my local multiple movie theater who were asking strangers to re-rate the violence in light of these recent events. And in contrast to those game designers who are banking on the disturbing effects only being temporary, others, such as Anthony Lane writing in *The New Yorker*, claim they may well be definitive--a prediction with which I tend to agree.

What happened on the morning of September 11th was that imaginations that had been schooled in the comedy of apocalypse were forced to reconsider the same evidence as tragic.... The shock springs not only from the intolerable loss of life but from a growing realization that America had so much else to lose.... If the liftoff of Apollo 11--essentially, a controlled explosion in the case of an adventurous peace--was the spectacle that first gave us leave to indulge in the joy of a big bang, then September 11th was not only an official rebuke to that license but the fiery end of the ride.

I don't meant to suggest that such a change in conventions will be universal or permanent, or that there won't be reversions to or nostalgia for the former system of violent representations. Even Lane acknowledges that we were all fascinated with the comparison between this authentic disaster and its simulation in films like *Independence Day* and that "it was hard to make the

switch," for,

the fireball of impact was so precisely as it should be, and the breaking waves of dust that barreled down the avenues were so absurdly recognizable--we have tasted them so frequently in other forms, such as water, flame, and Godzilla's foot--that only those close enough to breathe the foulness into their lungs could truly measure the darkening day for what it was. (79)

I would argue that in that historical primal scene, that traumatic moment of discovery when we realized we were mistaking the documentation of the real for a computer simulation and that its serial repetition did not make the horror go away but only intensified our panic, we experienced a crisis in our entire system of representation that will have long term effects. Or to put it in Doane's terms, when suddenly confronted with the "ur-event" of mortal destruction on this scale and with the radical opposition between the horror of the events and the comic seriality of their structure, many of us suddenly lost our taste for violent representation. For no matter how many times we see it, some of us feel deep down that this is the kind of devastation that should be inaccessible to repetition or representation. It makes us immediately distrustful of our previous reliance on signifiers of realism. The former concept of "reality TV" instantly became absurd, especially when it was replaced by round-the-clock news coverage of the traumatic events which were broadcast without commercial interruptions. Ironically this temporary suspension instantly transformed those normally-loathed commercials into signifiers of normalcy, or beloved signs of business as usual. Could the same thing possibly happen to violent representations? Is that why some local video stores have been reporting that since 9-11 the most popular genre for video rentals has been the disaster film?

These dynamics were played out most vividly in the airing of HBO's prestigious Tom Hanks/Steven Spielberg World War II television series *Band of Brothers*, which despite the cancellation of so many other programs, was allowed to resume, presumably for patriotic reasons. World War II may have been considered sufficiently distant to prevent the violence from being seen as too threatening, and the patriotic comments by real-life veterans about bravery and patriotism made it seem worth the risk. Still, the fact that the events of 9-11 occurred in the midst of the series enables us to experience the immediate impact of the trauma on our readings of this unfolding serial text. What seemed most remarkable in the pre-trauma airing of the first two episodes was the authentic representation of violent World War II combat, which periodically punctuated the familiar, otherwise slow-paced story, with its ordinary characters who could barely be distinguished from each other, despite the earnest moralizing interviews with survivors with hindsight. The primary function of these rather boring narratives was to hold the violent attractions together, to orchestrate them with unifying stories of guilt and punishment that could justify the graphic display of all this carnage. This dynamic orchestration of the violence was very similar to the one used by Spielberg and Hanks in their successful big screen World War II epic, *Saving Private Ryan*, as well as in one of this year's summer blockbusters, *Pearl Harbor*. But in the aftermath of 9-11 and President Bush's call to arms, we can no longer view *Band of Brothers* in the same way. The violent spectacle is no longer so thrilling and exuberant; it now seems more scaled down and contained. But the nostalgia is far more pervasive and intense, for most of us long for that vision of inexperienced Americans persevering against all odds in an old fashioned war where the enemy is clearly defined and the outcome well known. For, Bush's manichean rhetoric of good and evil and the mainstream media's endorsement of this return to bipolarity are urging us to see ourselves as triumphant innocents,

despite all historical evidence to the contrary.

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## On Line Games

But why dwell on these "old media" of television and cinema or those obsolete console games from the early 1990s, when clearly the profitable massively multiple player on-line role playing games are some of the most interesting interactive narratives around--games like *Anarchy*, *Ultima*, *EverQuest*, *Asheron's Call* and *The Sims*, most of which move beyond mere violence while granting more agency to their thousands of players who come from all over the world. Perhaps these are the sites where players will invent new modes of representing violence and generate peaceful alternatives--alternatives that are currently being suppressed from coverage on the national television networks. But this remains to be seen.

In one of those open town meetings on the crisis broadcast last week on one of the national TV networks, where ordinary folks were allowed to interrogate those in power, I happened to catch General Norman Schwarzkopf responding to two questions. The first came from a conservatively dressed middle-aged woman who asked, why is it that the national television networks, despite their non-stop coverage these events, have not yet seriously discussed any of the peaceful alternatives being proposed, including the peace demonstrations that are beginning to occur on college campuses across the nation, whereas you can easily find out all about these alternatives through list-serves and websites on the internet (and, one could add, also on call-in radio shows and in the opinion sections of most newspapers and journals). After being evaded by one official after another, her question was finally fielded by General Schwarzkopf who replied, President Bush did include a peaceful alternative--the Taliban could simply turn over all the terrorists to the USA and thereby avoid war. And the President's speech, including this peace alternative, was clearly covered by the networks. Before the woman could protest that this did not answer her question, the network conveniently cut away to a station ID.

The second question came from a middle-aged man who specifically asked General Schwarzkopf what lessons had he learned in the Gulf War that could be applied to this new conflict. Without hesitation, Schwarzkopf replied with a pat answer that helped explain not only the reason for his participation in this broadcast but also his evasive response to the previous question. He claimed the most important thing for fighting men and women was having the American public solidly behind them, as was the case in Desert Storm but not in Viet Nam. That, he claimed, was the difference between winning and losing. And the networks were clearly heeding his words.

For, in the immediate aftermath of 9-11, the national TV networks were apparently suspending not only commercials but also coverage of peaceful counter views (which had to turn to the internet for dissemination) and historical background on the Middle East that could help us understand our enemies and why they chose these specific targets for their heinous acts of violence. It remains to be seen whether the re-emergence of these peaceful alternatives and historical analysis will become signs of a return to the normal conditions of democracy and whether they will revive our belief in the democratic potential of the world wide web.