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This article profiles the violence that occurs in the films that compose the most popular (top-grossing) genres of 1994: comedy, drama, and action. The critical features used to describe film violence are intentionality, frequency, seriousness, consequences, explicitness, and severity (damage to the body of the recipient). Scales for seriousness, explicitness, and severity were systematically applied to the films using frame-by-frame analysis. Although the initiators of violence in American films employ lethal violence in nearly half the violent events, depiction of any consequences to the recipient's body occurs in 1 out of 10 cases. Throughout, the effects of violence on the victim's body are mystified by a form of narrative that occults and minimizes consequences arising from clearly depicted intentional assaults. So far as violence is concerned, the Hollywood body is an impossible one, merely a dramaturgical figure.

American Film Violence

An Analytic Portrait

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Film violence is a flash point in the contemporary public discussion of American life. Discussion of this topic in recent years has become political and polemical—understandably so. Based on the scale and intensity of the experience it delivers, Hollywood cinema constitutes the foundation of popular culture as it is lived by millions of young Americans. Although the official culture and certain sectors of the academy are anxious about movie violence, surprisingly, there have been no large-scale empirical studies of violence across the broad spectrum of American film. In this respect, of course, film is different from television, about which numerous such studies have been conducted. On the empirical side of the recent research literature on film, study

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has been largely restricted to consideration of two genres outside the mainstream: pornography and the slasher film.¹

Today, film violence, like Hollywood itself, is more of a cultural gestalt than an empirical object of study. We think this is an oversight and that it is important to recognize the full contours of this unmapped territory. We intend to put the investigation of the topic of film violence on a new footing by shifting from the frequently considered question of its effects to focusing explicitly on the depiction of violence in Hollywood films. For that reason, in this article, we do not attempt to describe or account for the effects of movie violence on the audience. Rather, the aim is to offer an empirical, qualitatively based account of the types of violence and the frequency of violence that occurs in American film today. This study is not restricted to consideration of a few select or atypical films or of films that appear on television but attends to the full range of popular films seen by mainstream American audiences in movie theaters.

Centrally, this study focuses analytically on the relationship of violent action between initiators and respondents and the resulting depiction of bodily injury. Our underlying concern is the delineation of the specific portrayal of consequences of violence in the movies. The widely disseminated fictionalizations of violence and the falsifications of violence's consequences that are inherent in movie dramatizations of interpersonal conflict consolidate popular misunderstandings that health professionals are obliged to confront in daily practice. We focus on violence because it is the most dramatic issue of public concern related to film, because of the need for an account of the extent of violence in Hollywood film, and because of its bearing on the general problem of violence and injury in American life.

Film violence as we define it here is an interpersonal, aggressive physical act that impacts another character, committed by a human agent in the course of a conflict. (Of course, it is necessary to recognize a number of special cases.) Film violence designates the representation of such action by the film's use of images and sounds. We characterize film violence by treating it in its immediate context: as it occurs in the movie itself. This approach is important because it provides extensive data on the kinds of violent events that make up the universe of the movies and demands the development of tools for a critical discrimination of what occurs there. This perspective allows for a systematic description of acts and events that have too often been lumped together.

Seeing Hollywood violence analytically, in the context of the movie itself, means seeing it in a story as an element of narrative structure. Movie violence has its reasons (dramatic, commercial) and its consequences, injuries and actions that follow from prior events in the film. Of course, there are many

ways to analyze narrative. We have adopted the dramaturgical model centered on the concepts of character, motivation, conflict, and structure for which Kenneth Burke and Northrup Frye (1957) are the best known modern exponents. In these accounts, characters are agents of action that perform in historically and culturally consolidated types of stories called genres. The sets of characters and types of actions and outcomes that define genres are set in motion and regulated by well-known narrative conventions.

The type of violence in the movie universe and its distribution are far from being either uniform or unique. There are, in point of fact, zones of regular patterning of distinctive features of violence closely associated with narrative structure. We argue that in fact the category of genre offers a meaningful way to both group and account for the clustering of significant similarities in the use and depiction of violence in a wide collection of singular events. Genre is, moreover, a consistently employed category of analysis and exposition in work of this kind. It maps the large subsets that compose the movie universe and serves as a way of recording and making sense of violent conflicts that animate this universe.

Today, there is little about genres or genre analysis of contemporary movies that is self-evident. Generic exchange, migration of conventions, and promiscuous hybridity are the rule. Generic forms are frequently characterized by distinctive but not exclusive features. Notwithstanding generic instability, classification of films by genres is a continuing practical necessity allowing for clear comparisons.

METHOD

Analytically differentiating violent action, its consequences, and its representation required the introduction of five critical categories to effectively grasp the set of distinctive features constituting the interpersonal violent event in its narrative movement: intention, seriousness, explicitness, severity, and consequences. We sought in our analytic scheme to dissolve and then bring together the agency of the initiator of the violence (notated in two general features of any action, intention and seriousness, or degree of force) with the representation of the impact on the body of the recipient (severity) and a qualitative measure of the degree of detail the film provides about the evidence of physical destruction and wounding of the body of the recipient (explicitness). The categories seriousness (4 degrees), severity (3 degrees), and explicitness (4 degrees) were scaled through a set of criteria marking readily perceptible differences in a spectrum that is often highly simplified. Severity and explicitness notate the common term *graphic*. This scheme

brings together the subjective and the physical aspects of interpersonal violence within the arc of the narrative consequences (restricted here to a notation of injury and medical treatment).

Taken together, the five analytic categories used here are intended to provide classificatory discrimination that can make for a more reliable description of the universe under study and for more accurate data-driven conclusions. Although not every feature of the violent event is considered in this section of our scheme (for example, type of weapon used), these five terms compose a concise, integrated narrative grammar of the interpersonal violent act of the Hollywood movie and show how film violence is constructed.

Our sample, chosen for convenience, was the 100 top-grossing American films of 1994, as established by the *Hollywood Reporter* (1995), films that accounted for 90% of the domestic box office that year. Although the *Hollywood Reporter* classified these films into 11 different genres, this article focuses on the 3 most popular—action, comedy, and drama—81 films in all. The remaining 8 genres were aggregated. The results of the study, the patterns of distribution of the five components of the analytic grammar as determined by logistic regression analyses, are presented below in eight tables.

The first four authors developed an original three-part analytic instrument with 51 questions about character, 67 questions about narrative structure, and 33 questions treating the nature of the violent action. This analytic instrument was installed on an Apple Power Mac 7500, and each film was displayed on laser disc by means of a Media Max video-controller. Each violent act in its context was examined frame by frame and then coded directly into the options provided by the instrument. The data were collected and recorded in Filemaker-Pro and analyzed using Paradox, a data management program. The coders were three advanced doctoral students in film studies who showed 90% agreement on all applications.

RESULTS

In 1994, the 100 top-grossing films depicted 2,184 violent events against bodies (see Table 1). The 3 most popular genres, action, drama, and comedy (81 of the sample of 100 films), accounted for more than three quarters (77%) of the violence taking place in the whole sample. The 14 action films with 658 violent acts had the highest mean (47.0 violent acts per film) among all 11 genres of the sample. It also contained the most violent film, *Timecop* (Diamont & Hyams, 1994). Comedy (41 films) displayed 586 violent actions and had the lowest mean (14.0 violent actions per film) among the 3 genres.

TABLE 1: Distribution of Violent Actions Among Films, by Genre

<i>Genre</i>	<i>Number of Films</i>	<i>Number of Violent Actions</i>	<i>Mean Per Film</i>	<i>Minimum Number</i>	<i>Maximum Number</i>
Action	14	658	47.0	13	110
Comedy	41	586	14.3	1	81
Drama	26	437	16.8	0	44
Other	19	503	26.5	1	97
Total	100	2184	21.8	0	110

Drama's 26 films had 437 violent actions and a mean of 16.8 violent actions per film.

On average, in the most popular genres, there were 21.8 violent actions per film. Within a given genre, the concentration of violent acts per film, or the range, varied considerably. Action ranged from 13 to 110 (the highest in the sample), comedy from 1 to 81, and drama from 0 to 44. The 14 action films earned \$911 million (or on average \$65 million a piece), the 26 dramas grossed \$1,280 million (\$49 million each), and comedy's 41 films earned \$1,529 million (or roughly \$38 million each).² Because they make up the largest percentage of the sample and embody the bulk of the violence, these three genres will be the main focus of our analysis.

Frequency

The high number of violent actions per film in the action genre can be accounted for by this genre not being bound by physical realism and entertaining its audiences with impossible technical and pyrotechnical feats of spectacular magnitude. The conventions of this genre consistently extend and contradict the limits of physical experience in terms of the ability to initiate, receive, and endure violent assault. In 1994, films in this genre showcased the martial arts (*Street Fighter*, Pressman & de Souza, 1994; *On Deadly Ground*, Ho & Seagal, 1994; and *Timecop*, Diamont & Hyams, 1994) and extreme sports (*Terminal Velocity*, Engelman & Sarafian, 1994, and *Drop Zone*, Caruso & Badham, 1994, exploited skydiving and *The River Wild*, Foster & Hansen, 1994, white water rafting). In the action film, the enactment of violence to others was crucial to the resolution of the central conflict. In 1994, the major themes of the genre were international terrorism, drug and money smuggling, bank robbing, and computer hacking.

Filmic dramas are Hollywood narratives of human conflict provoked typically by the breach or contestation of a social norm. As such, the genre contains various narrative modalities that both expand and minimize the possibilities of violence within a given dramatic situation, hence the range of violent action: from 0 to 44 events. One frequent theme centered on life in the inner city (*Jason's Lyric*, Jackson & McHenry, 1994; *Above the Rim*, Medina & Pollack, 1994; *Sugar Hill*, Brown & Ichaso, 1994; *Pulp Fiction*, Bender & Tarantino, 1994; and *The Professional*, Ledoux & Besson, 1994). These films were all above the generic norm (16.8 events per film), ranging from 19 to 43 acts. Melodramas, on the other hand, (*When a Man Loves a Woman*, Avnet & Mandoki, 1994; *Intersection*, Rydell, 1994; *The War*, Avnet, 1994; *Little Women*, DiNovi & Armstrong, 1994; *8 Seconds*, Shamberg & Avidson, 1994; and *Nobody's Fool*, Donovan & Benton, 1994) situate conflict inside the family and the larger social community, stressing personal transformation over and above the accomplishment of objectives requiring force. The films in this latter subset contained 10 or fewer violent acts. Another subset, of seven films, (*Above the Rim*, Medina & Pollack, 1994; *Jason's Lyric*, Jackson & McHenry, 1994; *Legends of the Fall*, Herskowitz & Zwick, 1994; *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, Coppola & Branagh, 1994; *Natural Born Killers*, Hamsher & Stone, 1994; *No Escape*, Hurd & Campbell, 1994; and *Wolf*, Wick & Nichols, 1994) showed more than 25 violent acts per film chiefly by incorporating violent elements from action and horror.

Hollywood comedy is about disorder, chaos, excess, dissonance, and the ridiculous. Although the vast majority of comedies in 1994 had either romantic or family themes (more than half the comedies contained 10 or fewer acts of violence; the norm was 14), five comedies adopted action-like violence and pacing, usually in a "send-up" or parody of the action or western genres: for example, *Beverly Hills Cop III* (Neufield & Landis, 1994), *A Low Down Dirty Shame* (Birnbaum & Wayan, 1994), *The Cowboy Way* (Grazer & Champion, 1994), *Naked Gun 33 1/3* (Weiss & Segal, 1994), and *Lightening Jack* (Coote & Wincer, 1994). These five films, each with more than 25 violent acts, were the most violent of the comedy genre. In them, there were numerous scenes of armed chases, barroom brawls, shoot-outs, and large-scale explosions and numerous scenes of mayhem with large numbers of incidental characters shot and killed.

Intentionality: "If He Moves, Shoot 'Em"

The initiator was considered to be the character(s) who began the violence and the recipient to be the character(s) against whom the action was directed. Each violent act was evaluated as to whether it was intentional by the agent

TABLE 2: Distribution of Intentional and Unintentional Acts to People, by Genre

Genre	<i>Intentional Act</i>		<i>Unintentional Act</i>		Total n
	n	%	n	%	
Action	630	95.7	28	4.3	658
Comedy	499	85.2	87	14.8	586
Drama	404	92.4	33	7.6	437
Other	458	91.1	45	8.9	503
Total	1,991	91.2	193	8.8	2,184

who initiated the action or unintentional (as in the case of apparent accidents or acts of nature). The violence that takes place in our sample is overwhelmingly intentional (nearly 9 out of 10 times) (see Table 2). That is, for whatever reason, the initiator almost always intended to do harm to someone else. Accidents did occur, but rarely.

The action genre had very few unintentional actions (28 out of 658). Of the acts committed by action characters, 96% reflected the end result of specific aims ranging from subduing or humiliating to torturing and killing other characters. This can be attributed to the fact that in 1994, 14 of the 16 “men of action” embodied Herculean strength and were highly skilled technological warriors. More than 50% of them were police officers, secret service agents, or military soldiers.

Although roughly the same extent of intentionality holds true for drama, the situation in comedy was quite different. A number of the 42 comedies in the sample precipitated humorous crises by having dimwitted characters try to master situations beyond their grasp (*Dumb and Dumber*, Wessler & Ferelly, 1994; *Baby's Day Out*, Hughes & Johnson, 1994; *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, Robinson & Shaydac, 1994; *In the Army Now*, Rottenberg & Petrie, 1994; and *The Flintstones*, Cohen & Levant, 1994). For this reason, accidents and unintentional violence with and without physical consequences abounded in this genre, more so than in any of the others. Of the total violence of the genre, 15% was of this accidental type.

Seriousness

The three-point scale employed to measure the seriousness of violent action involved the categories of minimal force (pushing, slapping, restraining, pinching, and chases not involving weapons), moderate force (hitting

with a closed fist or with a weapon, but excluding life-threatening violence), and lethal force (deadly or potentially deadly violence). Of the 2,184 violent actions in the sample, 963 (44.1%) used lethal force, 817 (37.4%) used moderate force, and 404 (18.5%) used only minimal force (see Table 3). The level of lethal force varied across the three main genres: 48.2% of violence in action, 45.3% in drama, and 32.6% in comedy.

The action genre contained the highest percentage of actions involving lethal force and the lowest percentage involving minimal force (13.8%). This is due to the genre magnifying the spectacular elements of the classic western and war film: ensemble fighting and pyrotechnical explosions. In this context, dramatic stakes require the frequent performance of life-threatening attacks and defenses for the preservation of the hero and the maintenance of a heightened atmosphere of threat. In 1994, ensemble fighting (that is, instances where the initiator consisted of multiple members) occurred in 13 of the 14 movies, and all 14 films displayed destruction of property entailing bodily injury and/or death.

Although the frequency of violence was lower in the genre of drama than action, drama also contained a relatively high level of lethal and moderate force. This probably has to do with the number of films in this genre that focus on such social problems as gangs, alcoholism, and drug abuse. In dramas such as *Natural Born Killers* (Hamsher & Stone, 1994), *Pulp Fiction* (Bender & Tarantino, 1994), *Legends of the Fall* (Herskovitz & Zwick, 1994), and *The Professional* (Ledoux & Besson, 1994), a romantic relationship or the preservation of family ties was threatened by and/or required for its protection the performance of serious violence. The inner city ghetto, prisons, Mafia dens, and so forth are typically movie settings of greater violence and structure such films as *The Client* (Milchan & Schumacher, 1994), *Nobody's Fool* (Donovan & Benton, 1994), *The Shawshank Redemption* (Marvin & Darabont, 1994), *Jason's Lyric* (Jackson & McHenry, 1994), *Sugar Hill* (Brown & Ichaso, 1994), and *Above the Rim* (Medina & Pollack, 1994). The higher proportion of minimal force (slapping and pushing) in drama (19.7%) can be understood in terms of the dynamics of interpersonal violence between family members, lovers, and acquaintances, where the intention is less often to kill or destroy an enemy, as is common in the action genre, but is part of a struggle for dominance that ultimately affects the sociocultural stability of these milieus (*Intersection*, Rydell, 1994; *Disclosure*, Crichton & Levinson, 1994; and *Forrest Gump*, Finerman & Zemeckis, 1994).

Unlike the action and drama genres, comedy concentrates most of its violent actions within the range of moderate (44.0%) to minimal (23.4%) force. This distribution of violence reflects long-standing generic conventions such

TABLE 3: Distribution of Seriousness of Violent Actions to Bodies, by Genre

Genre	Minimal Force		Moderate Force		Lethal Force		Total n
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Action	91	13.8	250	38.0	317	48.2	658
Comedy	137	23.4	258	44.0	191	32.6	586
Drama	86	19.7	153	35.0	198	45.3	437
Other	90	17.9	156	31.0	257	51.1	503
Total	404	18.5	817	37.4	963	44.1	2,184

as slapstick (humor that relies on loud, crude, yet harmless, back-and-forth slapping, hitting, kicking, and boisterous horseplay between characters) and practical jokes (tricks played on characters to taunt, frustrate, or upset them for the fun of it). The sports situation is natural ground for hard-hitting comedy as *Angels in the Outfield* (Birnbaum & Brown, 1994), *D2: The Mighty Ducks* (Avnet & Weisman, 1994), *Major League 2* (Robinson & Ward, 1994), *The Air Up There* (Cort & Glaser, 1994), *Little Giants* (Schmidt & Dunham, 1994), and *Little Big League* (Lobell, 1994) show. The comedic effects of such conventions would clearly be diminished if violence escalated to that of lethal force. Not surprisingly, there is frequent unintentional violence.

Notwithstanding such moderating conventions, a significant percentage (32.6%) of comic violence was in fact lethal. Evidently, Hollywood has linked comedy and lethal violence together. One instance of this paradigm is John Hughes's *Baby's Day Out* (Hughes & Johnson, 1994), which follows the wildly successful *Home Alone* (Hughes & Columbus, 1990, 1992) films. All of these films involve children of wealthy families who enact sadistic and often lethal violence to fend off incompetent and déclassé criminals who are easily duped by their own bungling schemes. In this cycle, it is the innocence and ingenuity of the children committing the violent acts, which is played off the blatant idiocy of the adult villains, that comically mitigates the violence. A similar comedic strategy is played out in other films such as *Dumb and Dumber* (Wessler & Ferelly, 1994), *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (Robinson & Shaydac, 1994), *Naked Gun 33 1/3* (Weiss & Segal, 1994), and *Renaissance Man* (Abbott & Marshall, 1994), all of which couple serious violent actions with intellectually deficient, idiotic, childlike protagonists or villains to undermine the seriousness of the enacted violence. The formula for yoking comedy and violence appears to consist in establishing patently absurd situations, the resolution of which requires the administration of

lethal force that is both justified and effectively denied by unrealistic mitigation of consequences.

Explicitness: Blood and Gore

To measure the explicitness of the violent action, that is, the degree to which the actual wounding of the body was made visible and/or audible on screen, a 4-point scale was employed (see Table 4). The first level is the representation of an action that shows no impact on the recipient's body. The second level measures those actions that are shown to have a physical impact on the body that results in bruising or bleeding but that do not plainly show any open wounds. The third level shows the wounding of the body (a knife or bullet for example piercing the flesh) but does not expose the inside of the body or depict its dismemberment. The fourth level is reserved for those violent actions that display the tearing open or exposure of the inside of the body or dismemberment.

Like seriousness, the distribution of explicitness varies by genre. Low levels of explicitness (that is, actions coded as 1 or 2) are a uniform feature of the sample as a whole. There are some variations: comedy with 95% of all violent actions being coded 1 or 2 on the explicitness scale, action with 87%, and drama with 80%. Half of the violent actions in comedy (50.7%) exhibited Level 1 explicitness, that is, with no represented impact. Omission of explicit details of injury, even more than underrepresentation of seriousness, appears to be a strategy for the preservation of comedic effect.

The action films in our sample are almost antiseptic, so highly formalized are their treatments of violence. The standard language of the genre such as fast cutting and rapid action contributes to the lack of attention to impact and injury. Furthermore, although choreographed killing is a staple feature of the action genre (legitimizing death as the only solution to conflicts facing its heroes), there is no lingering on the physical damage inflicted. Thus, although action films have a tendency to study the image of the vanquished villain once he is dead, they devote very little attention to graphic displays of injury to the animated body.

The hybridization of drama with horror (a genre that emphasizes gore) is evident in *Wolf* (Wick & Nichols, 1994) and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Coppola & Branagh, 1994), films that employ the violence of classic monsters to jeopardize familial or love relationships and require violent action to halt the threat. Although both films are dramas of evolving consciousness, the graphic display of violent action in key scenes is taken from elsewhere. In the scene of childbirth gone awry in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, the mon-

TABLE 4: Distribution of Explicitness of Violent Actions to Bodies, by Genre

Genre	Level 1		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4		Total n
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Action	212	32.2	358	54.4	75	11.4	13	2.0	658
Comedy	297	50.7	262	44.7	27	4.6	0	0.0	586
Drama	157	35.9	194	44.4	81	18.5	5	1.1	437
Other	192	38.2	260	51.7	39	7.8	12	2.4	503
Total	858	39.3	1,074	49.2	222	10.2	30	1.4	2,184

ster tears the heart out of Frankenstein's wife in front of him (and us). At the end of *Wolf*, Jack Nicholson's character is impaled in the face by a pitchfork.

Throughout the sample, high levels of violent force were rarely linked to representation of highly explicit impacts. Even in the action genre, Level 4 explicitness is rare (2 of 100 cases). In terms of the entire sample, only 1 in 100 violent actions was represented with the highest level of explicitness. In general, so far as explicitness of bodily injury from violent action is concerned, violence in Hollywood cinema would be the real-life equivalent of a high-speed 100-car wreck on an American freeway that resulted in cuts and broken bones. Hollywood flesh is indeed a special effect.

Severity: Intimations of Immortality?

The resulting degree of damage to the body by violent action, that is, severity, was also scored on a 4-point scale (see Table 5). The degrees of severity are the following: no injury depicted, mild (representation of bruises, lacerations, or broken bones), severe (representation of bodies maimed, blinded, impaired, or disfigured), and ultimately, critical (representation of fatally wounded bodies). Severity differs from explicitness in terms of immediacy. Explicitness is the register of first impact. Severity, by contrast, codes the result of the impact, if any, after the violent event per se ends: sometimes right after the termination of the event, sometimes in a subsequent scene.

Although Hollywood films invest heavily in life-terminating violence (more than half, 51.1%, of the violent actions in the sample were of the lethal type), the industry is rarely explicit about the result to the victim's body. In four out of five cases of violence directed against another person, there is either no wounding or just bruising and blood. In fact, a glaring discrepancy

TABLE 5: Distribution of Severity of Injuries to Body, by Genre

Genre	<i>Implication Only</i>		<i>Mild</i>		<i>Severe</i>		<i>Critical</i>		Total n
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Action	9	1.4	14	2.1	10	1.5	27	4.1	658
Comedy	26	4.4	11	1.9	13	2.2	34	5.8	586
Drama	5	1.1	14	3.2	14	3.2	25	5.7	437
Other	13	2.6	6	1.2	18	3.6	22	4.4	503
Total	53	2.4	45	2.1	55	2.5	108	4.9	2,184

exists in all three genres between levels of force employed in violent actions and severity of injury inflicted. In action, where there were 317 discrete violent acts of lethal force, there were only 27 depictions of critical injuries to bodies and 10 depictions of severe injuries. In drama, where 198 violent actions were of lethal force, we saw depictions of only 25 critical and 14 severe injuries to bodies. In comedy, the situation was not much different. Out of 191 actions using lethal force, we noted only 34 depictions of critical and 13 depictions of severe injuries to bodies.

Although these data indicate that a strategy of elision (of consequent injury) was operative across these three genres in 1994, it is not uniform. The form of elision is peculiar to the various worlds constructed by genres. In action films, heroes and central villains are typically distinguished by a heightened resilience to violence that seldom permits any show of weakness or vulnerability because both must remain intact to enact the sort of climactic violence that resolves the conflict. Termination of the anti-hero must be delayed to the end. Furthermore, in any (typical) scene where the hero kills scores of unidentified characters, there is simply no point in treating the consequences to figures whose only role is to display the hero's dexterity.

Drama's heightened investment in characterization, by contrast, implies a greater commitment to psychological and physical realism and hence to actual consequences. Indeed, in spite of the fact that the dramas depicting the bulk of the violence in the genre (*Jason's Lyric*, Jackson & McHenry, 1994; *Above the Rim*, Medina & Pollack, 1994; *The Professional*, Ledoux & Besson, 1994; *Natural Born Killers*, Hamsher & Stone, 1994; *No Escape*, Hurd & Campbell, 1994; *Sugar Hill*, Brown & Ichaso, 1994; *Wolf*, Wick & Nichols, 1994; *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, Coppola & Branagh, 1994; and *Pulp Fiction*, Bender & Tarantino, 1994) were films that borrowed heavily from action and horror, there were significantly more depictions of severe

TABLE 6: Distribution of Violent Actions Without Consequences, With Bodily Injury, and/or With Medical Attention, by Genre

Genre	No Consequences		Bodily Injury Only		Medical Attention Only		Bodily Injury and Medical Attention		Total n
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Action	594	90.3	57	8.7	4	0.6	3	0.5	658
Comedy	496	84.6	83	14.2	6	1.0	1	0.2	586
Drama	375	85.8	49	11.2	4	0.9	9	2.1	437
Other	432	85.9	65	12.9	2	0.4	4	0.8	503
Total	1897	86.9	254	11.6	16	0.7	17	0.8	2184

injury. In fact, the most graphic depiction of severe injury and medical treatment in the sample occurs in the drama *Pulp Fiction* (Bender & Tarantino, 1994).

In comedy, where the relationship of cause and effect is determined by the dictum “the comic mask is ugly and distorted but does not imply pain,” humor was commonly generated through an underrepresentation of the consequences of serious violence. Because the humor of comic situations would be deflated by realistic representations of the physical or medical consequences of injuries, characters simply walked away, as in an animated cartoon, from violence of moderate to lethal force. In the exceptional cases, *Baby's Day Out* (Hughes & Johnson, 1994), *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (Robinson & Shaydac, 1994), and *Dumb and Dumber* (Wessler & Ferelly, 1994), severity of injury was represented to ridicule victims of violence.

Truth or Consequences

Across the entire sample, violent assault results in bodily injury in 1 out of 10 cases (11.6% to be exact). Of the violence occurring in the action genre, 90% was without depicted injury of any sort. It was similar with drama (86%) and comedy (85%) (see Table 6). Across genres, the Hollywood narrative suspends the laws of cause and effect and denies and mystifies the direct relationship between assault and injury. Hollywood dramaturgy leads up to the violent act but almost never follows it through to its inevitable conclusion. Narrative is cut short. Ellipsis rules. Even when injury is aggravated (2 of 3 injuries are serious or critical) and depicted, follow-up medical attention occurs in 1 out of 10 cases. This double omission, of depicted injury and the

TABLE 7: Average Number of Scenes, Episodes, and Actions Depicting Violence Per Film, by Genre

<i>Genre</i>	<i>Scenes</i>	<i>Episodes</i>	<i>Actions</i>
Action	10.5	14.4	47.0
Comedy	5.7	6.4	14.3
Drama	7.2	8.2	16.8
Other	9.2	10.9	26.5
Total	7.4	8.9	21.8

need for administration of medical attention, is nearly uniform throughout the most popular genres.

The films in the sample displayed a consistent pattern of violence without consequences. Indeed, this pattern of violence sustains the movies by suspending the physical laws of the universe. In the real world, the types of violence that appear in these films would have devastating physical, financial, and social effects. The human body in Hollywood cinema is a uniquely cinematic invention, almost wholly distinct from any real-life, existing one.

Distinctive Genre Violence Profiles

Each of the most popular film genres exhibits its own unique patterning of violent features. From Table 7, we can identify a narrative pattern of generic violence in the film as a whole. In both comedy and drama, there are on average two violent acts per episode and one violent episode per scene. (Of course, this does not mean that in other respects the scenes as such are similarly structured.) By contrast, narrative in the action genre has three times the number of violent acts per episode, more episodes per scene (25%), and more violent scenes than comedy (80%) or drama (40%). Structurally speaking, the action genre has more concentrated sequences of violent action and significantly more of them. Drama shows about 25% more violent scenes than comedy. Both the micro-narrative of the single event discussed in previous tables and the organization of violence within the film as a whole show distinctive generic profiles.

Regression analysis showed significant statistical differences between genres on three important parameters critical to qualitatively notating film violence. Table 8 shows the likelihood of a chance configuration of violent elements.

TABLE 8: Odds Ratios (ORs) and 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) for Three Principal Genres, by Violence Characteristic

<i>Violence Characteristic</i>	<i>Action</i>		<i>Comedy</i>		<i>Drama</i>	
	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
Seriousness	1.24	1.08-1.42	0.80	0.69-0.92	0.84	0.71-1.00
Explicitness	1.46	1.26-1.69	0.56	0.47-0.67	1.42	1.19-1.70
Intentionality	2.42	1.66-3.54	0.40	0.30-0.55	1.63	1.05-2.52

NOTE: The odds ratio represents the most probable deviation of the genre from the sample as a whole, with 1.00 representing no deviation.

Action films exhibited significantly higher degrees of intentionality (odds ratio = 2.42) and seriousness (odds ratio = 1.24) than the other popular genres. In terms of explicitness, however, it was similar to drama with odds ratios of 1.46 and 1.42, respectively. Comedies exhibited the lowest levels of seriousness (odds ratio = 0.80), explicitness (odds ratio = 0.56), and intentionality (odds ratio = 0.40) of the genres examined in this study. Dramas exhibited intermediate levels of intentionality (odds ratio = 1.63) and seriousness (odds ratio = 0.84). We have offered reasons for these characteristic differences in terms of the motivation and requirements of violent action to story, setting, and characters. Table 8 demonstrates clearly that the differences summarized as numbers and percentages in Tables 2, 3, and 4 are significant and constitute features that describe distinctive genre profiles of violence. The importance of genre to this study is that it frames and makes sense of the coagulation of diverse features of violent action in particular films and gives them particular significance and weight.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we have followed the major tradition of content analysis of violence as it has evolved in the study of television and adapted it by redefining and reintroducing critical terms and developing new scales and methods to suit the analysis of a comprehensive set of popular films. We have isolated, described, and critically examined several fundamental features of the interpersonal articulation of film violence; noted their patterns of distribution; and shown that they condense in distinctive ways around identifiable generic forms. We have indicated the way that violent acts structure the scenic building blocks, which in turn compose the narrative of the film as a whole.

Generally speaking, movie violence in the most popular American genres of 1994 was characterized by frequent intentional violent actions executed with high levels of force with a suppression of attending consequences. Notwithstanding that half the violent acts in the sample films were of the lethal kind, explicit indication of injury in any degree was only rarely acknowledged and was systematically minimized. Furthermore, the Hollywood narrative, regardless of genre, methodically dissociates cause from effect, violence from injury, and in effect creates impossible images of the human body. The profiles of film violence that result from the integration of these analytic categories can be understood as the result of the distinctive narrative demands of different genres.

The striking, perhaps unexpected, further result of this study is the recognition that violence in American film is not concentrated especially in the action genre but that it is widely distributed across the spectrum of popular types. As Table 1 shows, comedy and drama account for more than 60% of the violence in that popular set of films. For example, in the same set, more than a quarter of the violent assaults using lethal force and 40% of the critical (that is fatal or potentially fatal) injuries occurred in comedy.

The totals and averages set out in the tables provide a broad and objective perspective on American film. But by segregating the results this way, by genres, the article may give the impression that the generic worlds are hermetic. This is not the case. As a study of the data in Table 7 makes evident, the distribution of violence is a more complex matter. If, for example, the 3 most violent action films are put aside, the remaining 11 average 35 violent acts per film. The 3 most violent comedies then display more than two times the number of violent acts as the typical action film. Indeed, the 3 most violent dramas have a more heightened profile than the action norm. In fact, 22 of the comedies and 10 of the dramas have more violent acts than 2 of the action films. Table 7 shows as well how the presence or absence of violent acts comes to serve as the stereotype or ideal type of the form of the genre. There are 9 comedies and 7 dramas that have fewer than 3 violent acts, a benign minimization that amounts to 25% of their combined total. Of the 14 action films, 11 display more than 30 violent acts. It is features of this kind that help secure a certain idea of the identity and properties of the form. In the end, however, in a universe of this diverse type, there is no obligatory conformity to norms. There is, rather, an unruly and inventive reassignment of characters and conventions, a process of displacement and hybridization, that may help account for the considerable overlap of type, frequency, and structure of violent action that we found in this large sample.

NOTES

1. The study of violence on television initiated in the late 1960s by George Gerbner (1969) and his Annenberg School associates was modest in its stated ambition to offer a “descriptive account . . . of the extent and nature of overt violence in television plays.” Gerbner did not investigate the violent act or consequences in physical detail but concentrated on the social identities of the characters and their interactions. He established an initial analytic paradigm with the introduction of the analytic elements: frequency, seriousness, physical consequences, and program types. Seriousness was opposed to the comic; consequences indicated, without specification, the presence or absence of injury. (See summary chapter in Gerbner et al.) In the 1990s, the National Television Violence Study (Mediascope, 1996) employed categories of consequences (harm, pain), explicitness (whether the violence was shown in close up or long shot), and graphicness (with 4 degrees of display of injury). In this study of television, movies were one of six television genres examined (including dramatic series, children’s series, music videos, reality based programs, and comedy series). The principal interest was to establish violence profiles by channel, genre, and day part and to make related comparisons. The study, however, did not report the number or the titles of the films examined, the basis for the weighting of movies in the sample, or the criteria for inclusion of particular films. They were theatrical movies on cable. As a television category, movies were found to have the most violence, the most graphic violence, and the lowest percentage of harm and pain in comparison to other programming on television. Although there is, in name, some similarity in the present article to the analytic categories in the research referred to above, the terms employed in this study have been defined differently and constructed to meet the requirements of the specific task at hand. Neither of the studies above concerning television provides systematic or comprehensive detail about violence in the universe of theatrically released movies.

Television and film research have for the most part been conducted in different paradigms. The principal history of television research has for the most part been empirical and often experimental. Paik and Comstock (1994) gave an overview of 217 studies directed to the question of television violence conducted between 1957 and 1990. A useful presentation of the argument that exposure to media violence increases the chance that members of the audience will act aggressively can be found in Berkowitz (1984).

The empirical literature on the relationship between film and violence is frequently experimental and seeks to establish links between film viewing and increased aggression. Occasionally, the research addresses a particular genre, typically pornography (Slade, 1984). For a review of arguments related to violence and sexual aggression generally, see Felson (1996).

From the perspective of critical studies, the other main paradigm (nonexperimental, nonempirical), two recent book-length collections provide an valuable orientation to the subject of film violence: Prince (2000) and Slocum (2001). The first is devoted principally to a historical and cultural politics of Hollywood violence. A recently published two-volume encyclopedia (Gottesman, 1999) includes nine entries on various aspects of film violence: overview, landmark films, directors, violent genres, animation, documentary film, censorship, aesthetics of violence, and representing gender, race, and ethnicity. Each entry is accompanied by a bibliography. Surprisingly, a survey of the research literature does not show a single article or book in either tradition that details in an empirical way the features of violence across multiple genres or across a broad sample of American films.

2. The 100 top-grossing films in the sample accounted for 90% of the total domestic theatrical box-office take (\$4,587 million of the year's total \$5,159 million).

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