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Once Upon a Midnight Stalker: A Content Analysis of Stalking in Films

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Abstract

Media portrayals of crime have been linked to biased information processing and beliefs about society and personal risks of victimization. Much of this research has either focused on relatively holistic analyses of media consumption, or on the analysis of elements of only a few types of crime (e.g., murder, rape, assault). Research to date has overlooked how media portray stalking in interpersonal relationships. This study content analyzed 51 mainstream movies with prominent stalking themes to compare and contrast such depictions with the actual scientific data about stalking. By considering victim variables, stalker variables, relational variables, stalking behavior variables, victim response variables, and justice variables, this analysis illustrates how films have portrayed stalking as more gender equivalent, briefer, more deadly and sexualized, and more criminally constituted in stalker history and actions compared to actual stalking cases. Implications for the cultivation of attitudes about real-world stalking behaviors and recommendations for further research are discussed.

Keywords: Cultivation, Film, Gender, Media, Stalking, Violence

Where is courtship learned? The nature and process of romantic relations obviously have manifold origins, including genes, parents, peers, and the trial and error of adolescent practice. Among the potential sources of instruction in the culture of courtship, however, are media depictions. Research indicates that (a) there is ex-

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tensive exposure among adolescents to sex and violence in media (e.g., Worth, Chambers, Nassau, Rakhra, & Sargent, 2008); and (b) exposure to media violence and sex reveal statistically significant influences on children's and adolescents' attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Brady, 2007; Council on Communications and Media, 2009; Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, & Baumgardner, 2004; Lenahan, 2009). Such interrelationships include desensitization toward and approval of sexual activity (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; L'Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2006) and forms of interpersonal aggression (Coyne et al., 2011; Guéguen, Jacob, & Lamy, 2010).

Whereas traditional forms of violence and aggression have been studied extensively, certain forms of aggression have been overlooked in the study of media content. One form of aggression that has received relatively little attention in its media representations and cultural typifications is stalking, especially fictional stalking portrayals meant to represent and dramatize reality. The present study sought to understand the crime of stalking as it is depicted in one significant medium, the movies, and compare the nature of these depictions to the scientific research on stalking. The intent was to better understand the potential nexus between popular media constructions of this form of aggression and the actual process of stalking. To the extent significant discrepancies are identified, it could indicate that victims of the crime may systematically misunderstand their victimization or risks, and that society may not appreciate the true nature of the phenomenon. Such misapprehensions can significantly distort or misrepresent political policy agendas and cultural priorities.

Stalking has been a subject of academic and legal inquiry since California passed the first antistalking law in 1990 (Lowney & Best, 1995). The legal construct of stalking has been a point of academic and societal controversy in part because what is considered illegal stalking behavior, such as persistent attempts at communication and expressions of desire or commitment, is often difficult to distinguish from normal courtship processes (Anderson, 2009; Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Dunn, 2002; Emerson, Ferris, & Gardner, 1998). It is likely that human societies have always experienced forms of stalking (Dan & Kornreich, 2000; Finch, 2001; Kamir, 2001). Such overlaps between the cultural constructions of courtship and the prohibitions of threatening and harassing activities represent a problematic intersection. There has been a reluctance on the part of the criminal justice system to view stalking as a serious issue (Kim & Spitzberg, 2012; Spitzberg, 2002a); and when the system does confront it, efforts seem "more focused on physical rather than psychological harm, thus leading to the minimization of the terror that stalking causes as well as stalking as a crime" (Logan & Walker, 2010, p. 452).

"The term 'stalking' can include anything from benign courtship attempts to assault and murder" (Sinclair & Frieze, 2000, p. 23). While the legal definition of stalking varies from state to state, stalking has generally been defined as a pattern of intentional behaviors toward a person(s) that are unwanted and result in fear or threat. Conservative estimates based on large-scale representative surveys indicate that 8% of women and 2% of men have been stalked at some point in their life (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Such estimates suggest that about 3 million U.S. adults experienced stalking in the previous year (Baum, Catalano, Rand, & Rose, 2009; Catalano, 2012).

Different legal stipulations and jurisdictions, however, lead to different interpretations of the events that constitute stalking (Sheridan & Davies, 2001). In general, the “more that fear or threat are required as definitional elements of pursuit to consider it stalking, the lower this percentage gets” (Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2006, p. 201). A variety of experimental studies of hypothetical stalking scenarios demonstrate that the acknowledgement of stalking as a crime, and the extent to which it constitutes a risk or danger, often depends on the gender of the stalker and the gender of the victim, their prior relationship (or lack thereof), and whether or not actual threatening actions were enacted (e.g., Cass, 2011; Dennison & Thomson, 2005; Kinkade, Burns, & Fuentes, 2005; Scott & Sheridan, 2011).

The influence of prior relationship is illustrative. Hollywood depictions of stalking may suggest that stalking is stereotypically enacted by a crazed or mentally disturbed stranger. The popular news media may suggest that celebrities and public figures are the most common targets of stalkers. It is relevant, therefore, that 75 to 80% of stalking cases emerge from preexisting relationships, and half of all stalking cases develop during the aftermath of failed romantic relationships (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). That is, most stalkers are considered suitable relationship partners, and half of all stalkers are not only perceived as normal but attractive enough to date by their eventual victims. Given that stalking often emerges during or after romantic relationships, it is not surprising that the public in general commonly possesses inaccurate views of the crime. Scenario research generally indicates that strangers who engaged in unwanted pursuit or harassment behavior were more likely to be labeled stalkers, compared to prior romantic intimates (Kinkade et al., 2005; Scott, Lloyd, & Gavin, 2010; Sheridan & Lyndon, 2012). Other scenario research indicates that behaviors constituting illegal stalking were often not recognized as such because they did not seem to fit with people’s stereotypes of stalking (Ngo, 2012). For example, only 30% of college students recognized a relatively clear case of cyberstalking as such (Alexy, Burgess, Baker, & Smoyak, 2005). In the U.S., when justice center and victim services professionals were presented with two stalking scenarios, only 25–52% recommended calling the police (Logan, Walker, Stewart, & Allen, 2006). In a large-scale survey, Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison (2000) found that the majority (60%) of women who self-identified as stalking victims did not meet the legal definition for stalking for lack of meeting the typical legal “fear requirement” (p. 13). If even victims of stalking lack accurate conceptions of the crime, it raises the question of how existing conceptions of the crime may be socially constructed by media. In summary, there seem to be a number of inconsistencies between the legal and the social constructions of stalking, and between the ways in which stalking occurs, and the ways in which people believe it occurs. One of the possible reasons for such discordance is media cultivation.

Media Construction of Stalking

Cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998) proposed that extensive exposure to certain consistent images, events, and patterns of social behavior in the popular media can dis-

tort media consumers' views of reality. One of the more common cultivation effects is the mainstreaming of crime beliefs, in which heavy media consumers, particularly television viewers, will be overexposed to violent and criminal acts, and this exposure will be reflected in distorted and exaggerated beliefs regarding the prevalence of such crimes and the likelihood of personal risks of victimization by such crimes (Shrum & Bischak, 2001). Such effects appear to depend on the particular ways in which viewers consume such media (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006), and may recursively influence and be moderated by consumer personality, selection of such media, and enjoyment of such media (Hoffner & Levine, 2005; Weaver, 2011). Cultivation also appears consistent with associations between media consumption of sexualized violence and rape myths (Kahlor & Eastin, 2011) and interpersonal aggression (Comstock, 2008).

Media are primary sources of information regarding crime, and in particular, "film is one of the primary sources through which people get their ideas about the nature of crime" (Rafter, 2007, p. 403). The popular media invest significantly in cultivating fandom, identification, and parasocial relationships with characters and personalities (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008). One important factor to consider in media cultivation is the judgment of external realism, or "the extent to which fictional content is consistent with the actual world" (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, p. 267). Much perceived realism research assumes that content with greater perceived realism correlates with greater influence (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Furthermore, perceived realism correlates highly with typicality, or events, emotions, personalities, and actions in media that are perceived as familiar or usual (Shapiro & Chock, 2003). Therefore, media with greater typicality (i.e., films meant to represent reality) may have greater influence on audiences than media with lower typicality (e.g., fantasy, science fiction, or horror genres).

In one of the few published content analyses of stalking in media, Lowney and Best (1995) found that stalking was often portrayed in television news, talk shows, magazines, law reviews, scholarly journals, and congressional proceedings (i.e., media with high typicality) as a form of obsessive pursuit, which they identified as "a standard theme in American popular culture" (p. 50). They concluded that the portrayal and reporting of pursuit changed over time. Initially, circa 1980-1988, before the naming and criminalization of stalking, the media tended to depict women as victims of harassment by men. Subsequently, between 1989 and 1991, media depictions increasingly portrayed stalkers as mentally disturbed and pursuing celebrities. Eventually, between 1992 and 1994, the media redefined stalking more as a domestic violence issue, where victims were pursued by former lovers or spouses.

Given that stalking has often been portrayed in popular media as a form of "pursuit," stalking may be closely associated with a number of cultural values and beliefs, as suggested by aphorisms such as "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again," "persistence pays," "don't take 'no' for an answer," and "if you want it enough, and try hard enough, you can achieve anything" (Polivy & Herman, 2002). In this sense, the line between stalking and romantic pursuit becomes blurred, problematizing cultural understandings of the crime. Whether media depictions reflect their culture or the culture reflects its media typifications, it becomes important to ascertain the ways in which forms

of interpersonal aggression are represented, given the potential diagnostic, socializing, and agenda-setting impacts of such typifications.

Soon after the criminalization of stalking in the 1990s, news media aided in the social construction of stalking as a problem “by giving typifying examples, citing statistics, and quoting experts” (Lowney & Best, 1995, p. 34). Not surprisingly, the popular media and “experts” initially misrepresented key aspects of stalking and vastly overextrapolated certain sources of information (Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2006). For example, early expert guesses regarding the percentage of stalking cases that resulted in murder vastly overstated the probable actual rate of such violence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). While stalking has only recently been defined and discussed in the public sphere, the phenomenon is not new, and descriptions of harassing pursuit, which we now identify as stalking, can be seen in magazine articles as early as 1980 (Lowney & Best, 1995).

Since Lowney and Best’s (1995) analysis of stalking in the media, only three other obliquely relevant content analyses of stalking portrayal in media could be located, even though stalking has been noticed as a prominent theme in certain media genres (e.g., Bhugra, 2005). De Fazio, Merafina, and Sgarbi (2009) content analyzed 506 news stories between 1992 and 2009 regarding stalking in Italy, and found that excluding those about scientific or political reports, the term showed up progressively more over time, 83% of victims were women and 84% of the stalkers were men, 51% emerged from prior intimate relationships, and 51% involved violent behaviors. Rader and Rhineberger-Dunn (2010) conducted a content analysis of victim experiences in the 2003–2004 season of four television crime drama series; of the 42 victim–offender incidents identified, 60% involved rape or sexual assault, 33% involved intimate partner abuse or family violence, and 7% involved stalking. No further analysis of stalking was available. Welsh and Brantford (2009) conducted a content analysis of slasher films, and included stalking as part of a composite code for “psychological aggression.” Across 50 slasher films, psychological aggression occurred in 11% of the films, the most frequent form of aggression next only to “chopping, dismemberment, slashing or stabbing” (36%). In their analysis, about 10% of victims of psychological aggression were men, and 90% were women. Collectively, these studies provide a narrow image of stalking as a crime, and an even narrower image of stalking as a social process.

By comparing the portrayal of stalking on-screen to available real-world statistics, this study sought to contribute to a larger discourse regarding the intersection between a major source of popular culture and a relational phenomenon. Is the on-screen image of stalking in films similar to real-world stalking experiences? Do the media sensationalize stalking narratives by making on-screen stalkers more violent or threatening than real-life stalkers? How do film narratives present gender issues with stalking behavior?

Methodology

The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) was used to search for films with the keywords “stalking,” “stalker,” “female-stalker,” “stalking-victim,” and “stalking-by-

night," the only IMDB keywords including a derivative of "stalk." The initial list of 980 titles was revised to remove television shows, video games, short films, films produced outside of the U.S., films without a U.S. theatrical release, and independent films. The search began with *Play Misty for Me* (1971), Clint Eastwood's directorial debut, considered by many to be the quintessential stalking film, which debuted in 1971; therefore, films before 1971 were excluded. Films released after summer 2011 were also excluded due to the inability to procure DVDs to code, resulting in a 40-year census of stalking films.

Because this content analysis sought to compare real-world stalking data to film representation in reasonably comparable contexts, the genres of horror, fantasy, and science fiction were excluded in favor of genres that dramatize more realistic contexts. Justice variables, including variables related to police involvement and prosecution, may be incomparable between fantasy/science-fiction and reality, and fear may be exaggerated in the horror genre. Understanding that IMDB is extensive but may not be exhaustive, the first two authors then combed through the list of 99 remaining films, reading various synopses and watching theatrical trailers, to distinguish those with prominent stalking themes from those with peripheral stalking behaviors; if a film's description and trailer did not mention any variations of the words "stalk," "follow," "watch," etc., they were not coded. Since the goal of this analysis was to consider films with significant cultural presence and large audiences, 12 films grossing less than \$4 million were excluded. An internet search was then conducted to find articles or blogs about stalking films to make sure no important films were missed in the initial screening process, yielding no new films. The remaining 65 films were viewed and films containing a stalking story arc and/or the relationship between the stalker and the victim in approximately less than half of the film's running time were excluded, as were films in which stalking did not directly affect the main characters. Of the 65 films viewed, 14 were excluded due to lack of stalking prevalence, resulting in 51 coded films (see Appendix). Based on these criteria and the average gross of \$44,518,738.70, these 51 films provide the prime examples of stalking behavior and representations in major American film between 1971 and 2011; therefore, these films have the strongest potential to influence, develop, and produce attitudes about real-world stalking behavior.

A codebook was created based on a codebook originally developed by Spitzberg and Cupach (2007; Spitzberg, 2002b), and subsequently expanded and employed in other works (see Dutton & Spitzberg, 2007; Kim & Spitzberg, 2012; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003; Spitzberg, Dutton, & Kim, 2012). The original codebook was based on a meta-analysis of 175 studies of real-world stalking cases. Spitzberg and Cupach's (2007) meta-analysis began by extracting descriptive percentage incident reports from all the available studies and empirical reports that could be located in which a stalking variable was included. They then iteratively reduced these descriptive reports into a coding system for variables such as who stalked whom, what tactics were used, how long the stalking lasted, and what the outcomes of the stalking cases were. The meta-analysis codebook and results of Spitzberg and Cupach's most current database were obtained through personal communication with the authors. The researchers of the present study also

added variables to the codebook that have not been studied in stalking research but are available to the viewing audience (e.g., victim and stalker living arrangement, victim and stalker protagonist or antagonist status, and stalker motive).

Information about the individual films was coded including the Motion Picture Association of America rating, year of release, and IMDB genre. The remaining codes were divided into six categories of variables: victim (e.g., gender, race, criminal history, character classification), stalker (e.g., gender, race, criminal history, character classification), relational (e.g., relationship type, previous sexual encounter, duration, resolution), stalking behavior (e.g., surveillance, hyperintimacy, harassment, threat), victim response (e.g., fear, reciprocal stalking, family help, friend help), and justice (e.g., victim seek protective order, victim granted protective order, police involvement, stalker arrested). Given that legal definitions of stalking include fear, and subjectivity of character depictions including audience members witnessing stalker character actions that the victim character is not aware of, fear was removed from the operational definition of stalking and a variable for fear was added under victim response. Coders treated characters that acted intentionally, in more than one instance, and pursued another character without his or her consent and/or desire as stalkers.

Intercoder reliability was assessed between two coders (the first authors) for six different films, yielding reliability overall coefficient Kappa estimates across all variables of .88 (*Taxi Driver* [1976]), .93 (*Dressed to Kill* [1980]), 1.00 (*Pacific Heights* [1990]), 1.00 (*The Crush* [1993]), .69 (*Fear* [1996]), and .96 (*Eye for an Eye* [1996]). No variables displayed below 70% agreement. After verifying intercoder reliability, the two first authors then randomly assigned the remaining films and coded the variables independently, and aggregated their results.

Results and Interpretation

Because this is largely a descriptive study, and given the importance of comparing the film content on a point-by-point level in relation to existing research, the results are detailed in a series of comparative tables with further interpretation in text. Variables without comparable real-world data are included in the tables with a hyphen to indicate no available real-world data.

Film Information

Only 5.9% of the sampled films were released in the 1970s and 11.8% of the films were released in the 1980s; the small amount of films from these 2 decades more than likely reflects the historical awareness of stalking that corresponded to the development of antistalking legislation in 1990. Most films (45.1%) were released between 1990 and 1999. As the term “stalking” became more familiar to the public, the news and other media, such as films, participated in the social construction of stalking as a crime. Indeed, “less than 5 years after the term ‘stalking’ emerged, stalking had widespread rec-

ognition as a crime problem" (Lowney & Best, 1995, p. 34). The remaining 37.3% of films were released between 2000 and 2011.

The majority of the films (72.5%) were given an 'R' rating. Most interesting, however, is that 21.6% of the films were given a 'PG-13' rating. Of the 11 'PG-13' films, 81.8% were released after 1999, indicating an increased acceptance of stalking behavior as appropriate material for teen consumption. The remaining 5.9% of the films were coded based upon the 'unrated' version of the film. The IMDB user rating was also recorded; the average user rating for the films was 6.2 (out of a possible 10). Of the 51 sampled films, 29.4% were primarily "drama," 23.5% "crime," 19.6% "action," 9.8% "mystery," 9.8% "thriller," and 8.0% comedy or romance. These genre statistics suggest that films tend to portray stalking as more of a criminal activity that is largely "mutually exclusive of normal courtship" (Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2006, p. 202); it appears that movie stalking is framed with romance as peripheral to the crime and drama features of the narrative.

Victim Variables

In the sampled films, female victims were underrepresented; 45.1% of film victims were women versus approximately 75% of real-world victims. This is particularly true in the most recent films; of the 19 films that were released after 1999, only 36.8% of the on-screen victims were women, indicating a substantial drop in the representation of female victims. It should be noted, however, that among college populations, the proportion of female victims is closer to 65%, and there is no gender difference in self-labeling of stalking victimization (Spitzberg, Cupach, & Ciceraro, 2010). To the extent that films are primarily marketed toward youth markets, films may be more correspondent with the gender distribution of stalking activity.

Most of the films involved victims (90.2%) who were the protagonist character. Three (5.9%) of the victims were the film's antagonist (*Eye for an Eye* [1996], *Disturbia* [2007], and *Perfect Stranger* [2007]), and two (3.9%) were neither the antagonist nor protagonist (*The Dead Pool* [1988] and *The Town* [2010]). Although the proportion of films with a protagonist stalker and antagonist victim was small, they do exist, thereby reinforcing Spitzberg and Cadiz's (2006) suggestion that at "the same time the media horrify stalking, the media ironically tend to glorify stalking-like actions" (p. 204). See Table 1 for a complete comparison of film to real-world data.

Stalker Variables

Female stalkers were slightly overrepresented in film depictions, where 33.3% of film stalkers were women (including one male-to-female transsexual) versus 20–25% of real-world stalkers (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003, 2007; Spitzberg et al., 2010). It may be that films such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987), in which the stalker is a woman, or *Dressed to Kill* (1980), in which the stalker is a male-to-female transsexual, provide greater narrative novelty value in contradicting presumptive cultural expectations. However, it con-

Table 1. Presence of Victim Variables in Film Sample Compared to Real-World Data

Variable	Presence in films	Presence in real world
Victim gender	45.1% female 54.9% male	75% female (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003, 2007; Spitzberg et al., 2010)
Victim race	90.2% White 5.9% Black 3.9% Latino	Few meaningful discrepancies between ethnic populations (Baum et al., 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998)
Victim living arrangement	47.1% alone 5.9% roommate(s) 31.4% nuclear family 15.7% unknown	—
Victim living location	33.3% urban 54.9% suburban 11.85% rural	Among women with protective orders, rural (61%) women were more likely to be stalked than urban (50%) women (Logan, Shannon, & Walker, 2005)
Victim criminal history	15.7% yes	33% of a sample of law enforcement, clinical, and threat management stalker files (Mohandie et al., 2006)
Victim character classification	90.2% protagonist 5.9% antagonist	

tinues to suggest that even among female stalkers, masculine ideologies may typify the activity of stalking.

Mental illness was underrepresented in the film sample, with only 13.7% of the film stalkers portrayed as having a history of mental illness compared to approximately half of real-world stalkers (Mohandie, Meloy, McGowan, & Williams, 2006). Notably, 85.7% of films with a mentally ill stalker were released before 1993. This aligns with Lowney and Best's (1995) characterization of the popular image of stalking, in which prior to 1992 stalkers were generally portrayed as "mentally disturbed" (p. 39). Beginning in 1992, stalking came to be understood as more of a relational issue between individuals who are at least acquainted with one another (Emerson et al., 1998; Lowney & Best, 1995). Yet, unlike the types of mental illness commonly found among stalkers, such as borderline personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, and schizophrenia, film stalkers were often depicted with relatively exotic disorders (e.g., multiple personality disorder in *Dressed to Kill* [1980]). See Table 2 for a comparison of all stalker variables.

Relational Variables

The relationship type between the stalker and the victim was coded for when the stalking behavior began. The film sample clearly overrepresented stalkers and victims

Table 2. Presence of Stalker Variables in Film Sample Compared to Real-World Data

Variable	Presence in films	Presence in real world
Stalker gender	66.7% male 31.4% female 2.0% male-to-female transsexual	75–80% male (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003, 2007; Spitzberg et al., 2010)
Stalker race	96.1% White 3.9% Black	Few meaningful discrepancies between ethnic populations (Baum et al., 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998)
Stalker unemployed	45.1% yes	20–50% unemployed (Mohandie et al., 2006)
Stalker mental illness	13.7% yes	~50% probable mental illness (Mohandie et al., 2006)
Stalker stalking history	43.1% yes	27–31% (Mohandie et al., 2006; Spitzberg et al., 2012)
Stalker criminal history	64.7% yes	73% prior criminal history (Mohandie et al., 2006)
Stalker drug/excessive alcohol consumption	9.8% yes	32% substance abuse issues (Mohandie et al., 2006) 14% (Baum et al., 2009)
Stalker character classification	9.8% protagonist 86.3% antagonist 3.9% neither	

with limited prior relationships; only 35.3% of the films portrayed the stalker and victim as being in a romantic relationship prior to the stalking, while 13.7% of the films portrayed the stalker and victim as friends or acquaintances and 51% of the films portrayed the stalker and victim as strangers, including obsessed fans (13.7%). Although research indicates that 75–80% of real-world cases involve some type of prior relationship, fan stalking of public figures or celebrities does occur (McCutcheon, Scott, Aruquete, & Parker, 2006; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008), and represents as much as 27% of clinical and forensic cases of stalking (Mohandie et al., 2006).

Stalking resolution was determined by coding for both victim and stalker resolutions, including 'accidental death by stalker/victim,' 'murdered by stalker/victim,' 'suicide,' 'killed by third party,' 'geographically separated,' 'imprisoned,' 'mental institution,' and 'lives.' In 7.8% of the films the stalking was resolved by the victim being killed by either the stalker or a third party and in 66.7% of the films the stalking was resolved by the stalker being killed by the victim or a third party. The three victims coded as *murdered by stalker* were all male victims murdered by protagonist stalkers. Experts agree that the rate of homicide in stalking cases in general is far below 1% across all cases of stalking in society (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Meloy, 2007).

Stalker goals and motives were coded across the films, but “have not been studied with nearly the level of interest as other aspects of stalking” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003, p. 358; cf. Miller, 2012). The motive of film stalkers was coded when the stalking behavior began, including establishing a romantic relationship, seeking revenge, replacing another relationship, justice, fame, service (when the goal of the stalker was to gain a resource from the victim, e.g., the stalker extorted an apartment from his landlord victim in *Pacific Heights* [1990]), help (when the stalker’s goal was to assist the victim, e.g., *The Fan* [1996]), or control (when the stalker’s goal is to scare/bully the victim, e.g., *Edge of Darkness* [2010]). Spitzberg and Cupach (2003) concluded that the majority of stalker motivations generally represented one of two broad categories: instrumental and expressive. Instrumental stalkers tend to plan more, and seek to control their victim, retaliate against their victim or intimidate their victim. In the film sample 17.6% of the stalkers sought retaliation and/or revenge against their victim and 5.9% sought to intimidate and control their victim. Expressive stalkers react more spontaneously, are more likely to be jealous, and are more likely to seek to establish or maintain an intimate relationship with their victim. In the film sample 29.4% of the stalkers sought a romantic relationship through their behavior, 19.6% of the stalkers sought to either replace their victim or become a replacement for another person in their victim’s life. See Table 3 for a complete comparison of relational variables.

Stalking Behavior Variables

The fact that 90.2% of the film stalkers performed unwanted surveillance of their victim was not surprising given that stalking is almost semantically synonymous with following and watching in a sneaky, undetectable manner (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). Five (9.8%) film stalkers did not use surveillance tactics against their victim, all five of whom were antagonist stalkers. All five protagonist film stalkers surveilled their victims. Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) noted that surveillance “by itself would rarely qualify as stalking because of its typically covert nature” (p. 71), which cannot result in victim fear unless and until discovered by the victim. Nevertheless, surveillance tactics are “the common stereotype of stalking” (p. 71).

Violence was highly overrepresented in the film sample. Similar to Pirkis, Blood, Francis, and McCallum’s (2006) conclusion that on-screen characters with mental illness are portrayed as being more violent than real-life individuals with mental illness, so too are on-screen stalkers. In the film sample, 78.5% of the men and 73.8% of the female stalkers used physical, nonsexual violence against their victim, compared to one third of real-world stalking cases (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003, 2007; Spitzberg et al., 2010), although in actual stalking cases, violence rates rise to approximately 50% in cases with prior sexual intimacy (Mohandie et al., 2006). While none of the protagonist stalkers’ actions resulted in a third-party death, 45.1% of antagonist stalkers’ actions led to the death of a peripheral character. The one area in which female stalkers were more violent than male stalkers was in the ‘suicide and self-harm’ code; 25% of female stalkers performed some form of self-harm, compared to 11.7% of male stalkers.

Table 3. Presence of Relational Variables in Film Sample Compared to Real-World Data

Variable	Presence in films	Presence in real world
Previous stalker/victim relationship	35.3% romantic 13.7% friend or acquaintance 51% strangers	51% intimate relationship 12% friend or acquaintance
Previous stalker/victim sexual contact	33.3% yes	37% strangers (Mohandie et al., 2006) 75–80% of cases involve some prior relationship, and half of cases represent previously romantic relationships (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Spitzberg et al., 2010)
Duration of stalking	19.6% <1 week 80.4% >1 week	Stalkers persist, on average, for well over a year (Spitzberg, 2002b)
Stalker's goal	9.8% unknown 29.4% romantic relationship 17.6% revenge 19.6% replace 2.0% justice 3.9% fame 9.8% service 2.0% help 17.6% control	—
Death as stalking resolution	74.6% yes (7.8% victim killed; 66.7% stalker killed)	<1% result in death (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Meloy, 2007)
Stalker threatened victim	60.8% yes	40–50% involve threats (Baum et al., 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998)

Sexual violence and rape were underrepresented in the films; 5.9% portrayed sexual violence that was not rape and 3.9% portrayed rape of the victim. In actual stalking cases, sexual violence occurs in approximately 12% of stalking cases (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Of the five portrayals of sexual violence or rape, three of them were movies released before 1991: *Klute* (1971), *The Seduction* (1982), and *Blue Steel* (1990), and all portrayed female victims. It is of note that after stalking was linked with domestic violence in 1992, when stalking was reframed as a “women’s issue” (Lowney & Best, 1995, p. 42), the two films that portrayed sexual violence or rape had male victims: *Disclosure* (1994) and *Obsessed* (2009). See Table 4 for a complete comparison of stalking behavior variables.

Victim Response Variables

The “vast majority of victims of stalking experience extensive changes in lifestyle” (Spitzberg, 2002a, p. 172) as they try to cope with their stalking. Victim response vari-

Table 4. Presence of Stalking Behavior Variables in Film Sample Compared to Real-World Data

Variable	Presence in films	Presence in real world
Stalker surveilled victim without victim's knowledge	90.2% yes	—
Stalker had third party surveil victim	41.2% yes	—
Stalker displayed hyperintimacy toward victim	45.1% yes	—
Stalker harassed victim	60.8% yes	—
Stalker threatened victim	60.8% yes	40–50% involve threats (Baum et al., 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998)
Stalker engaged in physical, nonsexual violence toward victim	76% yes	33% used violence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003, 2007; Spitzberg et al., 2010) ~50% used violence if there was a prior intimate relationship (Mohandie et al., 2006)
Stalker sexually assaulted/raped victim	9.8% yes	~12% involve sexual violence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007)
Stalker victimized peripheral party (damage to property, threats, violence, or rape)	82.4% yes	—
Stalker killed peripheral party	45.1% yes	—
Stalker harmed/killed victim's pet	9.8% yes	—
Stalker used/brandished a weapon	82.4% yes	—
Stalker a serial killer	35.3% yes	—
Stalked attempted suicide or self-harm	15.7% yes	—
Stalker used legal system against victim	29.4% yes	—

ables were coded across the film sample, though limited real-world data exists for comparison. First, 80.4% of film victims were fearful of their stalker at some point in the film. Nearly all (95.7%) of the female victims displayed fear, while 67.9% of male victims displayed fear. Research indicates that male stalking victims are less likely to be fearful of their stalkers and therefore are less likely to view themselves as stalking victims (Spitzberg et al., 2010; Tjaden et al., 2000). Male victims likely find female stalkers less threatening due in part to “the gendered symbolic interpretation of the acts”; in contrast, women “are not able to use violence to control their partners because men and others in their social networks interpret their acts as ineffective” (Anderson, 2009, p. 1449).

Second, third party surveillance occurred in only 11.8% of the films when the victim had a third-party watch and/or follow the stalker. Third, mediated contact occurred in 13.7% of the films when the victim had a third party contact the stalker regarding the stalking behavior. Fourth, reciprocal stalking occurred in 54.1% of films when the vic-

Table 5. Presence of Victim Response Variables in Film Sample Compared to Real-World Data

Variable	Presence in films	Presence in real world
Victim feared stalker	80.4% yes	Male stalking victims less likely to be fearful than women (Spitzberg et al., 2010; Tjaden et al., 2000)
Victim used third party to surveil stalker	11.8% yes	—
Victim had mediated contact with stalker	13.7% yes	—
Victim reciprocally stalked stalker	45.1% yes	—
Victim physically counterattacked stalker	76.5% yes	<5% of victims obtain a gun, pepper spray, or other weapon (Baum et al., 2009)
Victim verbally threatened stalker	60.8% yes	—
Victim hid from stalker in public crowd	11.8% yes	—
Victim received help from friend	56.9% yes	43% contact or enlist help of friends or family (Baum et al., 2009)
Victim received help from family	29.4% yes	43% contact or enlist help of friends or family (Baum et al., 2009)
Victim received help from media	5.9% yes	—
Victim consulted with lawyer	7.8% yes	20% consult an attorney (Baum et al., 2009)

tim performed reciprocal stalking actions in an effort to get the stalker to cease stalking behavior. At present, there is little information available on the occurrence of reciprocal stalking, although it is recognized as a potential problem in some stalking cases (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). Fifth, counterattacks occurred in 76.5% of the films when the victim physically attacked the stalker whether in self-defense or in anticipation of physical harm, demonstrating the violent sensationalizing of stalking in films. Sixth, verbal threat occurred in 41.2% of the films when victims verbally threatened their stalkers. Victims do not commonly report engaging in threats against their stalkers, although small percentages (<5%) report such actions as obtaining a gun, pepper spray, or other kind of weapon (Baum et al., 2009).

In 17.6% of the films, victims either sought legal advice (7.8%) or retained legal counsel (9.8%). This is an accurate representation of real-world victim responses where, according to research (Baum et al., 2009), stalking victims occasionally report talking with an attorney (20%), contacting or enlisting the help of friends or family (43%), mental health professional (12%), clergy (9%), victim services counselor (7%), or private investigator (1%). See Table 5 for a complete comparison of victim response variables.

Justice Variables

Victims who sought protective orders were underrepresented in the sample. Only 7.8% of the film victims sought a protective order against the stalker compared to 15–30% of female victims in reality (Baum et al., 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Of the four film victims who sought a protective order, 50% were granted. Further, in 50% of the film cases the protective order escalated the situation, which is more than twice the estimate that 22% of protective orders escalating real-world stalking cases (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). In fact, “most of the research indicates that protective orders are routinely violated, but also do not appear to escalate risk of retaliation” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003, p. 365).

Although no data exists on police victimization for comparison, of the 31 films where legal and/or law enforcement intervened, 58.1% portrayed the police being victimized by the stalker. Police victimization included an officer being injured, killed, restrained, and/or isolated by the stalker. In a dramatic twist, in some cases, the stalker was a police officer (e.g., *Edge of Darkness* [2010]). In two large-scale surveys, when stalking victims were asked why they did not contact the police, between 6 and 8% indicated that their reluctance was because the stalker was a policeman (Baum et al., 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). See Table 6 for a complete comparison of justice variables.

Envisioning the Past, Present, and Future

A commentator on stalking suggested that it is “an especially dramatic form of behavior that lends itself to representation in fiction, film and TV. It involves in real life the kind of behavior which, paradoxically, we imagine would feature only in the movies” (Nicol, 2006, p. 10). This investigation asked if there is, in fact, anything peculiarly cinematic yet unrealistic about movie representations of stalking. Given the potential of popular media to both emulate and enculturate modes of social activity, the accuracy of film depictions provided an important avenue of study.

Overall, the rate of the stalker behavior variables and the victim response variables were relatively consistent with real-world data. However, the films in the sample tended to sensationalize stalking narratives by making the stalker more violent and threatening than what real-world statistics indicate, which may promote extreme stereotypes about stalkers and their behavior. This violence was not only directed toward the victim, but also peripheral parties and law enforcement. Palazzolo and Roberto (2011) noted that “media stories have the ability to arouse and sustain a range of affective and emotional experiences” (p. 2), and therefore individual opinions and perceptions may be skewed due to high media exposure. This cultivation effect has been demonstrated in various contexts and in various media (e.g., Lowry, Nio, & Leitner, 2003; Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003; Van den Bulck, 2004), influencing media consumers in often deep and subtle ways (e.g., Riddle, 2010; Riddle, Potter, Metzger, Nabi, & Linz, 2011). This cultivation effect may have implications for per-

Table 6. Presence of Justice Variables in Film Sample Compared to Real-World Data

Variable	Presence in films	Presence in real world
Victim sought protective order	7.8% yes	15–30% of female victims seek or obtain a protective order (Baum et al., 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998)
Victim granted protective order	50% yes	15–30% of female victims seek or obtain a protective order (Baum et al., 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998)
Stalker violated protective order	100% yes	42% rate of noncompliance (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007)
Protective order escalated stalking	50% yes	22% of cases the restraining order escalated the situation (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007)
Police involved	60.8% yes	35–50% of victims contact police (Baum et al., 2009; Kim & Spitzberg, 2012; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998)
Police helpful	48.4% yes	≤ 50% of victims report that police were not helpful (Kim & Spitzberg, 2012; Spitzberg, 2002a)
Police victimized by stalker	58.1% yes	—
Stalker arrested	19.4% yes	43% arrest rate (Kim & Spitzberg, 2012)
Stalker charged	16.1% yes	20% rate of charges (Baum et al., 2009); 41% rate of charges (Kim & Spitzberg, 2012)
Stalker convicted	3.2% yes	20% rate of prosecution (Baum et al., 2009); 40% conviction rate (Kim & Spitzberg, 2012)

ceptions of stalking as a purely physical act, where psychological trauma is already overlooked or ignored in real-world stalking cases (Logan & Walker, 2010).

The depiction of sex and sexual violence in U.S. movies has remained consistently low since 1968 (Nalkur, Jamieson, & Romer, 2010), thereby underrepresenting the reality of sexual assault and rape in instances of stalking, which is estimated to be 12% (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). In 9.8% of the films the victim was either raped or sexually assaulted by the stalker; before 1991 the victims of sexual violence in the films were women and after they were all men. Media outlets may be more reluctant to portray sexual violence in an effort to receive a maximum rating of 'R' to be shown in theaters. This reluctance is problematic because it can encourage the idea that sexual violence is not a threat for stalking victims, particularly for female victims who have not been sexually assaulted or raped by their stalkers in film since 1990.

In the films in which police intervened, less than half (48.4%) were helpful in investigating the victim's allegations, granting a protective order, or arresting the stalker. Mainstream films seem to be sending the message that it is best not to involve authorities in stalking instances because when the authorities are involved they may not be helpful. In both of the films where a protective order was granted the stalker violated it. Clearly, the films suggest that a protective order has no actual protective effect for the victim. This portrayal may be a reflection of the actual perception that "police cannot maintain constant surveillance of either the victim for protection or the stalker for enforcement" (Spitzberg, 2002a, p. 184) of protective or restraining orders.

Further, the rate of murder in films far exceeded the actual murder rate associated with stalking. Whereas the actual murder rate in stalking cases is likely far below 1%, 41.2% of films portrayed either the stalker or the victim being murdered by the other, 11.8% portrayed the victim accidentally killing the stalker, and 19.6% portrayed a third party killing the stalker. Furthermore, 45.1% of the films portrayed the stalker killing a peripheral party associated with the victim. While all of the films included a narrative resolution to the stalking, 74.6% ended in death of the stalker or victim. The excessive amount of murder in the films promotes the prospect that violence and murder are the most effective ways to dissolve the stalking relationship. This result is not surprising because an unresolved story line does not make for a good film conclusion.

Given that IMDB keywords are tagged by users, it may be assumed that other major motion pictures exist that were not included in this sample. This issue was mitigated by searching the internet for articles or blogs about stalking films. However, public perceptions of stalking and IMDB's user-generated keyword tagging system may perpetuate a disconnect between stalking research and media representation, where film narratives that researchers would identify as stalking are not identified as such by the public, and therefore not classified as such on databases such as IMDB. This disconnect was further illustrated by the absence of the word *stalking* in some of the film narratives. Though this is undoubtedly in part because several films were released before the first antistalking legislation was enacted, it is unclear whether or not all viewers of these films would identify the actions in the films as stalking, and whether this would influence how viewers were impacted by the representations. Further, there is still relatively little research on public perception about stalking and stalkers. People, and especially younger viewers, may seek, and cognitively reference, their vicarious experiences of stalking in the movies with certain expectancies and normative practices in relationships. On the other hand, it is possible that stalking simply makes for good drama.

Areas for Future Research

Relational disengagement variables were coded for across the film sample; however, few current data are available on how stalking victims seek to dissolve or disengage from their stalkers on an interpersonal level (cf. De Smet, Buysse, & Brondeel, 2011; De Smet, Loeys, & Buysse, 2012). Therefore, the data for that section did not add to the

purpose of this paper and were excluded completely. Additional research into how victims disengage and attempt to disengage from their stalkers would add to the scholarly discussion by identifying discrepancies between public perception, media representation, and actual stalking phenomena.

Public opinion surveys of stalking in conjunction with additional media content analyses could create a broader picture “regarding the role that media and their consumers play in the co-construction of crime stereotypes” (Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2006, p. 208). Only by gaining a clearer understanding of how stalking is viewed by the general population and how that understanding differs from clinical and legal definitions of stalking can researchers begin to comprehend how media may produce and reproduce individual and societal perceptions of stalking (Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, & O’Connor, 2004; Sheridan & Davies, 2001). Such research holds the promise of serving both policy-based and basic theoretical questions regarding the nexus among aggression, criminal behavior, and cultural practices of aesthetic expression.

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Appendix

Sampled Films

Year	MPAA Rating	Title
1971	R	Play Misty for Me
1971	R	Klute
1976	R	Taxi Driver
1980	R	Dressed to Kill
1982	R	The Seduction
1986	R	The Hitcher
1986	R	Murphy's Law
1987	R	Fatal Attraction
1988	R	The Dead Pool
1990	R	Blue Steel
1990	R	Pacific Heights
1990	R	Misery
1991	R	Cape Fear
1991	R	Sleeping with the Enemy
1992	R	Basic Instinct
1992	R	The Hand that Rocks the Cradle
1992	R	Single White Female
1992	R	Unlawful Entry
1993	R	The Crush
1993	UR	Sliver
1993	R	Guilty as Sin
1994	PG-13	The River Wild
1994	R	Disclosure
1995	R	Copycat
1995	PG-13	The Net
1996	R	Fear
1996	R	The Fan
1996	R	A Thin Line Between Love and Hate
1996	PG-13	The Cable Guy
1996	R	Eye for an Eye
1997	R	Breakdown
1998	R	There's Something About Mary
2000	R	The Watcher
2001	R	Don't Say a Word
2002	R	One Hour Photo

continued

Sampled Films (*continued*)

Year	MPAA Rating	Title
2002	R	Trapped
2002	PG-13	Enough
2002	PG-13	Swimfan
2004	PG-13	Wicker Park
2004	UR	Taking Lives
2004	PG-13	Paparazzi
2005	R	A History of Violence
2005	PG-13	Red Eye
2007	R	Disturbia
2007	UR	Death Proof
2007	R	Perfect Stranger
2009	PG-13	Obsessed
2010	R	The Town
2010	PG-13	The Ghost Writer
2010	R	Edge of Darkness
2011	PG-13	The Roommate
