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Bloodred: Violence on Screen

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The dishonest mob boss goes down in a spray of bullets and blood; a humanoid machine meets her end amidst flying glass shards; a son smothers his mother in her hospital bed; a former assassin confronts the red in her ledger. Violence in films exists in a variety of dimensions. It can be graphic or subtle, triumphant or tragic. It can be primarily masculine and heterosexual, or it can involve other genders and sexualities. However it is portrayed, violence plays an important role in a film's narrative and cultural messages. The four films I analyze in this essay—*The Godfather* (1972), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Joker* (2019), and *Black Widow* (2021)—represent a broad range of genres and time periods, from a crime/gangster film set in the 1940s to a science fiction film set in futuristic Los Angeles. However, these films are not completely disparate. All four feature violence as a major narrative element, with protagonists who inflict violence intentionally and repeatedly, albeit for varying purposes. This essay investigates how the differing portrayals of violence in these films contribute to the films' implicit and explicit meanings. Violence in films plays both a narrative role, delineating elements of plot, and a cultural role, clarifying the film's stance on issues of gender and sexuality; these, combined with a discussion of the social reception of violence, particularly as it relates to the rating system, frame this essay's argument.

It is no secret that cinema is rife with violence. Ever since the restrictive Production Code was replaced with the film rating system in 1968, filmmakers have been free to explore

"incendiary areas" such as "crime, violence, sex, obscenity, and religion" (Doherty 13). The

Production Code, drafted in 1930 by a Jesuit priest and Catholic layman, barred the production

of any film "which will lower the moral standards of those who see it," ensuring that "the

sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin"

(Shurlock 142). The film rating system eliminated these restrictions, allowing any film to be

produced as long as it accepted its assigned rating—from the family friendly G up to the no-

holds-barred X. Although advocates of the Code claimed that "producers, under the code, remain

entirely free to bring to the screen virtually any social problem," the era of films produced after

1968 seem designed to challenge that assertion (Shurlock 146).

Enter *The Godfather* (1972). Shot within the criminal realm of the mafia, *The Godfather*,

directed by Francis Ford Coppola, sneers in the face of the Code's admonition against

"sympathy" for "crime." Bullets and blood fly across the screen, often at the behest of the

protagonists. Using its newfound freedom to full extent, *The Godfather* demonstrated that

violence, an aspect decidedly outside of the Code, could effectively shape the narrative of a film.

Violent shots highlight important narrative moments in *The Godfather*. For example, over the

course of the film, viewers see mafia heir Michael Corleone slowly succumb to the criminal

world into which he was born. His ascent culminates in a brutal scene of murder. While Corleone

attends his godson's baptism, hired assailants kill the other family heads on Corleone's orders.

Coppola alternates shots of Corleone reciting his vows with shots of the various murders, which

escalate in intensity. The first shot only shows the assailants shooting through a doorway; there is

no blood in the frame, and viewers do not see the bullets hit their targets. The next vignette

introduces blood, but only in a small amount, as it flows from Moe's eye (figure 1).

Figure 1. Blood flows from Moe's eye in The Godfather *(02:40:53).*

The next few shots increase the number of bullets and quantity of blood, with the final victim painstakingly tumbling down a staircase over several seconds (02:37:00-02:41:40). The build-up of violence here mirrors how the film's narrative has itself built up to this moment—from the very beginning, when Corleone did not want to be involved in the family business, to his semi-reluctant murder of Sollozzo and McCluskey, to this final violent embrace of his role. While violence has been present throughout the narrative, it is fitting that the film's most violent moment comes just as Corleone fully steps into his role as the Godfather, himself embracing violence. In this way, *The Godfather* demonstrates that violence, beyond just being a sensationalized taboo, can enhance a film's presentation and message.

  Joker, directed by Todd Phillips, similarly uses escalation of violence as a narrative tactic. At the beginning of the film, Fleck is a poor, downtrodden clown-for-hire, regularly picked on and derided by society. It is through violence that he grows in confidence, starting with the murder of the Wall Street boys on the subway, initially an act of self-defense, and

progressing to the cold-blooded stabbing of his coworker and shooting of Murray Franklin. In addition to escalating in violence, Fleck's murders progressively become more public: when he murders the Wall Street boys, there are no witnesses; he stabs Randall in Gary's presence; and he shoots Murray on live TV. This, too, echoes *Joker*'s narrative arc. As Fleck comes to terms with his identity and grows in confidence, he becomes more bold in how he chooses to inflict violence. Released half a century after the abolishment of the Production Code, *Joker* reaffirms the potential of violence as a narrative strategy.

Key to this strategy in the first two examples is the close tie between violence and the protagonists. While other characters also commit violent acts in *The Godfather* and *Joker* (Barzini's men kill Sonny; a random rioter kills the Waynes), the main character either directly commits or orchestrates much of the violence. This fact contrasts with the real world, where people tend not to root for violent criminals. Investigating this contradiction, Richard Keen et al. compile several reasons as to why viewers are so drawn to violence. One of their takeaways was that a film's narrative structure influences how viewers perceive violent characters. Looking at Corleone as a case study, Keen et al. find that his narrative role shapes viewers' response to him: "Since he is the protagonist and we have learned and expect to root for the protagonist, the net result is that we find ourselves rooting for the bad guy" (137). Psychologically, this is known as a *schema*. After watching hundreds of stories in which the narrative focuses around a single character and their successes or failures, people grow accustomed to viewing the main character in a positive light. *The Godfather* casts Corleone as its protagonist from the beginning, focusing on him and Kay at the wedding, then tracing his actions and development over the course of the film. His narrative position thus overshadows how people would react to violence in everyday life, causing viewers to side with him despite his violent tendencies. By leveraging this tendency,

films can condone violence implicitly through their narrative choices while explicitly maintaining a distance from the characters' violent actions.

In addition to influencing viewers' perception of the protagonist, schemas may also play a role in assessment of violence generally: if people continually root for violent characters, they may be conditioned to view violence in a more positive light in subsequent films. In *Joker*, not only do we have a violent protagonist in Fleck, but later in the film, Fleck's actions set off a city-wide riot. In the diegesis, the rioters follow Fleck's violent example; in the exegesis, viewers associate violence with the restoration of justice. In subsequent films, following the schema they adopt in *Joker*, viewers may be more likely to accept aggression as an appropriate response to issues of fairness. As this cycle repeats itself, violence gradually becomes a necessary and expected part of film narratives. This opens a new possibility: when violence is especially prevalent in a film's narrative, the sudden lack of violence can also be an effective narrative tactic.

Blade Runner and *Black Widow* exemplify the use of lack of violence in otherwise violent films. Rick Deckard and Natasha Romanoff, the protagonists of *Blade Runner* and *Black Widow*, respectively, both occupy inherently violent professions. Blade runners kill humanoid replicants, while widows kill political targets of the Russian government. Throughout the course of *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott, Deckard tracks down four allegedly dangerous replicants. His encounter with the final replicant, however, displays not escalated violence, like the climaxes of *The Godfather* and *Joker*, but the absence of violence—Batty reaches the end of his artificial lifespan before Deckard has the chance to kill him. This results in a rather muted, reflective end, echoing Deckard's own character arc. Over the course of the film, Deckard faces the humanness of the replicants he kills, focalized through his relationship with Rachael. As Sean

Redmond asserts, "Replicants . . . are all ultimately shown to be more fully human than many of the human characters we get to see in the film" (41). Rachael is an upgraded version of a replicant, closer to human than any replicant before. Initially, Deckard is hostile toward her, but as the film progresses, he begins to interact with her more naturally, even developing a romantic relationship with her. The violence in the film, initially a way to put down dangerous machines, becomes vicious murder. Thus, when Deckard does not kill Batty, the cycle of violence ends, reinforcing the film's implicit message about the humanity of replicants. From a viewer's perspective, the abrupt lack of violence in a film that up to that point has focused on hunting and killing replicants stands out, highlighting the moment's narrative importance.

Black Widow's approach similarly utilizes the absence of violence. From the beginning, *Black Widow*, directed by Cate Shortland, portrays Romanoff sympathetically. At the film's start, Romanoff's days as a trained assassin are in the past; now she works as an Avenger, a hero fighting to defend the planet. These are classic moral qualities in a protagonist, and they make it easy to root for her. However, a dark past complicates her narrative. At a key moment, the film reveals that Romanoff murdered Antonia, the young daughter of Dreykov, the man in charge of the widows. The intentional murder of an innocent child is an especially unforgiveable form of violence, but by holding off on this reveal until late in the narrative, the film preserves viewers' sympathy with Romanoff. Having seen her working to better herself, viewers sympathize with her emotional struggle instead of being disgusted by her violence toward Antonia. Narratively, the film uses violence as a tool to complicate Romanoff's characterization; when Antonia is later revealed to have survived the explosion thought to have killed her, Romanoff refrains from killing her, demonstrating her growth over the course of the narrative.

In addition to augmenting narrative elements, violence in films also indicates the films' approach to cultural issues such as gender. Historically, many films have centered around men as the perpetrators and targets of violence. *The Godfather* and *Joker* perpetuate this tradition. *Black Widow*, on the other hand, focuses on females as the main perpetrators of violence. Additionally, *Blade Runner*, while featuring male-to-male violence, also includes instances of non-traditional violence—both in terms of violence against women and against deviant "others" as represented by replicants (Yeates).

Violence in *The Godfather* upholds traditional gender divisions. In general, the film sequesters its women, keeping them out of the professional, violent world of men. The classic ending shot exemplifies this concept: when the door to Corleone's office closes, it creates a physical barrier between Kay and Corleone, literally shutting her out from his business dealings. The portrayal of violence in the film reflects this separation. Although violence saturates the film, it is almost exclusively perpetrated by and meted out on men. When women are the recipients of violence, it is at the hand of the film's antagonists. Apollonia, Corleone's first wife, dies as a result of a car bomb intended for Corleone. The film portrays this as a tragic incident, Corleone calling out in warning seconds before the explosion (02:06:17-02:06:22). Moreover, her death could be seen as punishment for trying to transgress gender divisions. Apollonia was planning to drive the car to Corleone, showing off her newly acquired driving skills. This attempt to take charge results in her death.

Hugh Davis argues that *The Godfather* models itself after traditional Roman values, explaining its penchant for violence. He writes, "In *The Godfather*, Don Vito and Michael exhibit the consummate masculine qualities of strength, courage, skill, and decisiveness" (109). Corleone's strength is quiet, controlled. When he volunteers to kill Sollozzo and McCluskey, he

is seated in a relaxed position. Sonny paces around and talks loudly; in contrast, when Corleone begins to speak, his voice is soft but immediately commands the room. The camera frame slowly zooms in on him as he describes his plan, reaching its closest frame right as he proclaims, "Then I'll kill them both" (01:13:21-01:14:37). In this scene, Corleone demonstrates each of the virtues Davis describes: by sitting, he displays strength under pressure; by volunteering to kill the men and having a thought-out plan to do so, his courage and skill are on display; and finally, by definitively proclaiming that he *will* kill them, he indicates decisiveness. By including these qualities in a scene discussing murder, the film clearly ties masculinity and violence.

Like *The Godfather*, *Joker* focuses on male-to-male violence, with violence against women minimized and de-emphasized. Misha Kavka notes that in *Joker*, "as opposed to the graphic, drawn-out killings of the male characters, the murders of women are kept off-screen" (38). When Fleck smothers his mother with a pillow, the camera frame remains on him and his expression; only the flatline beep of the heart monitor indicates her demise (01:21:30-01:21:42). Kavka also notes that when Fleck murders the boys on the subway, he initially redirects their attention away from a woman they are harassing, which would usually suggest a pro-feminist take; however, Kavka argues that "*Joker* resist[s] a feminist reading [because] Phoenix's deformist masculine performance does not work in the service of women, but is rather contained and even amplified by conformist masculinity under Phillips' direction" (38). The rescue of the woman aboard the subway is overshadowed by the gruesome triple-homicide; indeed, the extreme scenes of violence throughout the film center attention on the male characters. The film depicts most strikingly the scenes in which Fleck murders men—from the subway boys to his coworker Randall to, ultimately, Murray. After killing Randall, Fleck leans against the wall, his

white makeup spattered with bright red blood (figure 2).

Figure 2. Red blood against white makeup in Joker *(01:28:16).*

Fleck's makeup seems to suggest that this is just another performance to him—when he leans

against the wall, it is as if he is posing for viewers' admiration. Fleck may represent a

"deformist" masculinity, but it is masculinity nonetheless. Merlin Seller calls Fleck's unique

brand "alienated masculinity," arguing that "as beta-male antihero, Arthur's murderous

enactment of masculine crisis is a result of urban, capitalist and historical forces" (n.p.).

Whatever the message about political forces, the end result is clear: *Joker* perpetuates a

masculine vision of violence.

Unlike *The Godfather* and *Joker*, *Black Widow* decidedly does *not* center male violence.

On the contrary, at its heart *Black Widow* is a film about violence done to and by women. The

widows in the film, trained to track down and kill, are exclusively female, and the cast of

characters comprises multiple violent women. The film also, in direct opposition to traditional

masculine narratives, promotes feminine agency in its portrayal of violence. Much of the film

focuses on reversing a chemical brainwashing process used to control the widows' actions. These

efforts do not demonize the women committing violence but rather criticize the men's control of the violence. This theme of control appears not just in the chemical brainwashing but also in the control of their bodies: at one point, Yelena retorts to Alexei, "I don't get my period, dipshit. I don't have a uterus," revealing that the Red Room gave her "an involuntary hysterectomy" (01:02:23-01:02:33). By revealing that the Red Room instigates this personal and invasive form of violence against women, the film further villainizes the Red Room. Shortland is careful to differentiate the scenes in which women commit violence of their own free will from those in which they are under the influence of the Red Room, simultaneously acknowledging the cinematic history of violence as it relates to women and promoting a new model of feminine violence.

In contrast to the films discussed so far, which clearly fall on the male or female side of the gender divide, *Blade Runner* offers a more nuanced take on gendered violence. While the film clearly represents both masculine and feminine forms of violence, the inclusion of the replicants adds another layer to the film's portrayal of gender and sexuality. Past scholars have noted how the film draws attention to the constructed nature of gender: Redmond observes that "the cyborg origins of the central female (and male) characters destabilise the masculine/feminine binary oppositions found in the film" (53). Similarly, Robert Yeates reflects, "The humanity or inhumanity of these characters is not something innate but rather is constructed by society's image of them, just as it is with prejudice on the basis of race or sexuality: the replicants are considered depraved, perverted, and sinful merely for their deviation from the supposed norm" (66). The film reveals this construction gradually: the first replicant Scott introduces is immediately violent, unintelligent, and generally a threat to society—how the general population in *Blade Runner* is supposed to view replicants. The introduction of Rachael,

then, challenges this initial depiction: Rachael is attractive, kind, and intelligent, not at all like

the dangerous replicants Deckard is tasked to kill. Finally, in Batty's final monologue, he utters a

line that unequivocally humanizes him and all replicants: "Quite an experience to live in fear,

isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave" (01:45:12-01:45:22). Fear is one of the most human

emotions, and by voicing this line, Batty severs the last cord separating humans and replicants. If

replicants, something literally constructed by humans, do not fall into even divisions of good and

bad, then perhaps society ought to reexamine other binary divisions that it has constructed.

Violence is a key factor in highlighting the ambiguity of gender in *Blade Runner*. Citing

Zhora's death as an example, Yeates observes, "[Replicants'] bodies deviate from the human

norm, and the violence inflicted draws attention to this" (67). Also referring to Zhora, Redmond

argues that her "violent death . . . is quick and deadly retribution for her rebellion" (49). While

violence certainly points out replicants' deviation, Redmond is hasty in his assumption that

Zhora's death indicates that *Blade Runner* is upholding a traditional structure. Yes, Zhora is

killed right after her display of hypersexuality; however, the film does not portray her death

triumphantly. Instead, the scene is shot in slow motion, and the soundtrack that plays over it is

lingering and mournful, leaving space for the shattering of glass. In fact, the glass and the bullets

are the only diegetic sounds audible in this scene—although Zhora's mouth is open, we do not

hear her scream. This conscious separation of sound further emphasizes Zhora's alienation from

society—although she is running through a crowded thoroughfare, no one helps her. Not even

the audience can hear her scream. Deckard does not look victorious as he stands over her body

but rather appears distraught. Red blood runs in rivulets down the inside of her clear poncho,

letting onlookers see right through to her undergarment-clad body (figure 3).

Figure 3. Zhora lies in blood and broken glass in Blade Runner *(00:58:31).*

In death, she is helpless and vulnerable. By shooting her death in such a clearly empathetic manner, Scott exposes the wrongness of such a punishment—Zhora's death was unearned. The violence in this scene draws attention to Zhora's deviance while also reminding viewers of her humanity, reinforcing *Blade Runner*'s criticism of gendered violence.

In any discussion of violence in film, it is crucial to note that although the Production Code freed films to include previously taboo content, producers still must consider other factors when deciding the nature and amount of violence to include in films. Certain audiences, such as parents or religious leaders, are often more critical of extreme violence. This creates tension between artistic freedom and financial profit: the more violent a film is, the less likely certain audiences will support it, leading to lower returns; on the other hand, if producers sanitize a film too much in an attempt to appeal to all audiences, they may lose its internal artistic factor, leading to an inferior product.

This conundrum is most often discussed in the context of the PG-13 rating, which has attracted scholarly criticism since its introduction in 1984. Initially, the Motion Picture

Association (MPA) introduced the PG-13 rating after parents criticized the PG-rated *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) for being too violent (Afra 45). By 2001, however, PG-13 had already gained a reputation as what Michael Medved deemed "the Trojan horse in the movie-rating system—allowing wildly unsuitable material to smuggle its way past walls erected by even the most protective parents" (Medved). Since then, it has prompted concerns over "ratings creep," a term which "refers to the gradual ways in which the R and PG-13 classifications have supposedly become more lenient" (Antunes 28). And indeed, multiple studies have corroborated the existence of ratings creep, particularly in the element of violence: a 2005 study revealed the Classification and Ratings Administration's "failure to identify clearly violent content in American films," while "violence permeated nearly 90% of the [PG-13] films in" a study from 2007, and a 2010 study concluded that "the rating system has allowed increasingly violent content into PG-13 films" (Jenkins et al. e515; Webb et al. e1219; Nalkur et al. 440). Statistically, violence pervades PG-13 films.

If violence is so prevalent in PG-13 films, it would be easy to assume that producers do not have to adjust violence in PG-13 films at all. On the contrary, while PG-13 films may be rife with violence, as the studies show, that does not mean that they can depict violence in any way they want. According to the MPA, "There may be depictions of violence in a PG-13 movie, but generally not both realistic and extreme or persistent violence" (7). The vague language of these guidelines makes it difficult to determine what kind of violence the MPA is seeking to exclude. "Extreme" and "persistent" are both qualitative factors and matters of opinion, not distinct, quantifiable parameters. This may explain why PG-13 films can include so much violence in the first place. Furthermore, studios have a financial incentive to obtain a PG-13 rating. As Kia Afra

notes, PG-13 is widely regarded as "the industry's most lucrative rating" (46). If films can alter

the way they portray violence to achieve a PG-13 rating, they may earn a higher profit.

Films have successfully employed several strategies to lessen the perceived intensity of

violence. In an analysis of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Afra highlights such strategies as

creature violence, analytical editing, and spatial displacement (58-60). Creature violence (in the

context of fantasy) receives more leniency because it is "the kind of violence that is associated

with pure fantasy and cannot be imitated" (Afra 60). Looking back at the MPA's parameters for

PG-13, creature violence falls under the distinction of not being "realistic." When the violence is

realistic, on the other hand, careful editing and framing of shots ensure that "little blood [is] on

display and instruments are almost never shown in the act of creating flesh wounds or bodily

dismemberment" (Afra 60). This editing and framing thus downplays the violence to make it

appear less "extreme," allowing it to fit within the MPA's guidelines. The rating system may not

prohibit films from including violence, but it does affect the way they portray it.

Of the films discussed in this analysis, all are rated R with the exception of *Black Widow*,

which is rated PG-13. Indeed, all the films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, in which *Black*

Widow is an entry, are rated PG-13. As a producer of films about superheroes, Marvel has

correctly identified that much of its audience are kids, and thus the restricted rating of R would

severely limit both their potential viewing audience and, by extension, their profit. To achieve

the desired PG-13 rating, *Black Widow* employs several strategies to minimize violence. While

distinctly concerned with violence, as in the storyline of the widows, *Black Widow* contains far

fewer blood-drenched scenes than the R-rated *Joker* or *The Godfather*. Shots that do include

blood, such as when Romanoff breaks her own nose, are edited so rapidly as to be barely visible

(figure 4). While still employing violence intentionally, *Black Widow* sacrifices the possibility of

especially graphic or attention-grabbing violence in order to play to its audience.

Figure 4. A rare blood spatter in Black Widow *(01:43:49).*

Joker offers a different perspective on the ratings conundrum. While it is also a superhero film, *Joker* received an R rating for its multiple bloody and violent scenes. Choosing not to pursue a PG-13 rating allowed *Joker* to show moments such as Fleck shooting Murray in their entirety, including the blood spattering on the set. If the studio had opted to pursue a PG-13 rating, this moment would have had to have been edited to elide both the blood and the exact moment the bullet hits Murray. Staying with an R rating gives the violence a different effect. But did the restrictive rating limit its potential profitability? *Joker* belongs to the Batman franchise in the same way that *Black Widow* belongs to the Marvel franchise. Kids that love Batman may be inclined to see *Joker* as well. But with *Joker* restricted to 17 and older, kids would either have to convince a parent to bring them or find another workaround. In the age of streaming, it is not entirely unfeasible that kids may be able to find easy access to a restricted film online, bypassing the restrictions altogether. Thus *Joker* keeps both its audience and its violence.

When the film rating system replaced the Production Code in 1968, it ushered in a new era of cinematic violence. In unrestricted violence, filmmakers added a powerful new tool to

their arsenals, one that could grab viewers' attention, shock them, and force them to rethink their convictions. *The Godfather* paved the way in showcasing how violence can shape a narrative and create a complex protagonist, but it failed to cast off a masculine image of violence. A decade later, *Blade Runner* established the use of lack of violence as a narrative tactic and challenged gendered conceptions in its depiction of the replicants. More recently, *Joker* and *Black Widow* have taken starkly different stances on gender and film ratings, emphasizing the versatility of violence. In the character of Arthur Fleck, *Joker* highlights masculinity and challenges the convention of PG-13–rated superhero films. *Black Widow*, on the other hand, sticks to the PG-13 tradition but advocates a place for women in the conversation of violence. The results may differ, but the method remains the same. Much like a red pen draws attention to errors in a text, violence draws attention to the most arresting and critical elements in cinema, allowing films to shape the way we see them and society.

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