

## Humor Through Use of Homicidal Violence

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Seeing a movie is an opportunity to detach from one's own life for a while to enjoy stepping into another world. People may look forward to movies by watching the multiple trailers that have been shown on television and the internet. Movies take me out of my life and submerge me into the story that happens. Many different expectations come from the different movie people watch. For comedy movies, I expect to laugh many times for many different reasons. I expect, among other things, to laugh at the slapstick comedy someone may do, the situation a person may be in, or just the conversations the characters may have. For action and horror movies, I expect to be shocked at what happens. In my opinion action and horror movies are similar and should, among many other things, be fast paced, have violence between characters, and should have my palms sweating because of the adrenaline is pumping through me.

What got me curious about this question when watching the movie *John Wick Chapter 2*. This movie is action packed and maybe has a joke or two in there, but for the most part, it is just the character John Wick shooting people in the most spectacular fashion. The times that John Wick has long action scenes, when he is killing, I noticed myself, and a large portion of the audience, laughing every time he shot someone. If this were to happen in real life, people would not be laughing; they would most likely be screaming and running away.

For the purposes of this paper, I will be exploring the question, how do movies make us laugh at homicidal violence? This paper's focus is on how do movies make us laugh in circumstances that are more serious, rather than moments in movies that are supposed to be funny. One example of I thought of was a scene in the movie *Pulp Fiction*. The scene is where a guy, named Marvin, is having a conversation with another guy and then shot in the head by

accident. Nobody is expecting it, but this unintentional comedic event might bring about a little laughter for a reason.

So, why is it that we might laugh at this unintentional act of violence being portrayed on film? I researched a few different topics to help me come up with an answer. The first topic is disengagement theory. The second topic is about gore and how it is used. The third topic is discussing styles of films. Finally, wrapping up discussions will be reactions to violence and gore.

The disengagement theory is an enormous part of how people laugh and are amused by movies. Philosopher John Morreall thought of this disengagement theory. He one of the few philosophers that argue against most of the others and has said, “amusement is so different from standard emotions that it is not useful to count it as an emotion at all” (Morreall, 2009, p.28). There are quite a few distinctions between emotions and amusement. Emotions cause changes in bodies that make us alter our “beliefs, desires, or motivations for adaptive actions” (Morreall, 2009, p.29). Amusement does not require any of those factors.

In movies and film, many of the elements presented are fictional or unbelievable. We might say that we have these feelings of anger, jealousy, or pity, but the emotions we think we feel are not supported. We must be fully engaged to experience these types of emotions. Engagement in reality means that we are going to have a strong hold in our beliefs and desires. Amusement is all about disengaging from reality and enjoy something else for a while. For example, a real event will evoke emotions toward something. The emotion toward that something does not amuse us. However, when we watch a cartoon or hear a joke, we are amused and have no feeling one way or the other.

For us to obtain amusement and possibly laugh from the movies disengagement is necessary, which means that we must switch off from reality. “Film has become a preferred form of relaxation and leisure” to escape from the world for a little while and live through another lens (Dowd, 1999, p. 324). A possible reason to why the disengagement theory might have us laugh at movies is it blocks compassion. Compassion is there to have people care for others who are suffering. This theory helps, or hurts depending on how you look at it, people not worry about someone. This theory provides people with the ability to not care about the numerous unnamed baddies that are shot in the face when attacking John Wick in a fight scene. Disengagement also applies to Marvin who was brutally shot in the head, brain and skull fragments all over. We hardly knew these characters, because we were not engaged enough to have empathy when they died.

Gore plays a role in how death of a character is portrayed. Gore in today’s time means blood, violence, guts, or anything that is a gross out factor. However, it was not always that way. The term grotesque came about over 600 years ago in art and literature, around the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period. Back in these periods grotesque was largely undecided on what exactly is the definition. However, authors at the time did agree that it had something to do with how humans and nature connected with each other (Jafni, Yahya, & Kaur, 2016). This grotesque realism was used to challenge certain social practices such as faith and polygyny. Therefore, grotesque is used through language, vulgarity, and “oppressive systems of faith, class, and gender” (Jafni, Yahya, & Kaur, 2016, p.57).

As time passed, the term grotesque evolved to incorporate terror and horror elements in the stories. There also became this sort of unintentional humor among the grotesque elements. One author mentioned an assumption about the effects of the grotesque. The underlying

assumption is that the grotesque is not humorous. However, Hopkins (1969) reports that the gruesome and ghastly effects are sometimes offered as “funny” and are appearing more frequent “in modern presentations” (p163). The grotesque elements of horror and terror bring about the outrageous and bizarre whether it is through books or film.

In the 1960’s George Romero was one of the first to use “gore and graphic violence” to show a completely different world when hard to rid evil roams (Arnzen, 1994, p.177). It is believed that it is because of Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* that the graphic violence is used. Many films like *Halloween* or *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* might not have been do if it were not for Romero. Nevertheless, some directors have their own style of films that are influential.

Styles of film affect how we obtain enjoyment and amusement from a film. Directors have arguably the biggest impact on a film. Directors “are in charge of the film’s dramatic and artistic aspect” (Rennett, 2012, p.392). If the director of the film wants the film to look B or C grade quality, they can for whatever purpose they desire. Directors can reinterpret history or put you on a rocket ship to space. There is one director where is trademark is how he portrays violent behavior; that man is Quentin Tarantino. He has directed such movies as *Inglorious Basterds*, *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* and *Pulp Fiction*, where we saw, dear sweet, Marvin shot in the head.

Tarantino is a director that knows what he wants to do and does it. He pays homage to his favorite genres of film, “spaghetti westerns, film noir, kung-fu, gangster/heist,” and revenge fantasies (Wucher, 2015, p1288). He is known to combine many of them into a coherent movie, which his audience loves. Tarantino burs the lines “between fact, fiction, history, and fantasy” (Wucher, 2015, p.1289). He has told his own history of World War II by actually killing off

Hitler in *Inglorious Basterds*. In *Kill Bill Vol. 1* he mixed kung-fu and revenge films by having one person take on and kill 88 ninjas.

He uses graphic violence throughout his films. Some critics do not approve of his directors style of film for “glorifying violence” (Wucher, 2015, p.1292). One example these critics refer to is the almost geyser-like blood spewing from bodies as Uma Thurman’s character, The Bride, in *Kill Bill* slices through the group called the Crazy-88s. However, this amount of blood and gore, rather than glorifies violence, it romanticizes and celebrates the “theatricality of movie violence” up to a larger than life degree (Wucher, 2015, p.1292).

Tarantino’s directing style of films also mixes humor into very un-humorous moments. Rennett (2012) mentions one of Tarantino’s more controversial comedic approaches in *Reservoir Dogs*. In the scene, the character, Mr. Blonde is dancing around to the song “Stunk in the Middle with You” as he is about to torture a police officer. Tarantino’s style of this scene “allows the viewer to laugh at this otherwise sadistic scene” (p. 401). This scene has also made that song into a constant reminder to what happened. Having a director have a song on the radio call back a scene is a true mark of a creative director.

Many people will not react the same way to certain scene. Some people have varying levels of reactions to movies. People might squint or look away if something is scary or too gross to look at, while others will watch every second of it. If people are amused, they might find something humorous and guffaw, just smile, let out a small chuckle or some kind of reaction in between. If someone is scared, they might jump in their seats, squint, or let out a scream. People have many varying reactions to different scenes.

One question to be asked is how do we find amusement in violent and gore splattered movies? Two researchers, King & Hourani (2007), set out to find just that. They started out

thinking that people who watch gore movies, are motivated by three aspects of cognitive curiosity. The first is about “physical violence,” the way people are killed (p. 478). The second “vindictive interest in killing,” the victims had it coming (p. 478). Lastly, they are attracted to the grotesque, watching the blood and guts.

The research had over 200 college students and showed them four movies: “*Candyman*, *Needful Things*, *Leprechaun*, and *Pet Cemetery*” (p.480). Some had a teaser ending and some did not. A teaser ending, versus a traditional ending, is when the evil of the film, presumed dead, comes back to life, for more movies and mayhem. At the end of each movie, the students took a questionnaire that asked them about the movie. The results were that the “high gore-watchers” rated the movies that had a traditional ending was more entertaining and scary than the teaser endings.

Fantia, Kyranidesb, & Panayiotoua (2017) did a study on trying to relate facial reactions are related to the effects of “lack or guilt and empathy” (p. 209). Their experiment is seeking to examine facial reactions through viewings of pleasant and violent films. They had an experiment where they show participants violent, aggressive films where victims are either showing pain or in distress and pleasant comedic films showing amusing interactions (p.211-212). While viewing the clips of film, others recorded their facial expressions.

The results of the experiment are as follows. The participants who were ranked high on lack of empathy were less likely to show a facial expression resembling sadness in violent films, rather than watching a comedy. Some participant showed anger in both violent and comedy films. That difference depended on emotionally charged the people were. The participants that were high on the lack of empathy were less intense on showing disgust (Fantia, Kyranidesb, & Panayiotoua, 2017). This experiment just showed how the lack of sympathy in people results in

how they perceive certain facial traits. The conclusion of the experiment showed that people who were high on the lack of empathy traits showed “reduced facial expressions” especially sadness or disgust (Fantia, Kyranidesb, & Panayiotoua, 2017, p.221-222).

So what does all this mean? Why should we care about why we laugh at movies that depict homicidal violence? We should care because our laughter at violent acts in movies do not mean we are horrible people it is all just in movies. The disengagement theory states that we should remove ourselves from reality to enjoy a movie. No emotions should be tied to Marvin that was accidentally shot in the head. We the audience, did not know the character that well, not emotion is tied to that character.

The violence in the gore used in that scene has been around for many years. The amount of blood used in one shot, has a shockingly amount used. That alone should emit some kind of laughter, even if it is a nervous type. However, the method of death occurs, disengagement theory states that no emotion tied to this laughter. Many horror movies have made people laugh unintentionally just through the use of strange happenings in the course of the movie. In some horror movies, the method of death, on the evil that is present, is outrageous it has to be laughed at.

Quentin Tarantino is the one of the more artistic directors and uses the violence to paint a picture. His movies are meant to be on the outrageous end of things. He is known to take one comment and make it relevant throughout the viewing of the film. He purposely puts in awkward dance moves in a torture scene to stand out and to see people’s reactions. Tarantino has a type of cult following for his movies. He has a strong balance between violence and storytelling, with the right amount of humor mixed in to see if we are paying attention.

The teasers at the end of movies might make someone laugh as well. You have watched this whole movie expecting to see the evil die, but then at the last second, it somehow comes back to life. Our reactions are what make us want to tell our friends to watch it or just to stay away from a certain film. We also remember event that make us laugh, jump, or flat out are impossible to forget.

Personally, I enjoy it when something outlandishly violent happens. I feel like I was shocked when a violent event occurs. I enjoy thoroughly violence that is in movies. The shock and awe of how one person kills another; thinking to myself, how did they do that? Certainly, the amount of gore that is displayed makes a different. In my opinion the more blood there is, the more outrageous it is. I laugh much more in a violent movie with blood than in a violent movie where they try to keep the gore to a minimum.

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