

Kill Bill with Flying Daggers: Aesthetic Violence and Women in Film

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Abstract

A beautiful young woman leaps into the air, executes a series of gravity-free somersaults and then swiftly disarms a throng of lumbering male thugs. We are in the rarefied cinematic atmosphere of *surrealistic violence*. A recent trend in film uncharacteristically positions women as the heroes of movie violence that emphasizes its aesthetic qualities; color, line, composition and movement take precedence over realism. When films make violence look beautiful, they employ female form, action and interests. Although this trend may not characterize a robustly feminist approach, the centrality of women and their needs suggests a feminist orientation. Before analyzing surrealistic violence through two representative films, it is distinguished from *excessive* and *hyper-violence*.

Excessive violence, such as characterizes many Schwarzenegger films, does not present images that delight in their mere appearance. Instead, the films simply heap violence upon more violence. Increase in amount of bloodshed and carnage does not produce transformation; quantitative expansion does not qualitatively alter the violence portrayed. In contrast are two modes of film violence that do aesthetically reconfigure mayhem. Hyper-violence goes beyond simple excess. Dwelling on the sensuous surface of human destruction in visually captivating ways, it vivifies the artistic qualities of cutting and rending, maiming and killing. Hyper-violence exaggerates the consequences of combat, for example, by enriching the splatter of blood or focusing on its pattern. In surrealistic violence, bloodshed and gore are replaced by graceful movement and acrobatic creativity. Surrealistic violence departs further from realism by transfiguring violence more aesthetically through cinematic artifice. The concerns of women and their social constraints are also more pivotal than in other genres of film violence. The spectacle and import of magical female motion are investigated through analysis of *Crouching Tiger/Hidden Dragon* and *House of Flying Daggers*.

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Joseph Kupfer is University Professor of Philosophy at Iowa State University, where he teaches ethics, aesthetics, and medical ethics. He writes on the ethics of care, virtue and vice, and philosophy in film. His most recent book is *Meta-Narrative in the Movies: Tell Me a Story* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).