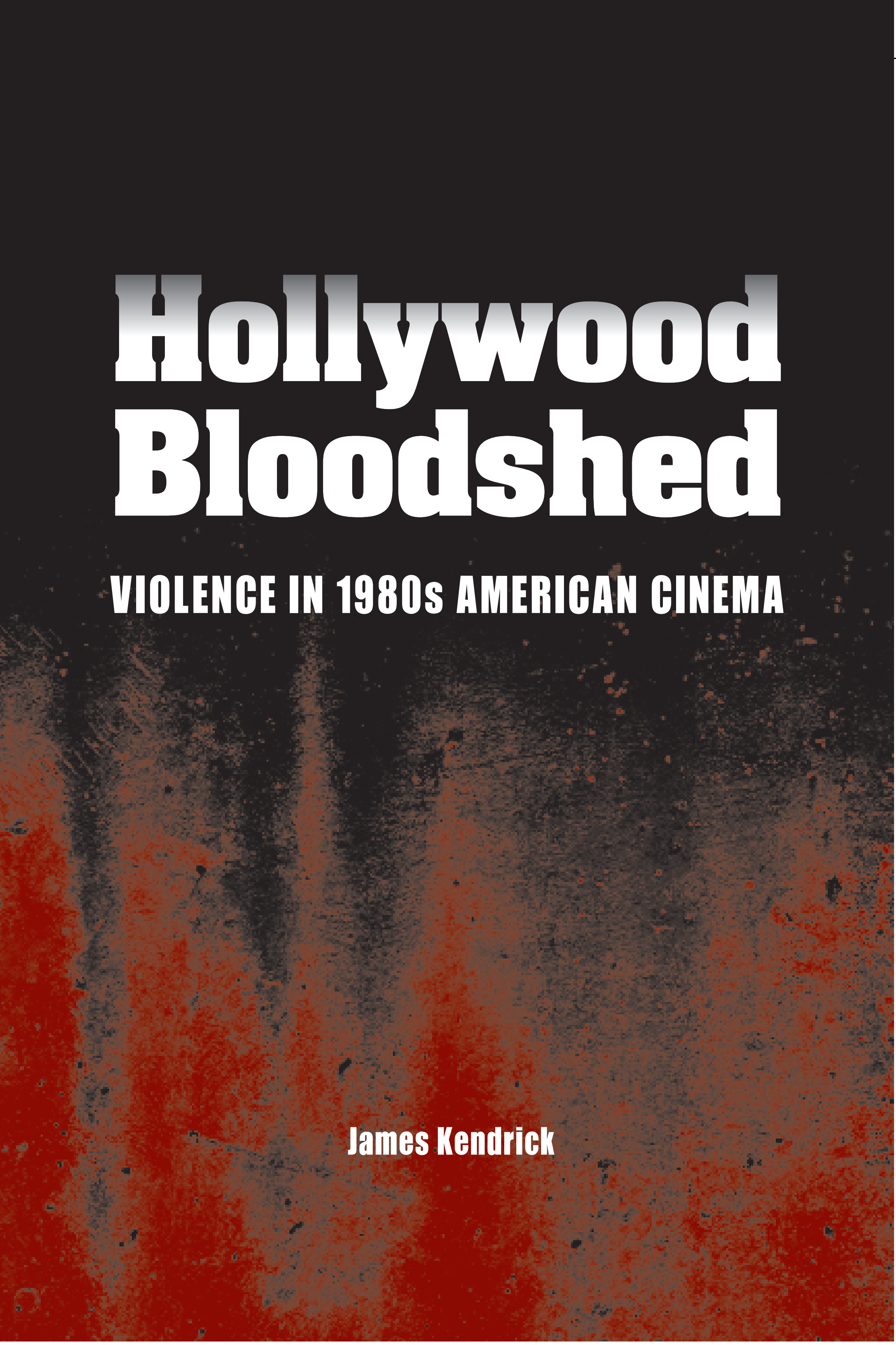

Hollywood Bloodshed

VIOLENCE IN 1980s AMERICAN CINEMA

James Kendrick

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Preface

THIS PROJECT WAS ORIGINALLY sparked by two seemingly separate but ultimately interrelated fascinations: the role that screen violence plays in our complex attraction to and enjoyment of movies, and the ostensibly sharp divide that separates Hollywood cinema of the 1970s from Hollywood cinema of the 1980s. The amount of scholarship about American film in the 1970s is voluminous, and it is axiomatic for many to declare it one of the richest and most evocative periods of cinema not only in the United States but in the world. Meanwhile, the decade of the 1980s, when written about, has been frequently dismissed as a period of artistic and ideological retreat in which movies became simplified and empty—vacuous entertainment for an increasingly conservative culture that had elected a former movie actor to the most powerful position in the world. Similarly, violence in movies of the 1960s and 1970s, which is frequently viewed as a kind of formative moment in the aesthetic and ideological development of screen bloodshed, has been scrutinized quite heavily, as has screen violence of the 1990s. However, scholars have written comparatively little about screen violence in the 1980s, which is ironic, given its prevalence on American movie screens during the Reagan era.

Thus, it seemed to me that the intersection of screen violence and the shifts in American filmmaking at the juncture between the 1970s and the 1980s could offer rich possibilities in terms of exploring how movies ebb and flow with the times. As a lens, screen violence provides an intriguing perspective for exploring the constantly shifting nature of Hollywood cinema—the aesthetic, social, and industrial continuities and changes, some which are subtle, some of which are radical. In short, I was interested in screen violence not so much for its own sake but for what it could tell us about what was happening culturally and institutionally in Hollywood.

Of course, characterizing any given era in Hollywood history is always a dangerous endeavor because each historical period, however defined and delineated, is invariably rife with contradictions, volatility, and diversity. Each era has "characteristic" films, filmmakers, and production trends that are used in summation as convenient shorthand, but they consistently fail to capture the depth and complexity of what the Hollywood film industry represents at any given time. Such is the case with the two eras that are contrasted in this book: the 1970s and the 1980s. The former is conventionally understood as an era of experimentation, social consciousness, artistry, and boundary-pushing, while the latter is often seen as a period of conservative ideological entrenchment and commercial conformity. Each era is usually viewed through the prism of its political culture, with the 1970s seen as an era of upheaval and disorientation, while the 1980s is seen as a period of focused conservatism. And, on some level, both characterizations are right, but to stop there is to see only a fraction of the whole.

Digging just slightly beneath the topsoil reveals that the fabled New Hollywood of the late 1960s and 1970s, the same era that produced such critical landmarks as *The Graduate* (1967), *The Godfather* (1972), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), *Nashville* (1975), and *Taxi Driver* (1976), was routinely dominated at the box office by sentimental romance (1970's *Love Story*), musicals (1971's *Fiddler on the Roof* and 1978's *Grease*), disaster epics (1974's *The Towering Inferno*), and science fiction (1977's *Star Wars*). Thus, we can see in only that cursory overview that, as Peter Lev puts it, "for sheer diversity of aesthetic and ideological approaches, no period of American cinema surpasses the films of the 1970s" (xvii). Similarly, while we like to see the so-called Reagan era as a period overrun by the "Lucas-Spielberg Syndrome" and conservative blockbuster filmmaking, a slightly deeper investigation unveils a twisting maze of contradictions and heterogeneity that includes a noted increase in the exhibition of documentaries (Plantinga) and the rise to prominence of controversial filmmakers such as David Lynch, Spike Lee, Abel Ferrara, David Cronenberg, and Oliver Stone.

Yet, in writing the many histories of Hollywood, it is quite natural to fall back on the practice of periodizing, which by its nature tends to privilege the historical "breaks" that separate one period from another. However, as Murray Smith argues, it is important that, in trying to understand the historical trajectory of Hollywood's development and the changes in its various structures (industrial, aesthetic, ideological), it is crucial to recognize continuities in addition to breaks. The constant goal of Hollywood filmmaking, and thus the primary continuity that has crossed every significant historical break, including the one between the 1970s and the 1980s, has been "the maximizing of profits through the production of classical narrative films" (M. Smith 14). This one goal binds together the history of Hollywood production, from the silent films of the 1920s, to the CinemaScope spectaculars of the 1950s, to the auteur-driven revisionist genre films of the 1970s, to the digital-effects-laden blockbusters of the 1990s and today. Therefore, as Smith notes, it is most useful to focus on "smaller-scale changes and shifts, at both the institutional and aesthetic levels, within a more broadly continuous system of American commercial filmmaking" (14).

It would seem, then, that this book's focus on screen violence in the decade of the 1980s, often in counterpoint to the violence of films in the 1970s, would contribute to the reification of periodizing as the optimal means of understanding Hollywood history. Separating out the 1980s as a decade somehow distinct from the 1970s and the 1990s is too convenient, and it is not my aim. Rather, the focus on the 1980s is meant to underscore, not erase, the continuities between what came before and what came after without losing sight of the significant changes that did occur. In looking at the 1980s, this book focuses on how aesthetic and industrial practices involving the representations of screen violence underwent changes and shifts at varying scales and on different levels, thus creating connections among the various decades. On the surface, there is a great disparity between the characteristics associated with violent films of the 1970s and those of the 1990s, and this book explores what happened in the years in between as a way of linking them back together, focusing on the often hidden articulations and small-scale changes, rather than on just the large-scale historical breaks, in how violence on screen was depicted.

Chapter 1 is a historical overview of violence in the cinema, beginning with the silent era but focusing primarily on the enormous increase in both quantity and levels of graphic detail beginning in the late 1960s with the end of the Production Code and the implementation of the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) rating system. While this story has been told before, particularly by Stephen Prince (*Savage Cinema*; *Screening Violence*; "Graphic Violence") and David A. Cook ("Ballistic Balletics"), it is important to lay this historical groundwork before focusing on the 1980s and the screen violence of that decade. One way in which this historical overview differs from those told before is its primary focus on the rise of the "New Hollywood" and the connection of its most revered auteurs with depictions of violence and on how their particular violent style ended when that "New Hollywood" was eclipsed by the blockbuster era.

Chapter 2 focuses on the 1980s, beginning chronologically by covering the controversies that opened the decade. There are continuities that span historical breaks, and even though the cinema of the 1980s is often discussed and described in stark opposition to the cinema of the 1970s, the early years of the 1980s had much in common with the previous decade despite the large cultural shift to the Right. Thus, violent films like Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980), and

Sam Fuller's *White Dog* (1982), which were more in tune aesthetically and ideologically with the previous decade, ran into myriad problems and controversies in marketing and theatrical distribution. The lessons learned from these films and their various difficulties help explain why the industry was so intent on avoiding controversy—not by removing violence from movies but by finding ways to package it so that, on the surface, it appeared less controversial.

The final four chapters focus on case studies of specific kinds of violence that characterized Hollywood in the 1980s and on the ways in which filmmakers and studios packaged them. Again, this is not an encyclopedic coverage of all the kinds of violence that characterized Hollywood films of the 1980s but rather a series of specific case studies that explore a select few of the various articulations among screen violence and producers, consumers, and the culture at large.

Chapter 3 shifts to the "pure action" genre and focuses on the rise of the powerful and highly visible producer and his role in packaging violent entertainment. The director-auteurs of the 1970s lost much of their power in the 1980s and were replaced by producers in the public's understanding of who was largely in control of Hollywood filmmaking. This chapter looks particularly at Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer as self-styled packagers of pure action violence and at the ways in which their films negotiated the kinds of violent subject matter that were troubling in 1970s films like *The French Connection* (1971) and *Marathon Man* (1976) and made them palatable and acceptable to a more conservative-minded audience in films like *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) and *Top Gun* (1986). While certain aspects of these action films remained consistent between the two decades, there was a discernible ideological shift in how violence functioned in the narratives. Thus, central to this discussion is also the way in which action films of the 1980s rewrote the rules first laid down in the western genre, from the male hero fighting for what's right to the male hero fighting simply to win, which mirrors on a meta-level the producers' view of the motion picture industry and their role in it.

Chapter 4 offers a counterpoint to the reductionism of the pure action genre by focusing on the cycle of films about the Vietnam War that dominated the latter half of the 1980s. Vietnam films offer a particularly intriguing glimpse into the competing ideologies of the Reagan era in their attempts to recuperate and make sense of a war that had divided the American culture for decades. My contention in this chapter is that, rather than categorizing the 1980s Vietnam films as right-wing revenge films or realistic combat films, it is more useful to consider them in terms of how they direct violence narratively and ideologically. Thus, we can examine these films in terms of being externally violent, in that the violence is directed at a foreign enemy and/or the corrupt—and therefore un-American—bureaucracy that caused the United States to lose the war, or inwardly violent, where violence is directed inward at the U.S. military or even American culture itself.

Chapter 5 looks at the violence of the horror genre, which has been a popular topic of analysis from a number of angles, including gender (Clover), subversion of social hierarchies (Paul), and political ideology (R. Wood, *Hollywood*), to name just a few. However, this chapter moves away from analysis of the film texts themselves and instead focuses on how the explicit gore that characterized the most popular horror films of the 1980s (for example, 1982's *The Evil Dead* and the *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series) was packaged through fan magazines such as *Fangoria* and was understood by the genre's specialized audience. Surprisingly little has been written about the rise of the horror fan magazine during the 1980s and the role it played in articulating screen violence, the horror genre, and fandom. Mark Kermode has written briefly about *Fangoria*, which he describes as "the Sex Pistols of horror fanzines, loud, noisy, visually graphic and absolutely guaranteed to send your parents apoplectic with righteous indignation" ("Teenage Horror Fan" 59). While Henry Jenkins notes that science fiction fans make up a "scandalous category" of people, horror fans are viewed as that much more extreme and therefore "illegitimate" given the disreputable nature of their objects of pleasure (16). This chapter investigates the articulations among these fans, the film texts they love, and the fanzines that captured and dispersed their enthusiasm. As David Sanjek argues, these fanzines cannot be dismissed, because they "constitute an alternative brand of film criticism, a school with its own set of values and virtues" (316).

Chapter 6 looks at how the MPAA dealt with the complexities of screen violence in the 1980s by creating a new rating, PG-13, to distinguish those films that existed in the previously unmarked space between more kid-friendly PG-rated films and adult-oriented R-rated films. The PG-13 rating was yet another form of packaging screen violence—a brand that marked the violence of certain movies as just illicit enough to entice curious viewers but not so illicit that some people (that is, children) had to be kept from viewing it outright. Central to the creation of the PG-13 rating was hugely successful producer/director Steven Spielberg, whose films *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (which he directed) and *Gremlins* (for which he served as executive producer), both of which were released to large box-office grosses in the summer of 1984, were primarily responsible for blurring the lines between how screen violence can function in "children's" and "adult" entertainment. As both of these films were clearly aimed at young audiences, the role they played in the subsequent creation of the

PG-13 rating tells us much about the 1980s conception of childhood and what role violent entertainment can and should play in it.

Finally, the conclusion bridges the gap between 1980s and 1990s Hollywood cinema by examining the concomitant emergence of new forms of screen violence—dubbed "new violence," "neo-violence," and "postmodern violence" by critics and scholars—and the rise of independent studios as a viable market force to contend with the hegemony of the major Hollywood studios, arguably for the first time since the "instant majors" in the late 1960s. Many of the most notable and economically successful independent films of the early 1990s engaged screen violence in a way that most films had not for the past decade. In a sense, it was like a return to the 1970s in which brash young filmmakers fought to make a name for themselves by "reinventing" American cinema, often by reworking traditional representations of violence.

Acknowledgments

ANY BOOK—BUT PARTICULARLY a first book and one that has been several years in the making—will inevitably bear the imprint of many people. The one you hold in your hands is no different, and while I cannot even begin to do justice to everyone who has left his or her mark on the following pages, I would like to acknowledge some of them individually.

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Finally, I would like to thank Cassie, my wife and best friend, who has been right with me through the long and sometimes difficult process of writing this book. She has sparked me intellectually, motivated me emotionally, and given her full and unquestionable support to my ambitious endeavors, even when that meant sitting through movies she never would have wanted to watch on her own. But, most important, her love and commitment have kept me grounded in what's truly important, and for that reason this book is dedicated to her.

Hollywood
Bloodshed

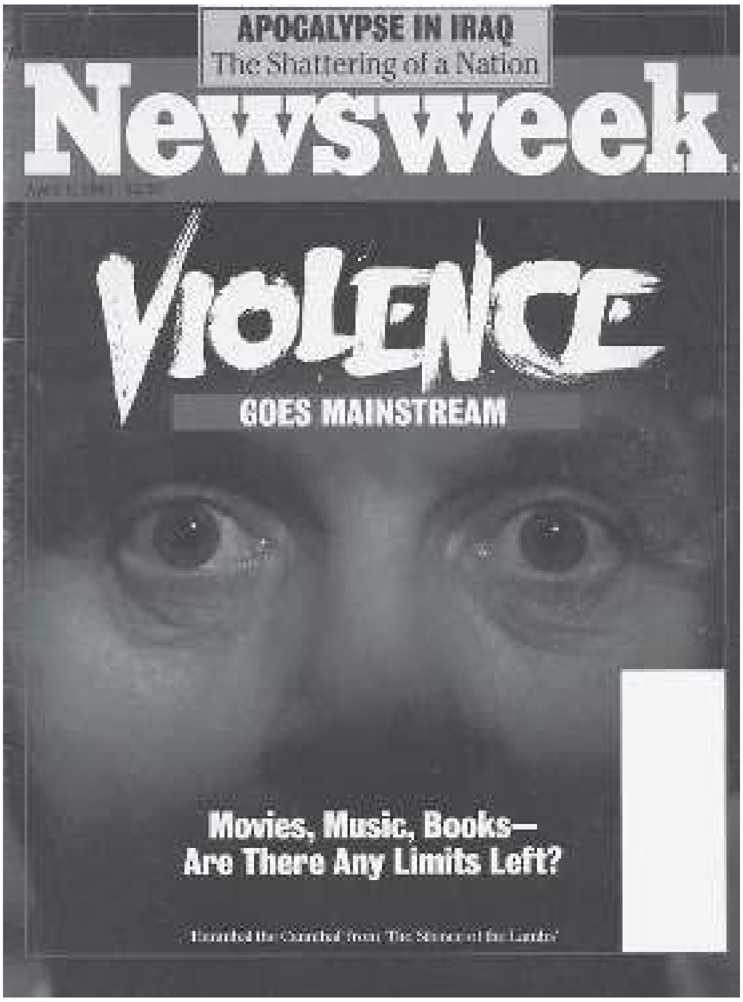
INTRODUCTION

THE MAINSTREAMING OF HOLLYWOOD SCREEN VIOLENCE

"VIOLENCE GOES MAINSTREAM"—or so declared the bold headline on the cover of the April 1, 1991, issue of *Newsweek* magazine. As visual accompaniment to this declaration, the editors chose to run a dramatic, close-up image of the face of Hannibal Lecter, the fictional serial killer played by Anthony Hopkins in Jonathan Demme's recently released and hugely popular *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). All we can see is the bridge of Lecter's nose and his intently wide-open, penetrating eyes, alight with a feverish intensity that makes it immediately clear why "Hannibal the Cannibal" had already become a pop-culture icon, as both mythic nightmare and subversive antihero. At the same time, those eyes, positioned as they are just beneath the sensational word "violence" in ragged font, indict the reader and his or her fascination with violent subject matter: Are those Hannibal Lecter's eyes penetrating his next victim, or are they our own, gazing in rapt excitement at the latest bout of Hollywood bloodshed?

At the bottom of the cover, a sub-headline pointedly asked, "Movies, Music, Books—Are There Any Limits Left?," suggesting that mediated violence had escaped whatever cage to which it had previously been confined and was now breaking taboos and crossing the previously demarcated limits that separate "us" from the base instincts that define the uncivilized "others" from whom we need to be protected. The accompanying article says just as much: "Sure, ultraviolent fare has always been out there—but up until now, it's always been *out there*, on the fringes of mass culture. Now it's the station-wagon set, bumper to bumper at the local Cinema 1–2–3–4–5, that yearns to be titillated by the latest schlocky horror picture show" (Plagens, Miller, Foote, and Yoffe 46). The title of the *Newsweek* article—"Violence in Our Culture"—subconsciously paints screen violence as an invading force, a contagion, breaking into "our" previously protected spaces and infecting them.

In sounding the alarm about the breakdown of limits and the "appalling accretion of violent entertainment" (Plagens, Miller, Foote, and Yoffe 46), *Newsweek* had its finger firmly on the pulse of American entertainment at the dawn of the 1990s, especially mainstream Hollywood movies, many of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Hannibal the Cannibal from 'The Silence of the Lambs'

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which were undeniably violent. However, the magazine was wrong in asserting that violence was "going mainstream" in the spring of 1991. Rather, violence had already *gone* mainstream, and the films, television shows, rock and rap albums, and books cited throughout the article were, in fact, just a particularly explicit manifestation—darker shades, you might say—of what had, in some form or another, been long accepted by the general American population: In all its many shades, screen bloodshed *is* entertainment.

In fact, some two and a half decades earlier, *Esquire* had sounded a similar alarm with its infamous cover image of a beautiful model with a Band-Aid over her left eyebrow just beneath a seemingly simple, direct question: "Why are we suddenly so obsessed with violence?" Numerous authors, critics, and pundits attempted to answer that question throughout the special issue of July 1967, including *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) screenwriters David Newman and Robert Benton, who inflamed the generation gap by suggesting that anyone who couldn't enjoy "the fun" of violence was out of step with the times (55). In the same issue, journalist Tom Wolfe coined the term "porno-violence," which he used to describe a kind of mediated violence in American entertainment that was not confined to a single point of view or a particular moral perspective. Despite this term's pejorative nature and its failure to catch on in the national dialogue, "porno-violence," as defined by Wolfe, is really quite appropriate in describing the role of violence in popular entertainment. As John Fraser argues in *Violence in the Arts*, the complexity of mediated violence is immense, and it can fulfill and has fulfilled numerous and varied functions: "violence as release, violence as communication, violence as play, violence as self-affirmation, or self-defence, or self-discovery, or self-destruction, violence as a flight from reality, violence as the truest sanity in a particular situation, and so on" (9). Violence is not a single entity, and it cannot be contained, although that is precisely what the Hollywood studios attempted to do during the 1980s: not eliminate screen violence but control it and tame it—shade it in such a way that it could work for them.

This book is about the varied roles screen violence played in the U.S. film industry during the 1980s—a crucial decade in Hollywood's economic and industrial development. Given the immense popularity of a wide variety of violent films and that decade's standing as the bridge on which the parameters of our current Hollywood system were negotiated, it is particularly important to understand how representations of violence functioned during this time. Thus, the book's focus is on the films produced by mainstream Hollywood, which is generally defined as the large movie studios that are members of the Motion Picture Association of America and "consistently account for 80 to 90 percent or more of the total receipts from the distribution of theatrical movies to theaters and the variety of other media in the United States" (Waterman 15).[1] As J. David Slocum argues, "The history and recurrence of film violence, certainly in Hollywood productions, represents not only an account of shifting cinematic standards and cultural values regarding the use of force and aggression, but an element in the ongoing negotiation of the place and meaning of cinema itself in society" ("Film Violence" 650). After the economic turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Hollywood studios were looking for stability, which is reflected in the way violence is presented in films of that era.

The changes in the industry during the 1980s were so transformative that Stephen Prince argues that they rank alongside the coming of sound in the 1920s and the breakup of the industry's oligopolistic ownership of production, distribution, and exhibition in the late 1940s (*New Pot of Gold* xii). During this time, the industry evolved from the late 1960s and 1970s "New Hollywood," an era dominated by young, film-school-trained auteurs and their incorporation of European aesthetics into traditional genre films, to the 1980s "New Hollywood" (sometimes referred to as the "New New Hollywood"), which is characterized by the high-concept blockbuster and an industrial reorganization around media mergers, transnational conglomerates, multiple avenues of exhibition, and emerging ancillary markets. Hollywood was no longer the producer of what Robin Wood calls "incoherent texts" (*Hollywood* 46), which reflected the ideological crises of the 1970s; rather, the industry was moving into what Andrew Britton calls "Reaganite entertainment," which found its most indelible form in the "clean" blockbuster aesthetic molded by hands-on producers like Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer. This is not to say that the films of the 1980s were monolithic in focus, commercial strategy, or ideological intent. However, there were certain powerful production trends like the "blockbuster aesthetic" that created the illusion of an era dominated by simplistic commercial entertainment infused with Reagan-era social and political culture, which may explain why so many scholars have shied away from analyzing this period. As Prince states, "If we move past the received wisdom on eighties Hollywood, we see instead a volatile era, volatile in terms of the industry's restructuring and reorganization and in terms of the connections and relationships between its products and the society that alternately assimilated and attacked them" (*New Pot of Gold* xvii).

This book explores the relationship of cultural changes in the 1980s to the various ways in which screen violence was depicted by filmmakers, packaged by studios, and understood by audiences. "Packaging," in this sense, refers both to how filmmakers packaged violence textually through narrative, character development, and aesthetic style and to how studios packaged many of the films themselves as a commodity through marketing and mediated discussion in newspapers and magazines and on television. It is closely related to Justin Wyatt's argument about "high concept" movies: "High concept functions as a form of differentiated product primarily through two routes: through an integration with marketing and merchandising and through an emphasis on style" (*High Concept* 19). Thus, the films discussed in this book are but one element in a larger articulated web of discourse that shapes and influences how we understand particular instances of screen violence.

What Is Screen Violence?

In any book about screen violence, it is important to ask a central, but often neglected, question: What, exactly, is screen violence? Defining this concept is a notoriously tricky endeavor, littered with rhetorical mines and conceptual pits, not to mention the ever-present shadow of common sense. Defining screen violence can be so exasperating, in fact, that one is tempted to follow the model James Naremore used in defining film noir by saying there is simply "no completely satisfactory way to organize the category" (9). Screen violence is similar in that, like film noir, it has been discussed and understood in multiple contexts—historical, ideological, rhetorical—that structure and define its meaning. Simply put, the term "screen violence" means different things to different people at different times. For example, screen violence that offended sensibilities in the 1940s not only might seem tame by contemporary standards but might even elicit laughter.

In this book, I will employ what Slocum has termed "the least elaboration" of violence to define it: "an action or behavior that is harmful or injurious" ("Introduction" 2). Of course, even this seemingly simple and intentionally vague definition has plenty of caveats and addendums. For example, the harm can be physical, psychological, or sociological, and in some instances it need not be done since the threat of harm can be just as disturbing as the harm itself. Violence can also be systematic or structural (for example, racism, sexism, and the like) rather than the product of an individual causal agent, and it can be directed at anything, from human beings, to animals, to inanimate objects. Importantly, Slocum notes that the term itself—violence—is essentially a label that is applied to preexisting behaviors or actions through a web of complex social processes: "Legitimacy as a critical category is thus crucial not only for the actions it validates as violent within a given culture but for the behaviors that it excludes from popular discourses of violence" (3). Similarly, Nancy

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