

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

An Off-screen Approach to Violence in Contemporary Art Cinema

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ARTS

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

“BA HONOURS IN FILM STUDIES”

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, MEDIA AND FILM

CALGARY, ALBERTA

APRIL, 2017

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Abstract

This thesis proposes a new approach to assessing the purpose of violence in cinema. It asserts that film violence analysis conventionally subscribes to an “on-screen” analysis of the violence that is visible and graphic. To augment this approach, this thesis argues that analysis of alternative interpretations of violence that reach beyond the visible are necessary. These “invisible” forms of violence inform the existence of on-screen violence and are analyzable in the “off-screen” violence analysis approach theorized in this thesis. I look to contemporary art cinema, and the cinema of Sergei Eisenstein as a precursor, in order to apply the off-screen violence analytical approach. This approach provides valuable insight into films known for their on-screen violence, while also challenging the problematic aspects inherent to representations of violence when taking film form into consideration. Off-screen violence analysis frames and better assesses the on-screen violence in complex art films, attributing a new signification to cinematic representations of violence.

Acknowledgements

I am very fortunate to have produced this thesis under the finest of supervision. The co-supervisors of this thesis, Dr. Lee Carruthers and Dr. Charles Tepperman, contributed their vast knowledge of cinema throughout this process, offering valuable insight and recommendations, placing much needed pressure on my ideas and writing, and influencing my work with their expertise, passion, and professionalism. I greatly appreciate the time they provided to me and this thesis over the course of the academic year.

I would also like to acknowledge the amazing core of Communication, Media and Film department instructors at the University of Calgary. I owe something to every instructor whose engaging, informative, and inspiring courses I have learned from in my undergraduate degree, as well as to those who specifically offered instruction to Honours Program meetings. Further, I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Ryan Pierson for his being a part of my defence committee, and to Dr. Tania Smith for offering valuable guidance throughout this writing process as coordinator of the Honours Program.

I cannot express enough gratitude to my parents, Dave and Elke, for their support and commitment throughout my education and this writing process. I would not have arrived at writing this Honours Thesis without their efforts. As well, thanks to the rest of my family for their general support and encouragement.

Finally, I owe infinite thanks to my muse, Nikki. She contributed countless hours of proof-reading and editing to this project, while also keeping me motivated and providing any support I needed throughout this process. I will never cease to be inspired by this muse.

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Chapter One: **Introduction**

Artistic representations of violence possess an inescapable theoretical ambivalence. This ambivalence stems from the fact that artistic representation invites exploration of troubling topics, effectively deeming that any subject is representable for an artwork. The counterpoint of the ambivalence, however, lies in the considerations that make representing sensitive topics controversial in the first place. Real world phenomena like violence are often deemed problematic when artistically represented due to their harmful nature; in other words, artistic representation does not do justice to the human suffering inherent to real world violence. All the same, we face these contradictions as art affords the opportunity of delving into representations that challenge, critique, and provoke by means of their subject matter. Cinema, as a medium, offers an enduring visualization of such representations of violence, contributing an omnipresence of violent content over the course of its history as an art form. With the ambivalent nature of sensitive subject matter in mind, analysis of film violence thus typically hinges on the question of whether these representations of violent suffering, oppression, and destruction are capable of being productively meaningful, or if they are strictly problematic.

In this thesis, I will argue that cinema offers representations of violence capable of achieving meaningful, critical, and informative statuses which challenge the concerns attached to representations of violence. Narrowing this assertion down, I propose a new approach to thinking about violence as it is represented in cinema, which deviates from a strict preoccupation with representations of violence on-screen. Rather, I argue that considering alternative and more inclusive interpretations of “violence” allows films to express substantial meaning beyond their representations of visible violence. Thus, I am taking into consideration the forms of violence that are less directly visible, including those built into and originating from social systems and structures. These types of violence are what I call “off-screen” violence, as they apply to cinema.

This theory does not, however, neglect the significance of the violence that cinema offers on-screen, and in fact aims to work in tandem with those representations, seeking out the off-screen violence to rationalize the on-screen violence.

This thesis argument stems from a theory proposed by Slovenian Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek in his book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Writing on real world violence, Žižek delves into the definitional question of “violence,” prompting him to separate his identified variants of violence into two categories: “subjective” violence, the visible and obvious signs of violent, physical conflict; and “objective” violence, the invisible violence that pervades the status quo through systemic and symbolic forms.¹ However, where other scholars seek to divide these two distinct forms of violence, Žižek argues that we should interpret them as interrelated entities. Thus, Žižek’s key argument states that in order to grasp the visible subjective violence, we must read into the invisible forms of objective violence which are provoking and motivating such acts.² It is Žižek’s theory of interrelation that I am bringing into the realm of film violence analysis. In doing so, I will generate novel observations and theorization on films known for their subjective, or on-screen, violence. An improved conception of the on-screen violence that films represent emerges, along with a heightened potential for their meaningfulness, by considering these “invisible” forms of off-screen violence.

To achieve this analysis and its goals, this thesis considers where the close historical tie between cinema and violence arrives in the present day by analyzing contemporary works of art cinema. The art films under comprehensive analysis here are *Irréversible* (*Irreversible*, Gaspar Noé, France, 2002), and *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, United Kingdom, 2008), which each

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2008), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

thoroughly engage with forms of violence at a myriad of on-screen and off-screen levels. Yet, in arriving at an analysis of contemporary art cinema, I also insist on necessary reflection upon influential historical works that feature significant violent content. For that reason, I initiate my analysis in historical cinema and the silent era films of Sergei Eisenstein, in *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potyomkin*, Soviet Union, 1925), and *Strike* (*Stachka*, Soviet Union, 1925). From the cinema of Eisenstein, I will extract analytical observations in order to frame and appropriately assess the films that I analyze from the contemporary era. Eisenstein's films represent a central component for the outlining of my theoretical framework, and will assist in making sense of the violence present in contemporary art cinema.

Each film I have selected to analyze employs a unique formal approach in its depiction of violence. I investigate this trait in my analysis as it provides distinct and valuable information pertaining to how films structure and present violence to the viewer. Art cinema is ideally suited to an analysis designed in this way as art films are renowned for their formal experimentation. Correspondingly, Eisenstein's cinema performs impeccably as a precursor for this analytical approach, exemplified par excellence by his pioneering Soviet montage editing technique. Thus, I will integrate the significance of the role that film form possesses in its ability to convey meaning to the viewer when representing violence.

Taken altogether, the method at work here employs a trio of analytical approaches in on-screen, off-screen, and formal approaches to analyzing film violence. Therefore, in analyzing each film, I proceed by first offering a detailed analysis of the on-screen violence that stands out as significant to each film. This on-screen analysis will demonstrate how the on-screen violence in a film is typically received, as well as how that violence shapes the viewing experience. This first stage will also begin to incorporate formal considerations into the fold. Second, I will

integrate the consideration of off-screen forms of violence which contribute elements to the understanding of the on-screen violence, while also uniquely shaping the viewing experience in their own, often unarticulated way. The all-pervading violence in each film is rationalized by incorporating off-screen violence analysis, standing as a full-circle analytical process when embracing formal analysis as well.

Following my analysis of each film, I will conclude by observing how a reading of the film from my approach formulates an interpretation that is meaningful. Through consideration of film form, this assessment will also explore how these films encourage a rethinking of the concerns that make representing violence problematic. The analysis of films from this approach will generate an innovative and in-depth study which functions beyond these ambiguous questions of representation. This assertion implies that the films I analyze are aiming for something beyond a realistic depiction of violence. In effect, the films selected stand in as works representative of meaningful and revelatory critiques at the level of insight into art and film, as well as social commentary; these works provide the viewer with informative and powerful takeaways to reflect upon about cinema, violence, and society.

The chief reason that I have elected to pursue a study of violence in cinema lies in the many ambiguities and ambivalences surrounding its prevalence in films today. Cinema of the contemporary era in particular continues to produce films that provoke and challenge by means of their violent content, and I will investigate the motives behind this onslaught of film violence in this thesis. I did not, however, want to produce a reiteration of similar studies of film violence. Rather, I am pursuing a study that provides a new perspective on the presence of on-screen violence in cinema. This method does not, however, negate the significance of standard analysis of on-screen film violence, but rather, it seeks to incorporate an understanding of it in relation to

other forms of violence that reach beyond the visible and graphic. Namely, I argue that contemporary art cinema offers films that exploit the technical and formal capacities of the medium in order to demonstrate intensified understandings and critiques of violence.

Chapter Two: **Literature Review and Theory**

2.1 Delving into film violence analysis and violence definitions

Methodological approaches to analyzing artistic representations of violence vary across art forms, depending on factors unique to each medium. For instance, we must differentiate amongst the assessment criteria of a war photograph; an off-stage, implied moment of violence in a Greek tragedy; or the often graphic, realistic violence of a film. In the realm of cinema, violence commonly appears with strong verisimilitude, artistically mirroring the violence that occurs in reality. Hence, the representing of vile and harmful acts or events, like violence, stands as a controversial process for filmmakers to undertake. Therefore, of utmost importance to discussing violence in any regard, be it on real world violence or artistic representations of violence, is this recognition of violence as a sensitive field of study. Of course, I am analyzing fictional representations of what is often a harmful, oppressive, and destructive phenomenon. This study based in artistic representation does not, however, validate analysis that detaches the artistically depicted acts from their real world bases. This statement gains twofold significance when considering the persistence of violence in films historically and contemporarily, as films consistently represent, critique, reinvent, and comment upon violence.

In order to avoid confusion and convey an articulate argument on violence in cinema, I contend that outlining the parameters of one's work on violence represents a primary concern for film scholars. The defining of "violence" is the initial task required for this stage of clarification. However, recognizing a suitable definition for a film studies analysis of violence is often a challenge due to the extensive applicability of the term. In the anthology *Violence and American Cinema*, its editor, film scholar J. David Slocum, offers this laudable example of a well read and all-encompassing working understanding of violence:

Violence is a notoriously expansive notion. While the term indicates an action or behaviour that is harmful or injurious, the least elaboration quickly demonstrates the range of phenomena for which it is potentially relevant. Individuals, groups, and states undertake harmful actions against individuals, groups, states, animals, property, and nature. Harm can be physical, psychological, or even sociological (countering the bonds of community or the state). Even more, the *threat* of harm or injury can often be as disturbing as the act itself. And the act need not have an immediate cause or responsible agent: systemic or structural violence can emerge from conditions—like racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, or xenophobia—that inscribe a given set of social or cultural relations without necessarily clarifying the reasons for or consequences of specific actions.³

As Slocum's inclusive definition visualizes, violence is a wide-ranging concept. Yet, the presence of such a complete definition of violence in a book on its existence in cinema is curious (though not entirely irregular), and it is with this assertion in mind that I raise the first point of argument for my approach to analyzing cinematic representations of violence: there is an overwhelming adherence to the scholarly practice of discussing and analyzing cinematic violence from a perspective that is exclusively subscribed to the understanding of violence as a graphic on-screen act.

Despite the wide-ranging applicability of the term “violence,” film scholars conventionally analyze it in terms of its physical and graphic manifestations. Accordingly, speaking to violence in cinema typically conjures up images of a disturbing and often bloody nature. I will henceforth refer to this approach to analyzing cinematic representations of violence as on-screen violence analysis. In on-screen violence analysis, we see in-depth examination of the visible, literally *on-screen violence*.⁴ The method I pursue conversely intends to determine how the consideration of alternative interpretations of violence assist in informing the existence and effectiveness of images of on-screen violence. Therefore, I will refer to these alternative

³ J. David Slocum, *Violence and American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

⁴ Though my selected terminology implies a focus on visual elements of cinematic violence, sound is not intended to be neglected from the equation of on-screen violence analysis.

interpretations of violence as *off-screen violence* as they are analyzed, or typically unanalyzed, in cinematic form. I will return to and expand upon this enigmatic off-screen violence and its analytical approach shortly.

Raising the on-screen violence analysis assertion from Slocum's anthology introduction is not intended as a detraction from his articulate work or the arguments he proposes on violence in American cinema. Slocum's definition comes from his introduction to an anthology of essays by other scholars on violence and its presence in American cinema. Yet, despite Slocum's introductory exemplification of a well read understanding of violence, the authors of the essay topics in *Violence and American Cinema* shift into the tendency of on-screen violence analysis. Similarly, in *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre*, scholar James Kendrick aptly recognizes the complex nature of defining violence.⁵ Still, as he proceeds to informatively trace the historical tie between cinema and violence, Kendrick too is essentially informing of the ways in which cinema has historically featured representations of and relationships with visible and on-screen violence. To an extent, this on-screen focused state of film violence analysis raises curiosity as to why these studies incorporate the issue of violence definition when they pursue analyses that focus solely on on-screen violence.

Cinematic representations of violence remain a popular subject for study due to their ever-increasing prevalence and often provocative nature. These images and their challenging qualities lead film scholars to conventionally conceive of and define film violence as this visible and graphic on-screen act. The issue I want to raise here is not that this on-screen approach is a flawed perspective. It is a logical and justifiable approach. Rather, I argue that we can gain further insight into this on-screen approach by considering the additional aspects of off-screen

⁵ James Kendrick, *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre* (London; New York: Wallflower, 2009), 8-9.

violence that are simultaneously at work behind on-screen violence. The on-screen analysis approach does offer useful methods and theories for analyzing the jarring presence of on-screen violence in films, even if its defining scope is somewhat limiting. The specifics of these methods will inform the on-screen violence analysis that I perform upon my case study films.

The approaches to analyzing on-screen violence range from historically all-encompassing to narrow theories and case studies. Historically-minded scholars (Kendrick, Prince 2000) approach violence in cinema from a perspective that traces its roots in early cinema, noting the significance of violence to film history both on the screen and off the screen over time. Other scholars examine how on-screen violence functions as it is housed in specific national cinemas (Slocum), film movements, genres, and the work of single filmmakers (Prince 1998); while others (McKinney, Çelik Rappas) pursue case study-oriented analyses which focus on topics ranging from film violence stylistics (Prince 2003), to the ethics of viewing on-screen violence (Brown, Grønstad), and spectator subjectivity in viewing violence (Kendrick, Sobchack). In a way, the methodological approach I am pursuing touches on each of these methods, being a theory-based analysis which delves into the specifics of sociohistorical filmmaking contexts, as well as film form and style.

A predominant theme that pervades the majority of these film violence analyses is the question of whether or not on-screen violence in cinema can be meaningful, or if it is an exclusively problematic phenomenon. This debate extends well into public discourse on violence in media, with fears surrounding the potentially damaging consequences of viewing such images. My intention is not to declare a side in that consistently fruitless debate. I am not excluding the existence of problematic representations of violence, or their ostensible potential for destructive influence upon viewers, but my analysis is proceeding with the notion that cinematic

representations of violence are capable of possessing a meaningful substance. Determining the line between meaningful or problematic is, accordingly, a task that requires careful consideration and justification. In related works in the field, a number of other scholars carefully explore the potential for a positive value in viewing cinematic representations of violence. These analyses and theories bestow on-screen violence in films the power to function in forms that can be awareness-raising, informative, allegorical, and immensely critical.

Scholars have long embraced the debate on the value that film violence may or may not possess, though no definitive answer or conclusive results have been established. Nonetheless, this debate is still an area of importance as it gets at the root of the sensitive nature of cinematic representations of violence. In “Violence: The Strong and the Weak,” film scholar Devin McKinney sets out to distinguish between “strong” and “weak” representations of violence in films. Following the rationale that “some nightmares are worth having,” McKinney outlines strong film violence as that which “acts on the mind by refusing it glib comfort and immediate resolutions.”⁶ This strong violence also possesses consequences for those involved along with a provoked awareness of immediacy and resonance.⁷ This contrasts what McKinney refers to as weak film violence, which he associates with the overly rationalized and stylized depictions of violence typically associated with big budget commercial films.⁸ While McKinney’s essay lays out a productive framework for separating the meaningful from the problematic, undermining his essay is the lacking of in-depth film textual analysis or specificities within the films he identifies as possessing this strong violence. The trajectory that I am pursuing in this thesis is, in a sense,

⁶ Devin McKinney, “Violence: The Strong and the Weak,” in *Screening Violence*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 100.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 103.

seeking to draw out from cinematic representations of violence a quality akin to McKinney's strong violence. Only, I am applying a reading of off-screen violence analysis to these strong representations to seek out a further meaningful and useful quality.

The particular branch of meaningful cinema violence I strive to analyze is that which exemplifies a usage of on-screen violence that functions beyond plausibility or solely critical intentions. I want to investigate how substantially violent films express their power on-screen by perceiving how they craft violence, as well as how that violence is subsequently experienced by spectators. For a particularly intriguing study of these ideas, I look to contemporary art cinema and the unique approaches to representing violence undertaken by art films. The art cinema is no stranger to producing representations of violence, and this assertion proves to be as true as ever in the contemporary era. Scholar İpek A. Çelik Rappas was even able to pen an essay specifically on graphic attacks on the human body in art films screened at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival alone, which notably included Lars von Trier's controversial film, *Antichrist* (Denmark, 2009). Çelik Rappas argues that films such as these exemplify an abrasive new approach which references the disposability of the human body in contemporary society through graphic corporeal attacks and mutilation.⁹ Çelik Rappas's study exemplifies a sample approach to decoding the meaning offered up by violence in art films. Furthermore, art cinema offers more complex, nuanced, and thought-provoking fare that does not demand the commercial retribution that mainstream cinema does. As a result, the art cinema produces films that engage with form, tone, and style in increasingly unique and innovative ways. Relating specifically to my analysis, art films integrate violence into these experimental methods, and are able to do so radically with

⁹ İpek A. Çelik Rappas, "Corporeal Violence in Art-house Cinema: Cannes 2009," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 30, no. 6 (2016): 670-671.

a heightened sense of artistic freedom. Thus, art films often visualize the most rewarding and engaging representations of violence in both viewing and analytical terms.

Few comprehensive or wide-ranging studies of violence exist that concentrate specifically on art cinema of any era. In these few works that do pertain specifically to contemporary art cinema, a focused weight lies on consideration of violence in “extreme” cinema. Extreme cinema is a recently emerging form of cinema, which certain art films are classified in, wherein violence, sex, and disturbing images are at the forefront of film content, creating uncomfortable and challenging experiences for film viewers.¹⁰ This filmmaking method references ethical considerations in viewing films, achieved through its shock tactics and sustained violence, particularly where extreme art films challenge spectators by positioning and implicating them provocatively. Names like Michael Haneke, Gaspar No  , and Lars von Trier commonly appear under this brand.¹¹

As one may expect, the violence of extreme cinema requires viewers and scholars alike to question filmmakers’ motivations, while also considering the ethics of spectatorship. Scholars William Brown, in “Extreme Cinema and the Ethics of Spectatorship,”¹² and Asbj  rn Gr  nstad, in *Screening the Unwatchable: Spaces of Negation in Post-Millennial Art Cinema*,¹³ explore the ethical dimensions of viewing these extreme films, and argue that they possess redeemable and positive qualities. In his essay, Brown fittingly cites Antonin Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty” theory as an informing concept to assist in the making sense of extreme cinema’s violence.¹⁴ In

¹⁰ William Brown, “Violence in Extreme Cinema and the Ethics of Spectatorship,” *Projections* vol. 7.1 (Summer 2013): 27.

¹¹ Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, “Introduction,” In *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 1-2.

¹² Brown, “Violence in Extreme Cinema,” 26.

¹³ Asbj  rn Gr  nstad, *Screening the Unwatchable: Spaces of Negation in Post-Millennial Art Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 10.

¹⁴ Brown, “Violence in Extreme Cinema,” 28-30.

practice, Artaud's theatrical theory sought to involve and punish himself as well as his audience as a means of creating a critical, new experience of the subconscious via taking in his art.

Artaud's theory also eliminates the distance between the audience member and the work of art.

Brown argues that the on-screen violence of extreme cinema works similarly to Artaud's theory, as it seeks to physically involve and punish the viewer by forcing horrific images upon them.

According to Brown's argument, this experience results in personal and social betterment.¹⁵

Though I focus less on the ethics of spectatorship in my art cinema analysis, one film commonly branded as "extreme," *Irréversible*, is featured in the analysis section of this thesis.

Cinematic representations of violence often entertain questions of aesthetics and style. Stephen Prince is known as a central scholar on violence and its presentation via film form and style. I will be considering his analyses specific to assessing the image of violence on film, which themselves also work toward the question of good or bad representations of violence. In one of his many works that discuss violence in cinema, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema 1930-1968*, Prince observes that cinematic representations of violence function through two components of consideration: "the referential component" and "the cinematic treatment," where the referential component is the real world act being referred to and represented on-screen, and the cinematic treatment is the artistic delivery of the act via on-screen form, style, and duration.¹⁶ In this way, we are, again, taking the cinematic representation and its style into consideration, while also maintaining a relationship with the depicted act so as not to ignore the real life base of the represented behaviour. This method clearly neglects any off-screen form of violence, but, at the same time, the on-screen style

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ Stephen Prince, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 34-35.

method intriguingly proposes the question of how we could think about the off-screen forms of violence as they are referred to and reflected in on-screen form and style.

For an example of Prince's method at work, I look to his essay "The Aesthetics of Slow Motion Violence in the Films of Sam Peckinpah." Prince, who is generally opposed to the aestheticizing of violence in films, utilizes a case study of Peckinpah's films, and particularly *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, USA, 1969), to exemplify how film form and style can produce meaningful fare in depictions of violence. In this case, Prince explores how the violence in *The Wild Bunch* performs didactically. Chiefly, for Prince, *The Wild Bunch* represents a laudable work as it artfully and unflinchingly expresses an anti-violence sentiment. Peckinpah accomplishes this with socially-minded intentions behind the gory slow-motion gunfire and death of his Revisionist Western. In its Vietnam War era context, Peckinpah intended for this slow-motion, "balletic" aesthetic to de-glorify the bloodshed and horror of the contentiously patriotic and protested era.¹⁷ In this way, Prince integrates *The Wild Bunch* and the allegorical comment it produces via film form and style to further his anti-violence perspective. This analysis of how the film medium's formal elements are able to achieve meaning remains significant, though an analysis engaging more explicitly with off-screen violence alongside these on-screen considerations is my intention.

2.2 The two conceptions of violence and their interrelation

Thus far, I have established film violence analysis as subscribing to the on-screen violence approach, while also alluding to an enigmatic form of violence in films that I am designating as off-screen violence. Making sense of off-screen violence requires a fleshing out of

¹⁷ Stephen Prince, "The Aesthetics of Slow Motion Violence in the Films of Sam Peckinpah," in *Screening Violence*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 176.

the definitional complications of writing on violence. To address this task, I look to Vittorio Bufacchi's essay "Two Concepts of Violence." Bufacchi's essay identifies the discrepancies of academically approaching or defining violence by surveying works in the field. Bufacchi astutely observes that it seems as if scholars are writing and theorizing from two separate perspectives of violence altogether in their works.¹⁸ Based on this observation, Bufacchi straightforwardly outlines what he deems to be the two distinct conceptual approaches in studies on violence, which are: the "Minimalist Conception of Violence" (MCV), which informs the analyses that regard violence as a usage of physical force; as well as the "Comprehensive Conception of Violence" (CCV), which conversely informs perspectives that conceive of violence as shifting toward a violation, typically of any form of a person's various rights, while psychological factors may also be included here.¹⁹ The fact that Bufacchi's essay exists to explore these two differing approaches demonstrates the necessity for engaging with the question of a definition when writing on violence. A film studies analysis of violence may be distinct from the works Bufacchi draws from, but that does not justify a glossing over of the definitional question of violence.

While isolated study informed by either of Bufacchi's conceptions of violence can be productive, his selected terminology of "minimalist" contrasted with "comprehensive" implies an inconsistency in studies that neglect the full nature of violence. In this way, Bufacchi's two conceptions indicate that a greater understanding of violence leads to a more coherent analysis, both in conceiving of violence as a physical and unseen entity. However, arriving at a singular, informed definition of violence is a task that can be strenuously inclusive as a result of this conceptual divide.²⁰ Nonetheless, acknowledgement of this conceptual divide is required for any

¹⁸ Vittorio Bufacchi, "Two Concepts of Violence," *Political Studies Review* 3 (February 2005): 194.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 197-199.

²⁰ As is seen earlier (page 6) in Slocum's near paragraph long definition of violence.

work on violence, especially given that Bufacchi goes as far as to state that violence, as a concept, functions in this practically homonymous manner in scholarly circles. Appropriately, scholars perform this recognition of the seemingly interchangeable interpretation of “violence” in the more nuanced studies in the field.

Bufacchi’s two conceptions align with and inform my film violence analysis categories. The on-screen approach of analyzing film violence that I am outlining refers to violence in films within Bufacchi’s MCV, while the off-screen approach refers to violence in films within Bufacchi’s CCV. Yet, I argue that Bufacchi’s analysis of a divided two concepts obscures an intriguing perspective that links the two conceptions of violence. Rather, the *interrelation* between Bufacchi’s two concepts is paramount, and I enlist the assistance of Slavoj Žižek to explore this notion. The perspective of strictly defined separation, and its application to film studies violence analysis, ultimately limits the productive analysis that can be gained by studying violence. The differentiation does remain essential, but the reality of this dual interpretation is that it is not distinct enough to finalize violence as a theoretical homonym.

In his book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Žižek acknowledges the inherently complex nature of writing on violence. In doing so, Žižek unites the understanding of the two conceptions of violence. Comparably to Bufacchi’s assertion, Žižek first opts to separate his versions of the two conceptions into “subjective”²¹ and “objective” categories of violence, with the former aligning with Bufacchi’s MCV and the latter with his CCV. Subjective violence, for Žižek, is violence that is visible and traceable to an obviously identifiable source (or subject), as

²¹ Žižek’s usage of “subjective” violence is separate from the pertinent, but not specifically relevant perspective that views film violence analysis as reliant on subjectivity. This perspective is best exemplified in Vivian Sobchack’s “A Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir on Death in the Movies,” in *Screening Violence*, ed. Stephen Prince, 110-124. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

in a person to person exchange of physical force. On the other hand, objective violence is that which, as Žižek describes, is “inherent to [the] ‘normal’ state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent.” Žižek further contends that objective violence occurs in both systemic and symbolic forms, and represents this zero-level standard of oppressiveness in the everyday, upon which subjective violence occurs.²² According to Žižek, this “evil” objective violence motivates and initiates acts of subjective violence, though it does so through social systems, like the ramifications of capitalism, and symbolically via language.²³ Žižek’s background as a Lacanian certainly informs his usage of “symbolic” violence, as in Lacan’s “the Symbolic,” but the specifics of that formulation are not particularly relevant to my analysis or what I am taking away from Žižek’s work. Rather, I am influenced by how Žižek places emphasis on and delves into the interplaying relationship between each conception of violence. As he explains, subjective violence arises and is only considered as an aberration to peace as a result of the objectively violent forces that invisibly instill their oppression in the status quo.²⁴

Notably, Žižek’s terminology (subjective and systemic violence) recalls sociologist Johan Galtung’s separation of “personal” (or direct) violence, which is violence traceable to a person, from “structural” (or indirect) violence, a silent, unseen violence built into societal structures. This structural violence often manifests in unequal power relations and oppression.²⁵ Writing in 1969, Galtung’s influential essay “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” asserts that personal violence consistently receives more study than the intolerable, and more volatile, aspects of

²² Žižek, *Violence*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁵ Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 170-171.

structural violence largely “because it *shows*.”²⁶ Though he does not cite Galtung in his 2008 book on violence, some of Žižek’s remarks on subjective and objective violence illuminate reasoning akin to Galtung’s. Imperatively, Žižek assigns a certain “inherently mystifying” experience of horror and empathy to the direct confrontation with subjective violence (in all probability by looking at these instances, in photographs or on film), and for that reason feels that analysis of subjective violence is problematic.²⁷ This rationale validates Žižek’s pursuit of study outside of the realm of subjective violence, with his concluding lesson of insistence being that “one should resist the fascination of subjective violence.”²⁸ Instead, more crucial for Žižek is how societally ingrained objective violence produces those outbreaks of visible subjective violence. Hence, when Žižek recognizes the distinct forms of violence, he maintains the close relationship between the two conceptions that permeate within “violence.” The interrelation between the two is essential, and this is the idea that I will transpose to film violence analysis.

2.3 On and off-screen violence in light of Bufacchi’s two concepts and Žižek’s interrelation

So, what implications arise from the fact that film violence analysis is structured from this “on-screen” perspective, as opposed to a dual or interrelated conception of violence? To begin contemplating this question, I re-engage with Žižek and his ruminations on subjective and objective violence, as well as the interrelation between them. Žižek, of course, will offer his commendable reason for avoiding the isolated study of subjective violence as he wants to avoid its *fascinating lure*—its disturbing qualities that we are curiously drawn to: its graphicness, bloodiness, and deviancy. This justification speaks volumes, in a negative manner, to the on-screen violence approach, as it tirelessly attempts to make sense of films featuring on-screen

²⁶ Ibid., 173.

²⁷ Žižek, *Violence*, 3.

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

violence. With film violence analysis structured exclusively in this on-screen form, there is an indulgence in the alluring aspect of violent images, seen for instance in scholar Henry Bacon's book *The Fascination of Film Violence*. Bacon's work takes to breaking down the elements of violence in films, from types of violence, to aesthetics of violence and more in an effort to get at the underlying fascination beneath these images and their persistence.²⁹ As Bacon's work evidences, when applying Žižek's line of thought to cinema, it seems nearly unthinkable not to engage with the medium's obsession with producing images of on-screen violence.

Nonetheless, it is important to reiterate that I am transposing Žižek's theories into the realm of artistic representation, which complicates matters. Therefore, it is with Žižek's warning of troublingly fascinating and alluring aspects in mind that I contemplate the theory: we can look to artistic renderings of violence instead of real life violence for meaning. The reality of staging representations of violence and arranging them into film narratives may seem counterproductive initially, but perhaps we can circumvent the concerns that hinder our analysis of representations by considering how and why cinema historically possesses a close tie to violence. Certainly, as artistic representations, films tap into the underlying complexities attached to society's relationship to violence. Violence may be horrifying, but it also possesses this capacity to awe and seize attention; entire film genres are based around violence, and it is indisputably a draw in contemporary cinema's blockbusters of superficial, spectacular, and unrationalized violence. Thus, it is by exploiting this complex fascination that films can convey unique meditations on violence, as seen in art films, which essentially exist as the antithesis to the mainstream blockbuster. Progress is achievable if we examine how films present violence in order to raise

²⁹ Henry Bacon, *The Fascination of Film Violence* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7-8.

awareness of the medium's utilization of representations of violence. Of course, this is not to say that any or all films with violent on-screen content adhere to the theory I propose, but, as I will explore, only particular films achieve this uniquely laudable status. Hence, my interest here is both in how films represent violence, as well as how that violence is presented to the spectator by the means of the medium.

Film violence analysis adhering to the on-screen violence viewpoint is not necessarily an incorrect or flawed approach. Myriad films, especially in the contemporary era, engage with on-screen violence of increasingly strong graphicness and verisimilitude. Accordingly, such representations of violence in cinema possess any number of justifications for study, both for the potentially problematic and meaningful implications within these works. My intention is thus not to set aside the significance of on-screen violence in the realm of film violence study. Moreover, my argument is not attempting to say that scholars entirely neglect analysis of off-screen violence. Rather, I argue that the significance of off-screen violence and its specifics are thus far unarticulated in film violence analyses. Integrating the understanding of an interrelation allows for a greater conception of the images of on-screen violence that are typically studied ad infinitum.

In my analysis, the concept of off-screen violence, and its analytical process, relies on a symbiotic relationship with on-screen violence. Off-screen forms of violence are certainly analyzable in their isolated form in films, but I am positing that relating them to and seeking them out in instances of on-screen violence makes for the most rewarding analysis. This assertion refers once again to the necessity for acknowledgement of the interrelation between the two concepts of violence, where off-screen violence is required to articulate on-screen violence. Thus, in practice, off-screen violence analysis proceeds by stepping back from the on-screen

violence presented by a film. Off-screen violence analysis asks the questions of why that on-screen violence is occurring, and what is motivating or provoking it. Accordingly, off-screen violence analysis is only applicable to films that frame their on-screen violence in complex forms.

To say that any act of on-screen violence in a film invites off-screen violence analysis would be erroneous. Rather, Eisenstein's films and the art cinema exemplify on-screen violence that functions in such a form that signifies and necessitates reflection on aspects of off-screen violence. Provocative implementations of film form work toward requiring off-screen violence analysis, which ultimately determines the substance of a film's representation of violence. My task within this framework is to appropriately address and expound the pertinent forms of off-screen violence required to interpret these challenging instances of on-screen violence. The specifics of each unique case of off-screen violence will involve considerations of Žižek's systemic violence, Bufacchi's CCV and rights violations, Galtung's structural violence, as well as reflections on social, historical, and cinematic contexts relating to oppression, corruption, ideology, politics, hatred, exploitative employment, sexual objectification, and misogyny.

Chapter Three: Case Study 1 – The Cinema of Sergei Eisenstein

3.1 “For a spoonful of soup”: Sergei Eisenstein’s Kino-Fist cinema of violence

The nature of cinema is that it is an ever-evolving art form, constantly informed by past practice and developments. With this consideration in mind, I have chosen to proceed by first analyzing the work of the influential Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein prior to moving forward into contemporary art cinema. Of course, Eisenstein’s body of work predates the category of art cinema and possesses objectives distinct from the art films under analysis in this thesis. Moreover, Eisenstein’s films and Soviet montage theory are more fittingly classified as avant-garde cinema,³⁰ and antecedents to what we now view as art cinema. Nevertheless, a reading of Eisenstein’s cinema of formal experimentation lends well to the art cinema analysis I pursue in this thesis, while also exemplifying the filmic components required for exploring my theory.

Pertinent for my analysis are Eisenstein’s early silent films *Battleship Potemkin* and *Strike*, both released in 1925. These films produced stunning images of graphic on-screen violence for their time, though the impact of those images remains as substantial today as in their cinematic context of the formative years of silent film. Yet, for Eisenstein, violent images are not the extent of the violence residing in his cinema. For, as I will demonstrate, Eisenstein’s films are also considered to be “violent” when considering his formal techniques as well as the off-screen violence relevant to his films. Thus, I argue that despite the well-developed discourse that exists on the on-screen violence in Eisenstein’s films, a step back from that on-screen violence allows for off-screen violence analysis to formulate a more coherent understanding of the violence central to Eisenstein’s silent era films.

³⁰ David Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” *Film Criticism* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1979): 56, note 1.

Many film scholars declare the film medium as inherently violent at a myriad of levels, ranging from film image content to the functional processes of the camera. Studies such as these proceed to astutely apply this assertion onto one of the medium's most basic technical aspects: the cut. Scholar David Thomson, for one, identifies the violence intrinsic to each filmic transition to a new shot: "Above all, we are reminded that the film and those in charge of it can do anything to us, blow us up or blow our minds, quicker than we can close our eyes. For in any cut, the shock of the new is delivered, and felt, before defensiveness can function. There is always something explosive, or invasive, something of an assault, in any unexpected cut."³¹ Decidedly, there is perhaps no filmmaker that exemplifies the abrasive, assaulting potential present in the cut and the defenseless reception of a new image as fundamentally as Eisenstein. At a time when filmmakers were still in the process of theorizing and refining formal approaches worldwide, Eisenstein devised his ground-breaking approach of montage. Eisensteinian montage aims to construct and manufacture meaning by being conflictual; Eisenstein insists that conflict is "the essential basic principle of the existence of every work of art and every form."³² Eisenstein commonly achieves this conflict by juxtaposing clashing images via cuts in order to impose concepts upon the film viewer. In his Marxist approach to film form, Eisenstein outlines this process as a dialectic wherein the thesis collides with its antithesis, producing a new synthesis.³³ This process is evident perhaps most notoriously in Eisenstein's *Strike*, where a violent suppression of striking labourers is juxtaposed with real footage of a bull being graphically

³¹ David Thomson, "Explosions," in *Screen Violence*, ed. Karl French (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996), 155.

³² Sergei Eisenstein, "The Dramaturgy of Film Form (The Dialectical Approach to Film Form)," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, eds. Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, with Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 267.

³³ *Ibid.*

slaughtered and bled. In effect, the synthesis achieved in this sequence is a powerful metaphor imposing the concept of the labourers being slaughtered like cattle.

If we think back to Žižek's argument that there is a fascinating or alluring aspect inherent to images of subjective violence, or on-screen violence here, Eisenstein's cinema would seem to refute any notion of allure in looking at violence. Eisenstein employs images so deeply revolting and as grotesque as the bull's slaughter in *Strike* that questions of allure or attraction are set aside. If anything, Eisenstein recognizes the potential power and sway in this attraction, using it to punish and manipulate the film viewer. Eisenstein's approach is thus summed up concisely by his response to the "Kino-Eye" montage theory of fellow Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov: rather than a cinema that functions by capturing reality and displaying it for the viewer (as in Kino-Eye), Eisenstein conversely clarifies his own cinematic process instead as that which brutalizes the viewer, in his "Kino-Fist"³⁴ cinema. Eisenstein explains that "a work of art... is first and foremost a *tractor ploughing over the audience's psyche*," regarding *Strike* as the "*direct antithesis of 'Cine-Eye'*."³⁵ He continues: "The *Cine-Eye* is not just a symbol of *vision*: it is also a symbol of *contemplation*. But we need *not contemplation but action*. *It is not a 'Cine-Eye' that we need but a 'Cine-Fist'*. Soviet cinema must cut through to the skull! . . . Make way for the cine-fist!"³⁶ Eisenstein accomplishes his Kino-Fist vision of cinema through the intricacies of his uniquely theorized montage approach, with its confrontational style and targeted, mathematical formal construction. This approach accordingly results in conflict at the level of each shot, as

³⁴ In English language translations of Eisenstein's writing, his "Kino-Fist" and Vertov's "Kino-Eye" are translated as "Cine-Fist" and "Cine-Eye."

³⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 56.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

well as shot to shot relationships, which is also where images of stunning on-screen violence arise and assault the viewer visually and psychically.

Eisenstein's seminal film *Battleship Potemkin* exemplifies the conflict of his montage theory and his Kino-Fist approach to cinema well, incorporating numerous images of on-screen violence that function as components within Eisenstein's intricately structured filmic system. Openly acknowledged by Eisenstein himself as a propaganda work and test run for his montage theory, *Battleship Potemkin* cinematically re-creates the 1905 mutiny on the Russian battleship *Potemkin* and solidifies its significance as a revolutionary symbol for Soviet Russia. Seeing as Eisenstein recognizes within his formula the potency of violent images, on-screen violence is enlisted to assist in achieving Eisenstein's intended pro-revolutionary and pro-Soviet rhetoric. In this regard, the Soviets' realization of filmmaking as a powerful propagandistic tool after World War I is not surprising. This process was certainly aided by Eisenstein's realizing of the power of violent images on film. Vitally, Eisenstein's success necessarily relies on his knowledge of how violent images could gain their influential value through specific formal arrangement afforded to the film medium.

3.2 On-screen violence in *Battleship Potemkin*

Battleship Potemkin is one of cinema's most highly-regarded historical films, and it also contains what is perhaps cinema's most famous sequence exemplifying on-screen violence in its Odessa Steps sequence. This sequence occurs after the revolutionary mutiny on the *Potemkin* is successfully carried out, and news of it has reached the port city of Odessa. The people of Odessa ideologically unite with the revolutionaries aboard the *Potemkin*, only to have the local police open fire on them in a dramatically produced, bloody slaughter of men, women and children. Of the Odessa Steps sequence, scholar James Kendrick remarks: "It is, without doubt, a savage and deeply disturbing portrait of human violence and one of the finest examples of the

emotional and political impact film violence can have.”³⁷ And while the sequence itself is brutal and emotionally charged on paper, its cinematic treatment, in classic Eisenstein fashion, delivers an over the top visualization of emotion and disorienting on-screen violence. The result is a powerful and persuasive viewing experience that provokes and influences the viewer’s ideological leanings as they pertain to judging the morality of the two sides depicted in the film.

The Odessa Steps sequence begins with an intertitle that abruptly announces the impending assault, stating: “Suddenly...”, and the civilians of Odessa begin fleeing down the city’s now infamous staircase from a line of armed police. Eisenstein proceeds to execute the sequence with his signature provocative rhythm, disorienting and conflicting movement of on-screen bodies and the camera, repetitions, and stunningly violent images: a woman’s eye is graphically shot out; another woman holds her wounded child in her arms, angrily pleading with the police before being shot herself; and a child in an unattended carriage rolls dangerously down the staircase, eventually tipping out of the carriage as the sequence concludes. As if these occurrences lack any horror, Eisenstein’s formal techniques only enhance the chaos and abrasive experience of viewing such a scene. Moreover, repetition also represents a salient component in the sequence. Repeated shots of the police mechanically firing on the civilians adds to the portrayal of the regime’s police as heartless, coldblooded murderers that no viewer could endorse or forgive.

Following the sequence in Odessa, the *Potemkin* retaliates for the civilian slaughter by firing on a military headquarters. Taking this counterstrike into account with the addition of the ruthless slaughter at Odessa, Eisenstein seems to be guiding and predicting a fatal destiny for the crew of the *Potemkin* as they confront a fleet of the Tsar’s battleships in the film’s climax.

³⁷ Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 42.

Eisenstein's previous utilization of on-screen violence has, up to this point, conditioned the viewer to anticipate a bloody conclusion to *Battleship Potemkin*. Yet, it is to the viewer's surprise when the Tsar's fleet unexpectedly sides with the revolutionary cause, allowing the *Potemkin* to pass through unharmed. Eisenstein's ideological rollercoaster of emotions is difficult to avoid getting caught up in, confirming the political influence that Kendrick earlier referred to in the film. As the red Soviet flag flies over the black and white image of *Battleship Potemkin*, the power and enveloping sway of a deft execution of on-screen violence through film form projects itself, with all the ideological, political, and propagandistic sentiments Eisenstein intended.

So, as we see, a reading of the on-screen violence in *Battleship Potemkin* functions to adequately decipher the meanings and structures at work in the film. However, even *Battleship Potemkin* and its famous images of on-screen violence gain further significance when considering their relation to the off-screen forms of violence relevant to the tale of the *Potemkin* and those involved in the Russian Revolution. Thus, I will now explore how Eisenstein engages the film medium and its exploitable capacities for representing on-screen violence in order to produce a pervasive experience of violence, which includes and requires consideration of off-screen violence.

3.3 Off-screen violence in *Battleship Potemkin* and *Strike*

Essential to grasping the full effect of Eisenstein's filmic system is employing Žižek's notion of the interrelation between the two conceptions of violence. For, in Eisenstein films, the notion that on-screen violence occurs only on the foreground and in relation to the off-screen violence is paramount. Understanding the on-screen violence of films like *Battleship Potemkin* and *Strike* requires acknowledgement of the fact that Eisenstein wants the instances of revolutionary on-screen violence to feel utterly and wholly provoked, and necessitated by their

directly represented situations. Eisenstein accordingly depicts this off-screen violence in the form of systemically ingrained oppression, poor living and working conditions, as well as corrupt leadership and law enforcement in the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire. As a result, in Eisenstein's films we see irrefutably biased and propagandistic depictions that manufacture urgent situations requiring action, and they eventually result in on-screen violence.

Battleship Potemkin and *Strike* both place particular emphasis on forms of off-screen violence that affect the lives of the Russian proletariat. In *Battleship Potemkin*, the crew aboard the *Potemkin* live in putrid conditions, exemplified in their being forced to eat spoiled meat crawling with worms. Some of the sailors refuse to eat the spoiled meat, and the officers respond by ordering them to be executed. This moment is the impetus for the sailors' revolt, led by Vakulinchuk (Aleksandr Antonov), resulting in a skirmish that finds the sailors overtaking the battleship and throwing the officers overboard. Vakulinchuk is killed in the process, and his body is sent to Odessa with a note reading "for a spoonful of soup." These citizens are practically enslaved and regarded as prisoners of the Tsar's navy, vividly depicting a situation of off-screen violence, summed up by Vakulinchuk's exaggerated, yet telling death note: the people of Russia were being killed for yearning for a better life and living conditions. In this sense, while also taking the Odessa Steps sequence into account, Russian society required a revolution to respond to the systemic violence suppressing their everyday existence. So, when Eisenstein reimagines the mutiny on the *Potemkin* for his film some twenty years later, the outcome is a film that exudes propagandistic sentiments of overcoming the off-screen violence of the previous regime (that the revolution purportedly brought an end to). This off-screen violence is further referenced in the Odessa Steps sequence, where the rulers are depicted as callous and brutal, emotionlessly slaughtering the civilians that peacefully support the revolutionary cause.

Returning to *Strike* and its bull slaughter sequence, the workers in the film are on strike at their factory due to their poor working conditions and treatment, as well as low wages and overly long working hours. Compounding matters, a labourer is falsely accused of stealing a micrometer, and he commits suicide. The proletariat rally to strike following the suicide, submitting a list of demands to their employers. At a lavish meeting organized to discuss how to suppress the workers, the corrupt capitalist stakeholders use the list of demands as a napkin to wipe up a spill. Additionally, they metaphorically discuss “crushing” the workers, much like the lemon they crush in order to get juice. This scene vividly depicts a hyperbolic off-screen violence, reminiscent of the ramifications Žižek describes in systemic violence brought on by capitalism.

The capitalists and the Tsar’s police force work in tandem to crush the striking workers, eventually resulting in *Strike*’s final chapter, titled “Extermination.” At this point, Eisenstein invokes the metaphor of workers being treated as subhuman, which correspondingly results in their routine slaughter, like animals. Eisenstein’s metaphor is cemented frankly by the cross-cut juxtaposition of the bull’s graphic slaughter as the unarmed mass of labourers flee into a field while being fired upon by the police. The lethal results of the extermination are shown to be a large mass of the strikers deceased, littered across a large area of grass. So, again, in this strike we are seeing no simple, isolated workers protest; the workers are shown to live in unbearable and unsustainable conditions, necessitating their strike. Only, their “extermination” and its significance requires this understanding of off-screen violence. This ending functions as a counterpoint to that of *Battleship Potemkin*, instead working as a plea for memory and a justification for the revolutionary action that produced the Soviet Union. Where *Battleship*

Potemkin acts as a celebratory revelation, *Strike* stands in as a warning and insistence upon memory of past violence.

3.4 Conclusions on Eisenstein's Soviet montage editing and his lasting reputation

As I have demonstrated, the on-screen violence so essential to Eisenstein's films becomes further comprehensible by implementing the considerations of off-screen violence. The informing aspects of off-screen violence allow us to make more sense of what Eisenstein is attempting to convey, and, vitally, how he is accomplishing the feat. As is visualized in *Battleship Potemkin* and *Strike*, Eisenstein's violence (on and off-screen) functions in a propagandistic way, intended to construct an interpretation for the viewer. Moments of on-screen violence arise out of political and class conflict, which the films depict as being incredibly savage, yet one sided. Thus, the off-screen violence, and the ramifications of which are occasionally visualized on-screen (but are not "violent" in a physical sense), inform and structure the viewer's understanding of moments of on-screen violence.

Therefore, the violence so essential to Eisenstein's films is meaningful and productive in several forms. First, Eisenstein is revealing the influential nature of the medium in terms of ideological and political representations of violence. We have propaganda here, but the mechanisms that produce such images are quite remarkable. Second, the distance of the work of art from reality lies in Eisenstein's formal approach. Certainly, Eisenstein's cinema is not aiming for straight realism achieved by continuity editing, as in the style of his contemporary, D.W. Griffith. While fittingly, Eisenstein's particular method of inflicting and imposing these messages lends well to a deeper notion of violence, his editing approach does not aim for reality whatsoever. Instead, his films offer a visualization of the way in which film form and technique, montage in this case, can craft meaning in their representation of violence. This is not to say that the images of on-screen violence in Eisenstein's films lack verisimilitude, as they are

extraordinarily graphic, but their highly manufactured and mechanistically arranged nature detracts from an interpretation of Eisenstein's cinema as one that is purely aiming for realism. Eisenstein's cinematic vision, in fact, invents its own language which speaks new meaning into the images it presents.

The ideological and political sway of Eisenstein's filmmaking formula deeply involves the integration of on-screen violence, while also including considerations of off-screen violence. Hence, the continually surviving value of Eisenstein's films and theorization is not in their pro-revolutionary or pro-Soviet rhetoric. Rather, the worth of Eisenstein's cinema lies in the visualization of the meaning-making potential of the medium, and in the emotional aspects achievable via form. Considerations such as these continue to value Eisenstein as one of cinema's most important figures, as well as an ideal starting point for this thesis. Eisenstein's formal experimentation also points to the art cinema, despite his rigid ideological impositions.

Chapter Four: Case Study 2 – Steve McQueen’s *Hunger*

4.1 Framing the fragmented, banal violence in Steve McQueen’s *Hunger*

There exists a general sentiment that art films are interpretable only with the reference point of deviation from conventional cinematic fare.³⁸ Where conventional cinema, typically understood as Hollywood cinema or continuity style, favours coherent narrative flow and continuity editing, some art films establish their “deviation” through fragmented and ambiguous narrative flow, as well as fragmented and elliptical editing. English filmmaker Steve McQueen’s 2008 film *Hunger* is one such art film that employs strategies of fragmentation and ellipses in order to convey its philosophy.³⁹ *Hunger* depicts the life of imprisoned Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) soldiers as they partake in a no-wash protest, and later a hunger strike in 1981. Taking place amidst the Irish Troubles, and based upon true events that occurred in Her Majesty’s Prison Maze in Northern Ireland, *Hunger* observes several people involved with life at the prison, including both prisoners and prison officers.

Hunger works to present itself from an objective perspective to the viewer by detachedly venturing into the viewpoint of both prisoner and officer, which is a process that is enhanced by the film’s fragmented form and narrative delivery. This shifting in perspectives frequently revolves around outbreaks of on-screen violence occurring between prisoners and officers, as well as one instance between an officer and an IRA soldier outside of the prison. However, an application of off-screen violence analysis is also essential to this dynamic, especially when considering the contexts that are pertinent to *Hunger*. I will therefore argue that off-screen violence analysis assists to entirely grasp the pervasive understanding of violence central to

³⁸ Bordwell, “Art Cinema,” 56-57.

³⁹ Jennie Carlsten, “Black Holes and White Space: Ellipsis and Pause in Steve McQueen's *Hunger*,” *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 9, no. 1, (2015): 43.

Hunger. The range of this analysis takes into account the manifest violence of prison confrontations, but also the subtler violence of a hunger strike and exploitative employment.

Hunger is based on the real life no-wash protest and what was the second hunger strike undertaken by IRA prisoners in the Maze Prison in 1981.⁴⁰ As the viewer learns in the film, the IRA prisoners chose to commit to the hunger strike as they felt indignity in the revocation of their Special Category Status (equivalent to political prisoner status). The prisoners, regarded as “Volunteers” for the IRA’s paramilitary cause, viewed their roles within the national conflict as something above standard prosecution and imprisonment. Yet, while incarcerated in 1981, and as depicted in *Hunger*, the prisoners were treated as common criminals, being handled with particular disdain by the prison officers due to their non-conforming principles. The Thatcher-led British government was not sympathetic to this notion or cause, which is revealed via audio inserts of Thatcher speaking in the film. In fact, the government viewed the IRA’s tactics of strategic bombings and assaults as terrorism rather than politically-motivated warfare. Seeing no other way of adequately gaining the attention of the government or the outside world, a group of prisoners, led by Bobby Sands (played by Michael Fassbender), elected to launch a hunger strike in protest of their treatment.

Despite the *Hunger*’s sensitive and disturbing subject matter, McQueen’s cinematic reimagining of the historical event is artfully contemplative, and at times formally experimental in its execution. However, McQueen recognizes the degree of complexity inherent to a film on such subject matter, which is especially crucial given the likely unthinkable physical and emotional suffering that IRA prisoners actually endured in the Maze Prison. Thus, the art film treatment addresses this predicament by presenting the events in unique and provocative forms

⁴⁰ Brendan Hughes led the IRA prisoners on an unsuccessful hunger strike in the Maze Prison in 1980.

which incite reflection beyond merely realistic or gory scenes of violence and suffering. As a result, *Hunger* is an intellectually rewarding viewing experience that includes essential reflection points upon the nature of staging and representing violence for a film, while offering an insightful look at a tragic, yet significant historical event.

Essential to further grasping the undercurrents in *Hunger* is recognizing that it is not a film attempting to champion the morality of the violent crimes committed by the IRA prisoners. Prisoners in the film confess to killing people and committing other crimes for the cause they believe in, and they are imprisoned for those reasons. Rather, what *Hunger* explores is a stark portrayal of humankind in a tense, conflictual era. This exploration visualizes an attempt at understanding the humanity in the prisoners' plight as they doggedly fight for their rights and beliefs. Simultaneously, while it attempts to narrow its scope of comment to the affairs of the Maze Prison, *Hunger* is also not a film that is exclusively focused on condemning the prison officers for their often violent actions and oppressive behaviour toward the prisoners. McQueen's film crafts an ambivalent portrayal of the officers, even if it is certainly true, and visibly so, that they frequently dole out brutal punishment and emotional intimidation upon the prisoners. On several occasions, this portrayal is achieved by expanding the film's perspective to events involving the officers that occur outside of the prison. Taken all together, *Hunger* speaks to intriguing questions regarding the role and perpetration of violence in society, with productive insight being offered by the film. These considerations will emerge first through on-screen violence analysis, and will then render themselves more coherent through supplementary off-screen violence analysis.

4.2 On-screen violence in *Hunger*

As far as the on-screen violence analysis approach allows, in *Hunger* there are numerous instances of physical confrontations between the non-conforming prisoners and the ruthlessly

oppressive prison officers. Additionally, there is a disturbingly abrupt murder of a prison officer committed by what is presumably an IRA soldier while the officer is visiting his mother at a care home. These two variants of violent confrontations in *Hunger* represent the pivotal instances of on-screen violence that I analyze from the film.

In the first and perhaps most notable sequence of on-screen violence in *Hunger*, the prisoners are forced to “run the gauntlet” through officers armed with batons and riot shields before arriving at a room to be probed. This punishment sequence is provoked by the prisoners’ response to a flamboyant new uniform being imposed upon them, which is one of the realities the prisoners face that is viewed as particularly dehumanizing. As well, the prisoners have their cells, which are furniture-less and covered in feces, cleaned and neatly refurnished. Naturally, the rebelliously devoted men, in unison, trash their newly cleaned and furnished cells, while also shredding the new uniforms. The higher-ups and prison officers are none too pleased with these actions, and respond by assembling the riot gear crew to beat the prisoners and perform humiliating body search procedures on them.

The sequence begins by following two prisoners out of their cells and through the gauntlet before moving into the room where probes are occurring. Notably, the riot gear crew inform the prisoners of their presence by pounding their shields with batons and screaming as an intimidation tactic. However, even when it seems the intimidation act is complete, the repetitive sound of batons banging on shields persists, intentionally creating a hypnotic and unsettling rhythm for the remainder of the sequence. To add to the chaos, the sequence is shot in handheld style, executed with minimal cutting. The actual graphicness of the on-screen violence in this sequence varies, with highly orchestrated blocking taking place at times, while other occurrences transpire deliberately out of frame. We do, nonetheless, see a prisoner collide violently with a

stone wall as he is thrown from his cell; a nude prisoner being beaten by batons as he crawls through the gauntlet; and a retaliating prisoner head-butts an officer. In response to the prisoner's head-butts, another officer, who is in frame, brutally beats the prisoner, who is out of frame below the camera, with his baton. The sequence concludes shortly thereafter as we see a bloodied Bobby Sands dropped to the floor, and then a prison officer, who is separated from his fellow officers, trembling in tears off to the side. I will return to the intriguing conclusion of this sequence in the off-screen violence analysis section in order to explore these behaviours further.

McQueen's formal techniques of fragmentation and ellipsis contribute to new interpretations of on-screen violence. What this sequence demonstrates is McQueen's interplay of formal elements, as well as his impressive long take aesthetic. Acting perhaps as something of a counterpoint to the later long take static conversation shot between Sands and the priest, this long take sequence portrays straight chaos. Yet, there is a manifest mix of both *seeing* and *not seeing* in this dynamic, referred to in this sequence with violence that occurs within the frame and in sight, as well as out of frame or obscured from sight. This fragmentary approach to film form speaks to the philosophy of *Hunger* as an objective work that is also not aiming for straight re-creation of unrepresentable experiences. Scholar Jennie Carlsten explains that *Hunger*

expounds on the notion of trauma as something unrepresentable, and something that cannot be expressed through language or through linear narrativization. . . . Through strategies of fragmentation, *Hunger* demonstrates the futility and incompleteness of narrative, employing formal devices that present traumatic loss as a process of breakdown.⁴¹

There is no singular path that could adequately proceed in contemplating and re-creating violence of this magnitude. For, even in one of the film's pivotal long take sequences, the fragmented and necessarily mindful depiction of even the most gruesome events is maintained.

⁴¹ Carlsten, "Black Holes and White Space," 43.

In the first portion of the sequence, a prisoner is followed out of his cell, through the gauntlet, and into the probe room. The interchange of seeing and not seeing is exemplified here. First, the prisoner is shown crawling through the gauntlet line where he is visibly struck by numerous batons; seeing this occur maintains the visual legitimacy of the on-screen violence. The prisoner is also, on two occasions, slugged by officers, but these occur out of frame or behind a blocked path of vision; the viewer is reminded in these moments that what they are seeing is choreographed, though the lacking of a full visualization does not detract from the viewing experience. Evidently, in order for McQueen to pursue his fragmented approach even within a long take, a meticulously choreographed act is required. The prisoner is then probed, and dragged out of the room, while the shot continues into the arrival of the next prisoner that will be forcibly probed. The second prisoner arriving in the probe room is the one that, as earlier mentioned, head-butts an officer, and is beaten horrifically by a baton out of frame. In this case, McQueen has opted not to visualize this brutality, seemingly deeming it beyond representation; its implications are registered, but the actual visualization of the act is not necessary.

The second significant instance of on-screen violence requires some lead-up information, which will then invite the application of off-screen violence analysis. From the outset, where one may expect *Hunger* to exclusively depict the prisoners and their plights, McQueen opts to offer a look into the life of the prison officer as well. This is notably in play as the film opens, where we see an unidentified pair of hands with bloody knuckles being soaked in a sink of water. We then see these hands performing menial household tasks, including getting dressed and eating breakfast. The marked hands are soon revealed to belong to prison officer Raymond Lohan (Stuart Graham), who must also check for a car bomb before departing for work in the morning; this is an act that he performs as routinely as buttoning his shirt or eating eggs for breakfast. For

Lohan, and the prison officer more generally, the bloodied hands come to represent a marking upon his life which pervades beyond his shift in the prison. After all, it is at the prison where he consistently wounds his knuckles by pummeling the non-conforming prisoners.

Lohan is later shot in the back of the head by an IRA soldier while visiting his mother at a care home in a particularly graphic and disturbing exchange. In the sequence, an unsuspecting Lohan, armed with a bouquet of flowers for his mother, strides into the care home and sits across from his elderly mother, who does not seem to notice his presence due to a health condition. Framed firstly in a medium long-shot that omits his head, the next shot reveals Lohan's face as he is seated in a medium shot. These framings suggest that we may forget that the officers violently suppressing prisoners are also regular people with mothers, hence the facelessness of the initial shot. McQueen wants to challenge these concrete conceptions, however, adding the personal look into Lohan's life, realized again in the revelation of his face in this intimate setting.

After a few seconds of Lohan being seated with his mother, an IRA hitman emerges with a revolver and shoots Lohan in the back of the head. Following some frantic cutting, McQueen's camera lingers on the image of Lohan lying bloodied and deceased on his mother for a disconcerting five seconds so as to provoke reflection in the presumably shocked viewer. This scene is an instance that McQueen deems necessary to show in full sight to the viewer, as opposed to, say, the prison officer beating the retaliating prisoner with his baton. In that regard, it provides a countered reflection on the nature of the IRA men, reminding the viewer not to freely empathize with their cause merely by association. Evidently, a broader critique is at work in *Hunger*. I now enlist the assistance of the off-screen violence approach to contemplate the implications of this scene as well as the gauntlet sequence.

4.3 Off-screen violence in *Hunger*

The at times curious perspectives offered to the viewer in *Hunger* begin to become interpretable within utilization of off-screen violence analysis. It is imperative to remember that while both the cause of the IRA prisoners as well as the troubling portrayal of prison officers in *Hunger* are perceivable as negative and damaging, McQueen is not aiming to present a film that strictly condemns either way. What *Hunger* does pursue is a broader critique, investigation, and revelatory examination of humanity and the society that motivated the intense hatred, violent warfare, and dire protest depicted in the film. Considerations such as these speak directly to off-screen violence, making *Hunger* an ideal case study for off-screen violence analysis.

Somewhat akin to Eisenstein's biased portrayal of the Russian proletariat in *Battleship Potemkin* or *Strike*, McQueen wants to depict incarceration for the IRA prisoners as brutal and stringently demeaning. However, this is not executed in *Hunger* with propagandistic intentions or ulterior motives, as it was in Eisenstein's films. Rather, *Hunger* is presenting the story of the prisoners through the immersed lens of their own perspective. In this way, the viewer does not necessarily question the actions of the prisoners or judge their predicament based on their crimes. Instead, being integrated into this objective representation functions to portray the hunger strike and no-wash protest as necessary action, much as Sands allegorically explains to the priest in their pivotal conversation scene in the film.

In a film like *Hunger*, contemplation of Žižek's warning of getting lost in fascinating aspects of violence remains essential. McQueen's elegant and aestheticized formal treatment extends into violent moments as well, notably through his formal technique of "lingering." Scholar Eugene McNamee identifies how McQueen's camera lingers on banal acts within the

prison in order to address humanity over the sensitive politics relevant to the film.⁴² Though McNamee avoids McQueen's usage of the technique relating to on-screen violence, I argue that it applies to those instances as well. This assertion is evidenced on occasions including lingering on Bobby Sands and his bloodied face after he is thrown to the ground by prison officers at the end of the gauntlet sequence, as well as when officer Lohan lies sprawled and deceased across his blood-spattered mother in the care home. In this way, McQueen is engaging with this aestheticized treatment that McNamee identifies, but it is utilized in the case of violence in order to provoke reflection on the acts and the startling images they create. Žižek's insistence to look beyond the fascinating lure is simultaneously invited and exemplified through McQueen's technique.

So, what does this necessitated reflection encouraged by McQueen's lingering determine? The prisoners feel it is obligatory to perform their duties due to the systemic violence pervading their lives as IRA soldiers, both prior to their imprisonment, as well as once imprisoned. Of course, this pervasiveness is eventually regarded as unmanageable, with the prisoners determining that a hunger strike is necessary. Hence, an understanding of the violence, brutality, and suffering that these men endure requires contemplation on the purpose of and motivations behind such acts. This reflection requires two levels of understanding: on the first, of the conflict occurring in Northern Ireland during the Troubles; and on the second, of the revocation of the IRA prisoners' Special Category Status at the Maze Prison. The first level of understanding speaks more to the systemic violence that occurs which is not visualized primarily in *Hunger*, as in that which motivated the guerrilla-style warfare taking place between the IRA

⁴² Eugene McNamee, "Eye Witness - Memorialising Humanity in Steve McQueen's *Hunger*," *International Journal of Law in Context* 5, no. 3 (2009): 291.

and those opposing the Northern vision of a unified Ireland (including the British Army, and Irish loyalist paramilitaries). Likewise, when we see the prisoners preparing for and enduring the abuse of the gauntlet sequence, it is necessary to reflect on why they are subjecting themselves to such torture. At this point, the violence that motivated them to act for the IRA cause has transposed itself into their prison life, and they feel obligated to protest their treatment once again. For, in the realm of the Maze Prison, the IRA prisoners demand their rights be acknowledged, despite the physical and emotional toll the punishment may take on them.

The latter segment of *Hunger* depicts the hunger strike undertaken by the IRA prisoners, which offers a novel meditation on the image of one confronting off-screen violence head-on. McQueen elects to proceed through the strike by solely visualizing Bobby Sands' descent into malnourishment, and eventually death (which is portrayed disturbingly by a slender Michael Fassbender, who committed to a special diet for the film to give realism to his malnourished appearance).⁴³ The film notes that ten men succumbed to starvation during the strike, which did eventually grant their cause the attention of the government, with their demands being met (though Special Category Status was not reinstated). This portion of the film does not feature any on-screen violence per se, but it does offer a stark visualization of the violence one can commit upon their own body; the decrepit state of Sands's body as he nears death evokes a similar sense of questioning and contemplation on why the prisoners would be inviting such torture upon themselves. Ultimately, an extensive notion of violence on many levels is necessary to rationalize the actions of the prisoners. The degraded state of Sands's body prior to his death represents the quintessential image of resisting violence by committing violence upon oneself.

⁴³ Sheryl Garratt with Michael Fassbender, "Michael Fassbender on playing Bobby Sands in *Hunger*," *The Telegraph*, Oct. 18 2008. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3562289/Michael-Fassbender-on-playing-Bobby-Sands-in-Hunger.html>

There remains the lone notable instance in *Hunger* of an IRA soldier committing an act of violence outside of the prison, seen in prison officer Lohan's execution scene. In this case, off-screen violence analysis also allows for McQueen's choice of perspectives to unfold logically, particularly in the form of his depiction of the prison officers. I remarked prior that the opening moments of *Hunger* are curious, in that they provide a set-up for the viewer: the viewer wonders why the man, whom, at this point, is not known to be a prison officer, is in possession of hands in such poor condition. He appears to perform daily tasks like anyone else with a banal 9 to 5 job, only a noticeable default air of trepidation marks these acts. When the reason for Lohan's wounded hands is revealed, the fact that he fills this role as a violent oppressor speaks to this societally structured form of violence that pervades professions. Seeing as this profession involves physically suppressing non-conforming prisoners before a lunch or smoke break, it is not shocking that this violence correspondingly invades the domestic realm.

Consequently, the special case of the prison officer profession in this context carries with it potentially lethal implications. Thus, it is in showing the viewer Lohan's performing of everyday tasks that McQueen is commenting on the nature of socially ingrained violence, necessary for interpreting what is on-screen, which is visualized initially when Lohan checks for a bomb under his car. As well, this significance is only further rationalized when Lohan is murdered as he innocently brings flowers to his senile mother at a care home. Lohan's death is implied to be a retributory strike by the IRA who are employing terrorist tactics to raise awareness, and McQueen's choice of having them strike in the least moral setting possible functions as a contributing element to the reflection on off-screen violence that is needed to interpret the on-screen violence.

This complex portrayal of the prison officer further gains traction in returning to the conclusion of the gauntlet sequence. In the concluding moments of the sequence, a prison officer is seen in tears, secluded from his fellow officers partaking in the beatings and probing. This particular guard has become overwhelmed by the gravity of his actions. McQueen elects to split the visual of this shot of the crying officer with a slow-motion image of officers attacking a prisoner with their batons, while the repetitive sound of the batons on the shields persists. This noticeable formal intrusion distances the viewer from the intense occurrences they just witnessed, imposing an empathetic moment of unambiguous reflection. Moreover, this shot functions in a similar form to that of officer Lohan's experiences visualized in the film, presenting a more human side to the seemingly mechanical nature of the oppressive prison officer. Nevertheless, this officer seems to be the only one affected in this way during the sequence, but it remains significant in McQueen's commitment to an objective perspective. No one is granted immunity for their actions, but *Hunger* delves into a truly human perspective of the contentious divide present in the Maze Prison and Ireland in the early 1980s.

Political theorist Hannah Arendt's thesis on "the banality of evil" from *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* provides insight into the dilemma of the prison officer in *Hunger*. Arendt's 1963 report on Nazi Adolf Eichmann's war crimes trial in Israel led her to observe that there was nothing spectacular or insane about Eichmann's evil mentality.⁴⁴ Rather, a banal, acritical closedmindedness marked the evil of Eichmann's actions due to their lawfulness in the Nazi state, with his awareness of the evil nature of his actions becoming normalized in such circumstances. Eichmann, a Nazi SS lieutenant colonel during World War II,

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 25-26.

did not kill any Jews himself, but he was a logistical organizer of the Holocaust. Eichmann therefore preached innocence, obedience, and desire to perform well for superiors as justification for his actions.⁴⁵ Arendt observes:

As for the base motives, [Eichmann] was perfectly sure that he was not what he called an *innerer Schweinehund*, a dirty bastard in the depths of his heart; and as for his conscience, he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he has been ordered to—to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and the most meticulous care.⁴⁶

This led Eichmann to profess no guilt for his actions, despite the gravity of their consequences.

Eichmann was ultimately sentenced to death for his crimes.

Though the officers visualize their remorse more than the likes of Eichmann, the actions of the prison officers in *Hunger* are interpretable in a similar form to Arendt's theory. They by no means enjoy their duties, but they perform them nonetheless as part of the oppressive societal system. The prison officers are readily aware that their required actions are immoral, but it is their job and they are paid to perform the duty. As is exemplified by officer Lohan, the officers get to live their comfortable lives outside of the prison and its less than desirable responsibilities, but the gravity and weight of their actions stays with them. This residual effect shows up in both on and off-screen analysis, as the officer's life is marked by his profession, and Lohan is even killed for it. Ultimately, the labours of this profession are a ramification of a violent and hateful society resulting in citizens needing to perform this type of exploitative employment. Yet, McQueen, in line with Arendt's theory, does not want to let them go entirely unscathed for the actions they perform while being in the know of their immoral ways. Arendt explains in the context of Eichmann's trial:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 32, 42.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.

And just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ even though man’s natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler’s land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: ‘Thou shalt kill,’ although the organizers of the massacres knew full well that murder is against the normal desires and inclinations of most people. Evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it—the quality of temptation. Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted *not* to murder, *not* to rob, *not* to let their neighbours go off to their doom... and not become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them.⁴⁷

Arendt’s specific case study is of humanity’s most extreme atrocity, but the lesson of her argument is concise and applicable: an individual remains responsible for their social actions, even if their society is offering benefits from systems that normalize oppression and immorality.

4.4 Reflections on *Hunger*

Hunger achieves its unique philosophy through its fragmented form and narrative, as well as through techniques of ellipses and lingering. Considering these elements in practice, the narrative in *Hunger* is delivered to the viewer via a look into the lives of prison officers, prisoners, a story from Bobby Sands’ childhood, Sands’ starvation-induced hallucinations, audio inserts of Margaret Thatcher speaking, and contextualizing intertitles. As well, the representation of on-screen violence and its ramifications are often presented in fragmented and elliptical framings and edits. This approach to depicting violence results in an artful film that seeks out human qualities and beauty in even the most banal or violent aspects of life. McQueen’s *Hunger* accomplishes this representation admirably in the face of an historical event which is daunting to represent.

In sum, the on-screen violence in *Hunger* acts as a signifier, pointing to a bigger, off-screen picture that is critical of the society that structures situations that provoke outbreaks of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 150.

violence. The smaller perpetrators and victims affected by this oppression are not granted immunity for their flawed actions, but a sense of sympathy does mark their portrayal within this complicated society of fierce hatred. Furthermore, the formal components of fragmentation and ellipses are essential to the interpretation of the on-screen violence, as well as the off-screen violence so central to *Hunger*. Hence, stressing the off-screen violence that informs the subsequent on-screen violence in *Hunger* works to craft a greater understanding of why this historical event is significant, and why there are takeaways from this event for viewers in the twenty-first century. The specifics of the Troubles during the 1980s may be history, but social and political conflicts, as well as troubling social trends that breed and motivate violence, remain as prevalent as ever today.

Chapter Five: Case Study 3 – Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible*

5.1 Testing the limits of violence and searching for answers in Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible*

Eisenstein’s notion of the spectator as something to be assaulted or punished survives in certain factions of contemporary art cinema. The cinema of Gaspar Noé certainly meets this classification, existing as something of a combative statement to society at-large as well as to any notion of escapism in film viewing. Noé’s films often express this disagreeability by incorporating themes considered taboo by mainstream entertainment, as well as sensitive and risqué subject matter including graphic depictions of on-screen violence. His skill as a filmmaking craftsman remains undeniable, however, on display prominently in his films *Irréversible* and *Enter the Void* (France, 2009). *Irréversible*, Noé’s most controversially received film, provoked discussion in 2002 for reasons beyond its reverse chronological order narrative. Along with its dizzying, constantly in-motion camerawork, meticulous long takes, and droning soundtrack, *Irréversible* drew flak from critics and viewers alike for its manipulative structuring and graphic depictions of on-screen violence: notably including its long take rape scene.

Unsurprisingly, the film received critiques of homophobia⁴⁸ as well as general assertions of cruelty and nihilism. Beyond the conspicuously off-putting aspects of the film, *Irréversible* is, nonetheless, received as a progressive and thought-provoking art film by other prominent scholars and critics. I will further adhere to that sentiment, arguing that *Irréversible* stands as a uniquely scathing and disturbing film which represents violence in a form that subverts the nature of conventional depictions of violence in cinema and their reception. In doing so,

⁴⁸ David Edelstein, “Irreversible Errors: Gaspar Noé’s Cinematic Rape,” *Slate*, March 7 2003. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2003/03/irreversible_errors.html

Irréversible provides its polemical vision of society and its gender relations, and it is through off-screen violence analysis that these assertions develop most efficiently.

Noé is a filmmaker recognized under several classifying titles, including the New French Extremity group of filmmakers, as well as extreme art cinema. Both of these cinematic taxonomies are known for their depictions of horrifying violence and forefront sexual content. These forms of cinema are not devoid of substance, however, as the films emerging from these classifications are artful and intellectually challenging for viewers. Thinking back to Eisenstein and his mission statement of punishing his viewers, Noé's films take cinematic punishment to another level. However, Noé is not unaware of his role as a provocateur in this style, and his early films reflect this awareness. Noé's short film *Carne* (France, 1991) opens with a textual warning of forthcoming images that may shock and disturb the viewer. Incidentally, *Carne*'s opening on-screen slaughter of a horse by the butcher (Philippe Nahon) evokes an acknowledging nod to the compositional arrangement of the bull slaughter sequence in Eisenstein's *Strike*. Additionally, *I Stand Alone* (*Seul contre tous*, Gaspar Noé, France, 1998), Noé's feature length sequel to *Carne*, is notable for its mid-scene intertitle warning the viewer to avoid watching the final segment of the film due to its disturbing content, offering a thirty second countdown to divert attention.

Irréversible, however, deviates noticeably from the frantic editing of *Carne* or *I Stand Alone*, which is used to convey the manic, disturbed mental state of its troubled protagonist. Warning gimmicks are absent as well, though some viewers may have appreciated if Noé continued that trend for *Irréversible*. Rather, instead of exemplifying the exploitative and invasive power of the cut, as Eisenstein's films do, *Irréversible* visualizes the torturous power of the long take. This long take aesthetic is abetted by chaotic camera movement; although, a telling

omission of camera movement informs a particular scene in the film. Hence, Noé's viewer punishment in *Irréversible* is one that seeks to engage with the nature of filmmaking and film viewing, particularly in terms of how these aspects of cinema interact with on-screen violence. Thus, after considering the on-screen violence in the film, I enlist the assistance of off-screen violence analysis to delve into how *Irréversible* encourages reflection on the acts depicted on-screen, as well as upon the way in which they are received in cinema.

Irréversible portrays a day in the life of an unmarried couple, Marcus (Vincent Cassel) and Alex (Monica Bellucci). The couple frolic around their bed, discuss the possibility that Alex is pregnant, and prepare to attend a party that evening with Pierre (Albert Dupontel), who is Alex's ex-boyfriend. Prior to departing for the party, Alex quietly reacts with joy to the positive result of her pregnancy test, though she does not alert Marcus to the news. Later, at the party, Marcus consumes drugs and excessively drinks, which offends Alex and prompts her to leave without him. Pierre also stays behind to watch over the intoxicated Marcus. On her way home, Alex is raped and brutally beaten by a man in a train tunnel. The remainder of the narrative follows Marcus and Pierre as they attempt to track down the rapist, a pimp known as Le Tenia (Jo Prestia). The men eventually believe to have found Le Tenia at a gay S&M club called the Rectum, and, after a confrontation, Pierre bludgeons the man to death with a fire extinguisher. Pierre is taken away in handcuffs by the police, while Marcus is loaded into an ambulance with a broken arm. Alex is shown in a coma, but her fate is not revealed as the narrative "concludes."

Where this narrative intriguingly encounters a hitch is in the fact that it is presented in reverse chronological order. The reverse chronology positions the viewer confusingly at the out of context killing scene early in the film, and events only begin to add up as the narrative unfolds backward. It is, hence, only later in the film that the viewer learns the man Pierre bludgeons is

not, in fact, the man that assaulted Alex. Moreover, the viewer only discovers Alex's pregnancy in the closing portion of the film. A reading of off-screen violence analysis is required in order to fathom the implications of such a repulsive film.

5.2 On-screen violence in *Irréversible*

Irréversible consumes itself with a very personal look at lives affected by violence; or, how comfortable lives will be affected and forever altered as a result of violence. The on-screen violence in this case is understood best in Bufacchi's MCV, recalling terminology including the personal violence of Galtung, or the subjective violence of Žižek. The complicated presentation and reception of this on-screen violence provokes a need for deconstructing, particularly as Noé has opted to deliver these instances in reverse chronological order. The film features two prominent instances of on-screen violence, which are the aforementioned bludgeoning scene at the club, as well as the train tunnel rape and beating scene.

Irréversible, with a runtime of 97 minutes, is comprised of just thirteen long take shots. In reverse chronological order, each shot⁴⁹ plays out for its runtime before a new shot begins, eventually arriving at the beginning of the previous shot. Within these long take shots graphic portrayals of on-screen violence arise, and they are given additional realism by post-production digital visual effects. The film's third shot includes the first instance of on-screen violence, where Marcus, who is consumed with the idea of vengeance, and Pierre have tracked down Le Tenia. After a tireless search for him in the club, which is intentionally executed with dizzying handheld camera movement, Marcus finally arrives in-front of two men, one of whom is believed to be Le Tenia. Marcus scuffles with the man he believes to be Le Tenia, but has his

⁴⁹ A "shot" in *Irréversible* can represent an entire sequence for the film, or several smaller sequences within a single shot.

arm snapped by him and is nearly raped before Pierre intervenes. Pierre uses a fire extinguisher to bludgeon the man to death, graphically crushing his skull. The bludgeoning occurs in plain sight for the viewer, with ghastly verisimilitude.

The viewing of such a brutal and out of context occurrence early in the film imposes questions that require answering, and *Irréversible* begins to offer an unfolding logic as the narrative proceeds, in reverse. At this point, the viewer is, of course, unaware of both why revenge is being sought, and the fact that the man who was killed was not Le Tenia.⁵⁰ These questions and uncertainties also begin to point, undeniably, to the significance of the reverse chronology. As the shots progress, in reverse order, and fill in the blanks as to why Marcus and Pierre were seeking out such an act of violence, a new disturbing instance of violence arises, which *Irréversible* is notorious for, in its rape scene. It is at this point that Noé's camera elects to halt its erratic movements and stabilize itself for an excruciatingly long static shot.

After having no luck hailing a taxi outside of the party, Alex ventures into a lonely, abandoned train tunnel as a shortcut. There, she encounters Le Tenia, who seems bent on assaulting the transsexual prostitute he is with. Only, when he spots Alex, Le Tenia, armed with a knife, chooses to divert his despicable attention onto her. She resists, but is overpowered by him. The long take rape is agonizingly extended, running 8 minutes before Alex is finally beaten by Le Tenia to conclude the scene. The stylization and cinematic flair of the prior handheld chaos is abandoned in order to distance itself from any sense of artful or deceptive treatment. In this brutal scene, the viewer is at last afforded the motivation and justification for the earlier confrontation scene, in all its horrifying worth. This scene represents on-screen violence in its

⁵⁰ Though, tellingly, only the most astute of viewers will notice that it is not Le Tenia that is killed in a first viewing of the film.

most blatantly disturbing and unfiltered form, which encourages reflection on how violence is conventionally presented on film: in deceptive and distanced forms.

Žižek's assertion of an alluring element to images of subjective violence seems all but incomprehensible when analyzing a film like *Irréversible*. Devoid of allure, Noé's brand of art cinema is one that leaves the viewer wondering, nay, begging, the question of "why?" So, what could possibly make this a meaningful experience? To begin, the recognition of a need to ask "why?" is a common characteristic of art films. In the case of *Irréversible*, it speaks, to an extent, to manipulation on the part of the filmmaker, but it also provokes this investigative experience of questioning for the viewer. In this regard, *Irréversible* lends particularly well to the notion of investigation, given its unorthodox narrative delivery. Film critic Roger Ebert's oft-cited review of *Irréversible* begins to explore the significance of the on-screen violence in the film, as well as the investigative experience that it inspires. Ebert argues that

The fact is, the reverse chronology makes 'Irreversible' a film that structurally argues against rape and violence, while ordinary chronology would lead us down a seductive narrative path toward a shocking, exploitative payoff. By placing the ugliness at the beginning, Gaspar Noe forces us to think seriously about the sexual violence involved. The movie does not end with rape as its climax and send us out of the theater as if something had been communicated. It starts with it, and asks us to sit there for another hour and process our thoughts. It is therefore moral - at a structural level.⁵¹

Ebert notes his disgust and horror in viewing the film, but he also recognizes the productive critical angles that the reverse style proposes, on the level of filmmaking, film viewing, and social commentary. Grasping each of these levels of reflection contributes to the multifaceted understanding of violence necessary for analyzing *Irréversible*.

⁵¹ Roger Ebert, "Irreversible," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 14 2003. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/irreversible-2003>

Regarding forefront and graphic depictions of violence, scholar William Brown asserts that there is a positive value in viewing brutal on-screen violence. An imposition such as this forces the viewer to not shy away from the dreary, troubling aspects of life, which mainstream cinema may neglect.⁵² Brown's argument taken in combination with Ebert's position combine to productively frame the significance of the on-screen violence in *Irréversible*: it is presenting a taboo subject provocatively, and in doing so it is achieving a new form of polemical reflection. I will now move into the off-screen violence section to further expand upon this notion.

5.3 Off-screen violence in *Irréversible*

The violence central to *Irréversible* functions in a number of mutually dependent ways. These factors include the level of the film narrative, its formal presentation, as well as its implications for thinking about violence in cinema for a filmmaker and viewer. Off-screen violence analysis allows for these aspects to dovetail efficiently. To shift into the off-screen firstly requires an assertion of the on-screen: the on-screen violence present in *Irréversible* is born out of a reaction to cinema violence, as well as gender relations. The film offers a contemplative reflection piece on the tragic rape and beating of a woman, but it simultaneously functions as a reflection on the nature of violence in cinema through the retributive vengeance storyline, the reverse chronology, and its formal aesthetic. All the while, temporal themes run through the film, accentuated by but not limited to the reverse chronology, producing, as Ian Christie remarks, “a startling postmodern version of catharsis.”⁵³

⁵² Brown, “Violence in Extreme Cinema,” 26.

⁵³ Ian Christie, “Time Regained: the Complex Magic of Reverse Motion,” in *Projected Shadows: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Representation of Loss in European Cinema*, ed. Andrea Sabbadini (London: Routledge, 2007), 177-178.

Initiating this process requires us to step back from the gruesomeness of the two scenes of on-screen violence. What informs them, both within the narrative and for the viewer? Since the film does as well, I will begin with Pierre's killing of the man at the Rectum. Much of the lead-up mounting to this occurrence (which is of course shown after the scene in the film) is comprised of Pierre attempting to dissuade Marcus from seeking revenge. Pierre's rational, superego, counterpart to Marcus' animalistic, id, irrationality is well-documented throughout the film, thus Pierre wisely attempts to inform Marcus of the relative emptiness of a vengeance act. Up until the moment he must intervene to save Marcus, Pierre decries the animalistic vengeance that Marcus obsesses over. Fittingly, when propositioned with revenge, Marcus cannot help himself but to displace his emotions and attention onto the perpetrator of the crime rather than joining his ailing girlfriend. Disturbing irony strikes, naturally for No  , when it ends up being Pierre committing murder in the Rectum in defense of Marcus. Of course, the act's meaninglessness becomes twofold when the viewer realizes that the man killed is not Le Tenia.

Reception of this violent incident is assisted by taking into consideration the rape scene, and, again, the reverse chronology. As Ebert raises in his review, the importance of the effect (the revenge) playing out before the cause (the rape) of violence works to subvert and to draw attention to the conventional reception of cinematic violence; scholar Eugenie Brinkema even brands *Irr  versible* as a rare "revenge-rape" film, as opposed to the troubling rape-revenge genre.⁵⁴ Conventionally, an evil deed is committed, and the protagonist must respond by seeking vengeance, while the viewer is implicated in cheering the process on. This process is what scholar Devin McKinney would call weak violence, where violence possesses no consequences

⁵⁴ Eugenie Brinkema. "Rape and the Rectum: Bersani, Deleuze, No  ," *Camera Obscura* 20, no. 1 (Jan. 2005): 38.

and is merely plot motivating. In fact, in the film, Pierre chides Marcus and his persistence toward “B-movie revenge crap.” Hence, the notion of the violent rape of a woman operating as a plot point to be exploited for the hope of retributive justice in films is attacked here via reversed chronology. As a result, *Irréversible* offers this meta, postmodern art film style of off-screen violence which performs as a critique of the nature of on-screen violence in cinema. This point in reflection is, however, where assertions of nihilism and negative connotations of postmodernism come into play, as Noé’s film essentially proves that point by performing the act it is critiquing, only in a provocatively structured way.

Focusing specifically on the violence of the train tunnel rape and beating scene, off-screen violence analysis assists in informing the significance of the scene and what is at the core of the film. A fatal foreshadowing is delivered when Marcus pleads with Alex not to go home by herself, explaining that it is not safe for a woman out alone on the streets at night. Alex resists his pleading, but Marcus’ warning unthinkably comes to life, visualized in the fact that, in the story Noé wants to tell, a woman apparently cannot walk alone at night without being assaulted. This occurrence stands as a fierce critique of French society from Noé, but its implications speak more specifically to the socially established forms of violence, and threats of violence, that are inflicted upon and affect the everyday lives of women. Perhaps Noé’s method is an extreme means of getting at the root of misogyny and sexual objectification, but the point is taken nonetheless. This sort of brutality and violence is occurring in our society, and this is not something that Noé wants us to shy away from, even if *Irréversible* does not provide any sort of answer or solution to the matter.

Scholars Yaniv Eyny and A. Zubatov convincingly examine the male-female dynamic in *Irréversible*, asserting that Noé’s vision of society is one “drowning in sin, deep in the thrall of a

male sexuality that turns women into prey, men into predators and both into victims.”⁵⁵ They go on to argue that regardless of how hard Alex tries to define herself as an unobjectified being, she is continually torn down by the men around her. In this way, every person portrayed in the film is both guilty and a victim simultaneously. As well, this line of thought certainly extends to the viewer’s role in experiencing the film: the viewer is victimized in subjecting themselves to the revulsive aspects of Noé’s film, yet they are also guilty by implication of being a part of the society that Noé so grotesquely exhibits on-screen. Moreover, in the disorienting final moments of the film, an image of a pregnant Alex makes us wonder just what actually happened in the film, or what could (or should) have happened to a woman pursuing childbirth. This momentary escape from the horrors witnessed earlier is disrupted shortly thereafter by a violently flashing white light, concluding the film along with the quote “time destroys all.” Noé has surely achieved his goal of an all-encompassing nauseating cinema, but this cinema remains one that we need.

5.4 Conclusions on *Irréversible* and the point of it all

As seen in my analysis thus far, separating *Irréversible* from its formal presentation is virtually inconceivable. First and foremost, the reverse chronology shapes and defines the viewing experience of the film. Scholar Lee Carruthers contrasts reverse chronology narrative with classical forward-moving narrative in order to define its working mechanisms. She explains “we should note that each kind of narrative encourages a distinct mode of viewing: if the classical film engages us with matters of ‘What comes next?’ or ‘Will *x* achieve *y*?,’ the narrative of reverse chronology poses things somewhat differently, motivating questions like, ‘Is this why

⁵⁵ Yaniv Eyny and A. Zubatov, “In the Garden of Earthly Delights: *Irréversible*,” *Senses of Cinema*, no. 31 (April 2004).

she acted that way?,' or 'Is this how circumstance x came to be?'"⁵⁶ Thus, in viewing *Irréversible*, the reverse chronology invites these questions in order to counteract conventional representations of violence in cinema. This process also illuminates one of the several art film deviation elements from conventional cinema pertinent to *Irréversible*. These provocative aspects would not be invited otherwise, as in the classical forward-moving narrative film. Noé executes this specific experience of reverse investigation in order to impose the reflection process so vital to the film, which is also reliant on interaction with conventional cinema.

Irréversible's complex reverse chronology experiment works in tandem with the other formal considerations employed by the film. Noé's formal selections are intentionally confrontational and nauseating, imposing a chaotic and abrasive aural and visual experience upon the viewer. The entire film, barring a portion of the tunnel scene, is shot in handheld style, though the first third of the film is shot the most chaotically; Noé's consistently swaying camera in the long takes disorients for effect. Hence, when we arrive at the rape scene in the tunnel, Noé's camera excruciatingly halts, provoking contemplation and finally imposing a coherently sustained look at something on-screen. Furthermore, musician Thomas Bangalter, of Daft Punk fame, scored the film's foreboding soundtrack of low frequency sound that intends to physically disturb the viewer leading up to the rape scene. Noé's intended effect of crafting this persistently grating viewing experience is accomplished through these technical aspects taken in combination with the reverse chronology and disturbing subject matter.

What Noé ultimately achieves with *Irréversible* is a uniquely cinematic, scathingly critical rumination on violence, which is forced upon the viewer as a form of punishment.

⁵⁶ Lee Carruthers, "Back and Forth: Reading Reverse Chronology in François Ozon's *5x2*," *Doing Time: Temporality, Hermeneutics, and Contemporary Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 66.

Through being subjected to Noé's cinematic world, the viewer is forced to learn, at the very least, something about themselves, relating namely to how they conventionally interpret and receive violence in films. Moreover, the reverse chronology speaks to the ethical challenges of representing violence, as it forces an artistic interpretation and investigation of the on-screen unreality. *Irréversible* is something closer to an assaulting puzzle than a film to be mistaken for reality, even if its on-screen violence represents some of the more gruesome content that cinema has to offer.

In sum, off-screen violence analysis works into the process of investigation that *Irréversible* invites and necessitates. Where mere cause and effect questions may be answered by the film and its on-screen violence, off-screen violence analysis brings in the essential points that make *Irréversible* and its revulsive elements an important experience. This approach reveals why *Irréversible* is being presented in reverse chronology and how content such as this is should be received, all in an effort to critique and provoke. Noé seems to view society in extremes of its flaws and wrongs, and this is often hyperbolically reflected in his films through overtly disturbing subject matter. And this is something that may be painful to have revealed to us as viewers, particularly in the manner that Noé opts to in *Irréversible*, but it remains substantial as Noé is addressing areas of neglected suffering. Cinema need not exclusively be a distanced retreat into comfort.

Chapter Six: **Conclusion**

Can cinematic representations of violence possess a meaningful substance, or are they exclusively problematic? Violence, as an inherently troubling act, will timelessly possess this ambivalent status when artistically represented. These ambiguities will remain inherent to an artwork depicting violence, which is especially true in cinema, regardless of whether a representation is deemed to be meaningful or not. However, cinematic representations of violence rely on this ambivalence and exploit it in order to convey their philosophies and achieve their artistic goals. Meaningful, informative, and critical film violence lies in acknowledgement and awareness of this duality of violence in cinema. In films meeting these conditions, the germane concerns of representing violence are challenged for the purpose of critiquing violence. Films of this sort present violence in such a form that is artistically justifiable. The viewer is implicated in this process by being aware that they are viewing an artistic interpretation of violence, and this is not violence being implemented as a means of producing superficial entertainment.

The essence of my argument is that a new approach to assessing the question of violence's purpose in cinema can produce refreshing conclusions on the topic. In this way, I argue that the considerations that problematize representations of violence are reassessed and challenged by a form of film violence analysis that was unarticulated until this thesis. To acquire adequate background on this research proposal, I explored the conventional and canonical perspectives of film violence analysis, and examined many of the historically significant films known for their violent content. This research determined that scholars conventionally conceive of the violence represented by films in visible and graphic, or "on-screen" terms. Yet, in order to challenge this conception, I pursued study of violence in philosophical, cultural, and sociological literature. This expansion of viewpoints led to the outlining of film violence analysis as

subscribing to the approach of on-screen violence analysis, while raising the view that alternative interpretations of violence were overlooked in film violence analysis.

Taking alternative interpretations of violence into account sparks new vitality into images of on-screen film violence. Theorization on defining violence encourages consideration of violence that is not a physical or visible phenomenon. I refer to these forms of violence as off-screen violence as they exist in cinematic form. By invoking Žižek's theory of violence interrelation, a rewarding new approach emerges for analyzing film violence. The application of Žižek's theory to film violence analysis necessitates consideration of on-screen violence only within reference to off-screen violence. This approach to film violence analysis also fields the complex means in which contemporary art films represent violence, which in some cases seemingly demands such a multifaceted process of analytical reflection.

Looking beyond cinema's on-screen violence, and its fascinating aspects, yields rewarding results. Through the approach of off-screen violence analysis, I demonstrated that films exhibiting on-screen violence are further substantiated by stepping back from their visible violence. Hence, the at times alluring and at other times horrifying presentations of violence both find concrete rationalization in light of off-screen violence analysis. Thus, off-screen violence analysis acts as a supplementary and framing process to on-screen violence analysis, contributing to a better interpretation of on-screen acts in terms of the film's diegesis, as well as their significance as critical texts.

Off-screen violence analysis provides new and productive observations about films already well-known for their on-screen violence. The case studies I selected for analysis are in many ways known for and defined by their on-screen violence. Sergei Eisenstein's films are highly regarded for their editing technique and historical significance, but one of their most

recognized characteristics is their integration of on-screen violence. Likewise, *Hunger* and *Irréversible* are both known for their violent on-screen content, though both pursue a distinct means of presenting that violence to the viewer. Applying off-screen violence analysis to these films allows for a greater understanding of the way that each film structures on-screen violence and arranges the surrounding components of the film around that on-screen violence. This analytical process works by initially identifying and analyzing on-screen violence, and building on and around that analysis in thought-provoking ways.

Each of the three case studies analyzed offers a specific form of on-screen violence. Correspondingly, each film offers a unique form of off-screen violence which informs its on-screen violence. And while each type of violence is unique in each film, there are fundamental aspects in common amongst the conceptions of the violence in these films. In *Battleship Potemkin* and *Strike*, on-screen violence is inflicted upon the proletariat, who are depicted as victims of violence at the hands of the Russian Tsar's army and police force, as well as corrupt capitalists. Thus, the off-screen forms of violence at work in Eisenstein's films are those of a society that imposes oppression upon its citizens in order to keep itself in power. These are the effects of corruption and tyranny, from which citizens suffer. *Hunger* sees on-screen violence occurring between prison officers and IRA soldiers, with assaults being committed by both parties. Off-screen violence in *Hunger* manifests in forms of exploitative employment, rights revocations, and hatred, affecting all portrayed in the film. As well, in *Irréversible* we see on-screen violence in the form of vengeance and rape. The off-screen violence that informs these instances of on-screen violence are the entrenchment into everyday society of gender related oppression, misogyny, and sexual objectification.

As each of the unique forms of on and off-screen violence offered by the case studies indicate, violence shows itself in a variety of forms. Unfortunately, one such way violence often arises is in this visible form, motivated by unseen violent factors. Off-screen violence analysis works to inform on-screen violence regardless of whether it is in the form of politically-motivated oppressive violence; violence inflicted through power relations, hatred, and employment; or personal and sexual violence. In this way, the applicability of off-screen violence analysis begins to take shape. Additionally, it is essential to return to the integrating of formal considerations into this analysis. Film form played a pivotal role in my analysis and influenced the selection of Eisenstein's films and art films as case studies. The precursor analysis of Eisenstein also performed admirably for exploring the implications of an artistically violent cinema, as well as one that relies on form to achieve its intricacies. Intriguingly, formal analysis also played a role in both on and off-screen violence analysis. This observation evidences the salience of formal analysis within investigating the purpose of violence in cinema.

The main limitations of this thesis relate to its small-scale case study approach. It bases itself in contemporary art cinema, but as a result of also requiring a precursor analysis, the thesis only reflects on its theory in two art film case studies. Nevertheless, the theoretical framework of the thesis is exemplified ideally within these case studies, despite the limited number. A more wide-ranging analysis could explore multiple films of specific categories of on or off-screen violence, and analyze broader trends within them. Contrasting analyses with problematic and superficial violence could also benefit a larger-scale project. As well, off-screen violence analysis often requires an intricate knowledge and research base of historical context background. For example, to provide an informed off-screen analysis of the violence in *Hunger*, specifics are necessary pertaining to the Irish Troubles and the IRA. Analysis requiring this sort

of background does not allow for the briefest or most concise endeavour into film textual analysis, but the resulting analytical product is worthy of the time required.

Upon conclusive reflection, I argue that off-screen violence analysis is widely applicable to other violent art films, as well as possibly to any category of film that is depicting violence in a meaningful manner. As seen in my analysis, Eisenstein's films and *Hunger* both cinematically reimagine historical events, with themes that align on some fronts. *Irréversible* and its instances of personal violence are obviously very separate from the on-screen violence of Eisenstein's cinema or McQueen's *Hunger*. Yet, off-screen violence analysis and its interrelation to on-screen violence is applicable to each variation of violence. Evidently, this process requires the seeking out of on-screen violence that speaks to and signifies relevant broader structures of off-screen violence. The manner in which these films represent violence requires consideration of off-screen violence in order to rationalize the specific presentations of violence that these films formulate. Formal choices on the part of filmmakers also play an essential role in this dynamic. Conversely, I suggest that off-screen violence analysis and its interrelation to on-screen violence is applicable as a critical tool to implement upon films that represent violence in superficial forms. Finally, I also posit that off-screen violence analysis would be capable of standing on its own, separate from on-screen violence analysis. My analysis retrieves and necessitates off-screen violence analysis in relation to on-screen violence, but a more selective and subtle analysis of off-screen violence is surely conceivable.

In sum, off-screen violence analysis provides a valuable addition to the wealth of approaches to analyzing film violence. In joining the school of analyses that believe cinematic representations of violence can be purposeful and informative, this thesis concludes on a note akin to the sentiments expressed by films that articulately represent violence: cinematic

representations of violence (in on and/or off-screen form) are a place we can look to in order to identify and reflect upon violent injustices in society. Skilled filmmakers integrate violence into their films with these critical intentions, performing a vital and necessary artistic service. It is, however, an awareness of this fact that is crucial for allowing violent films to express their social discontentment. These representations may identify the obvious signs of violent conflict, but in doing so they often refer to the subtler forms of violence that we cannot see. This process is undeniably best referenced through artfully and reflectively exploiting the formal capacities of the film medium in representing violence. Ultimately, a cinema that pushes boundaries is a cinema that invites critical thinking and challenges the violent and oppressive ways that societies operate.

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