

Extended Essay in Film:

In depth study of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Outsiders* (1983) and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)

RESEARCH QUESTION:

Sympathy in Film: To what extent does the portrayal of graphic violence in film impart the ability to sympathize with real world situations?

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Introduction

Cinema conjures a variety of narratives that allow viewers access to experiences, both wonderful and horrific, that they may never have themselves. Despite the separation of reality and events occurring on a screen, an attachment is created between the viewer and the characters of the film who are observed fulfilling roles they were created for and subject to events they had no consent in. When the characters inside of cinema experience extreme levels of brutality and violence, we sympathize with the tragedy despite the lack of our own physical involvement. The importance of this analysis stems from exposure to graphic content as students learn and grow, along with the question of how this spurs ethical development. We are the opposite of the proposed “passive watcher” during the unfolding of a film as we form an understanding of struggles and hardships that we were formerly unaware of. Both Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Outsiders* (1983) and Stanley Kubrick’s *Clockwork Orange* (1971) portray graphic violence and allow the viewers to sympathize with the events that unfold through a negative narrative and character development.

In *The Outsiders*, the group called the Greasers is filled with adolescent boys who struggle with criminal backgrounds due to economic, social, and family issues. The plot unfolds covering content such as: the death of a friend, bullying, and the loss of parents- all of which occur in reality as well as in cinema. Creating this dynamic between the Greasers and the audience is established with a point of view shot focusing on the writing of Ponyboy who will continue the narration of his life throughout the film. This is immediately switched to an establishing shot of a movie theater followed by a medium shot of the protagonist being harassed by several adolescents in the car. All aspects of the initial plot and cinematography line up in order to establish the Greasers as those in need of sympathy. A study on “Cinempathy” explains how all aspects of cinema coincide to “elicit the kind of affective mimicry or emotional contagion responses that prime us for empathy

and sympathy”¹. This describes how the graphic violence used on the protagonists we are emotionally invested in, trains us to feel levels of empathy and sympathy we would not have in scenarios we have not yet experienced ourselves.

The Greasers possess a close dynamic amongst one another throughout the film and work against the antagonist Socials only to have a melancholy ending similar to Alex in the *Clockwork Orange*. As the film contains more close up shots of Alex and midpoint shots of him performing heinous acts, this alienates him and displays only negative qualities. This does not provide the setup to provoke sympathy later on until Alex is shown suffering which is still overall conflicted as he returned to performing criminal acts. Even though some of the violence is not as graphic due to shots that only feature shadows of what is occurring, the content crosses the border of graphic violence encouraging desensitization. As evoking sympathy is secondary to conveying the theme of each movie, this border is commonly crossed and creates the need for a guideline composed of which cinematic elements maintain the realistic aspects of graphic violence while continuing the relationship between characters and audience.

Graphic violence in media allows a variety of audiences, including younger age groups, an opportunity to observe realistic brutality that exists without their personal experience. Violence is used to convey the messages of each film including the overall struggle in *Clockwork Orange* between maintaining order versus having liberty whereas *The Outsiders* has plot focuses on class struggle. The emotional response to these two plots and the violence used is a byproduct of the combined effort of screenwriter and director to convey their intended messages of the film. Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Outsiders* (1983) and Stanley Kubrick’s *Clockwork Orange* (1971) can be

¹ Cinempathy: Phenomenology, Cognitivism, and Moving Images Robert Sinnerbrink

individually analyzed for their effectiveness at promoting sympathy using their composition, plot, camera shots, and semiotics as well as cross examined between each other.

The Outsiders

Francis Ford Coppola's "*The Outsiders*" has similarities to *A Clockwork Orange* in choice of Camera Angles and the choice of beginning with a narration; however there are key differences that create an established sense of sympathy towards Ponyboy and his greasers as opposed to Alex and his unloyal gang. The first scene and beginning of the movie opens with a low-angle shot of an unnamed adolescent boy lost in thought. The camera zooms in on his thoughtful expression as he looks down and the camera displays a close up of the journal he is writing in with his name and the title of the movie written inside. The mise-en-scene includes a warm, orangey toned room with commonplace items that is relatable to the average person. Interest is still maintained through mystery, but the introduction to this character is relatable and less intense than that of Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*.

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This is complimented by the ambient sound of crickets chirping, dogs barking, and a train horn that quietly exist until Ponyboy's brief narration begins. These are natural sounds that emphasize solitude and quiet peace which keeps the viewer at ease with the ability to identify Ponyboy as the protagonist. "When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the dark movie house, I had only

two things on my mind. Paul Newman and a ride home”² is all Ponyboy states with the continuation of natural background noise in the cut into the establishing shot. This establishing shot ends as Ponyboy is hunted down by several boys in a nice car that chase him to run towards the camera.

Later during the fountain scene, there are several shots including long shots and close ups which allow for the traumatic events to unfold smoothly. The camera switches along with the dialogue from Ponyboy to Bob the Social in their tense confrontation in order to depict the individual strength of each character, especially Ponyboy who remains calm despite being outnumbered. As the brutal fight takes place two switchblades are shown in close up shots being pulled out of both a social's pocket initially and Johnny's pocket as Ponyboy is being drowned. These close ups are a focus on the more violent aspects of this brawl including weapons and the real possibility of danger that comes to fruition. Contrasting the close ups is the high, from above shot of the Socs drowning Ponyboy. Being seen from above shows the advantage they have over the two greasers as well as the full extent of what they are doing to Ponyboy. This confrontation shows the dangers of violence and how functioning on hatred has repercussions such as death and fear for all parties involved. Seeing a remorseful Johnny despite having undergone a beating himself allows the viewer to evaluate what was happened and formulate a sympathetic standpoint on what has just happened. The process of evaluation and feeling sympathy despite the action of murder is applicable to the real world in that every violent instance has an explanation beyond what it seems.

²Coppola, Francis Ford, director. *The Outsiders*. Warner Bros, 1983.

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Dally's death or "suicide via police" is focused on two specific scenes. The lingering medium shot after Dally has left the payphone focuses attention towards the red blood stain on a white background. At this point he is already losing blood from one wound, and the emotional agony he is going through after news of Johnny's death is what spurs his rash actions. The second shot is a long shot where Dally falls to the ground having been shot multiple times by the police. The gunshots are an important asset to this as they amplify the viewers understanding of what is occurring as well as the immediate response to a tragic death. The dramatic irony behind the death lies in the fact that during Dally's impromptu store robbery and police chase, the gun he was wielding had no bullets. This is consistent to the motifs of the film where appearances do not relay the full extent of something's potential.

Symbolism is prevalent throughout the film in order to focus the attention on graphic violence towards relating to the class struggle and the depiction of the adolescents in the film. In the establishing shot it is clear that the motif of bullying is being brought on by the economic differences between the Greasers and the Socials. The bright red car used to follow Ponyboy is how the Socials travel and initiates each scene of conflict, from the establishing shot to the fountain scene. This works as a symbol alongside the from above camera angles of the Socials in order to

reflect how the Socials personally view themselves above humanity, poverty, and even the law in their own eyes. The Greasers are represented through the choice of costume as well as the combs and switchblades they carry at all times. While the combs do reflect vanity and self-assuredness, the fact that each Greaser carries one represents how they deflect their shortcomings with the support of each other and only outwardly project confidence. Both the Socials and the Greasers carry switchblades that represent their ability to do harm, with intention and without. In the case of the Socials, they wield their blades to harass and belittle other adolescents while the Greasers use theirs to protect each other. Even though the intentions are different, it does not change the fact that there will be violence. Each of the two groups are built upon critical elements of semiotics in order to fully reflect their emotional capacity despite the excess of conflict.

To summarize all of this, the Greasers are victimized and despite the rough exterior and violent displays, are portrayed by the film in a positive manner with family values. The combination of each of the boys recognizing each other's worth coupled with remorse for all the negativity and violence in their lives, both with intent and without, is what demands sympathy from the viewers. Sympathy towards others who are in lower positions or grappling with issues incomprehensible due to a lack of personal experience is able to be taught due to the creation of this emotional preparation. Having familiarity with the situation at hand is only available to the viewer if each scene has demonstrated why each person and situation is deserving of sympathy. *The Outsiders* is successful in showcasing a class divide, but also the human connection and compassion that is transferable to the world around us as well.

Clockwork Orange

Stanley Kubrick has directed *A Clockwork Orange* to have an unsettling atmosphere that compliments the violent actions which take place throughout the film. After watching and examining the film, it is clear that creating sympathy for the antihero of the film is belittled by creating the overall theme of the film. This theme differs from the former depiction of graphic violence in that it emphasizes the idea we have free will even if that will is good or bad.

The film begins with a close up image of Alex DeLarge which creates an eerie atmosphere and a disconnect from the character being depicted. There is no context of the person being displayed who looks straight into the camera with false eyelashes, a top hat, and monochromatic clothing. Not establishing who this person is carried throughout the entirety of the film as no personal connection is created. Instead of cutting to the next scene to identify the establishing shot, there is a slow retraction of the camera zooming out to reveal the imagery of other men in the same attire as the initial character with women-like mannequins objectified as furniture around them. The tension of zooming out reveals visually shocking and graphic set that does not allow for an emotional connection at the beginning; however, when the entirety of the scene is revealed, the person (Alex) in the close-up can be inferred as the main character of the film.

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This suspenseful technique of beginning in a close-up and slowly zooming out is repeated several times throughout the film including on of the most overt displays of violence- the rape that is revealed after zooming from the contrasting image of a flower.

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Another technique relevant to the depiction of human emotion are the copious amount of point of view shots utilized to depict how the character is feeling and influence this same reaction from the viewer.

Sound is used throughout the film in a variety of manners to exemplify the graphic violence or “ultraviolence” taking place on screen, beginning with the opening scene. The disturbing close-up is complimented by ominous music, Purcell’s “Music for The Funeral of Queen Mary”, and a quiet narration. While this seems to cultivate an uninviting atmosphere, the non-diegetic use of classical music during the violent occurrences of rape, fighting, and torture is what fully disconnects the viewer from what is occurring on screen. The primary example of this is Rossini’s opera “The Thieving Magpie” which is consistent with the scenery, but not the rape Alex is performing. While seeing this happen does allow for sympathy towards Author and his wife, it is one fleeting scene justified by the imprisonment of the main character.

Elements of camera angles and sound in *A Clockwork Orange* work together to create several themes and form the all encompassing theme of free will verses the good of society. Authors home that is aesthetically peaceful and calm with classical music becomes quickly violated by Alex and his gang proving that free will of some can limit the will of others. This depicts the common theme of corruption followed by betrayal after Alex is abandoned by his fellow gang members. Along with these themes, irony is heavily present with the contrast of classical music that is supposed to be one of the most revered and civilized and graphic violence that is provoked by it in Alex. Overall the cinematic techniques created throughout Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* display graphic violence in a manner that does create awareness of harmful action as well as certain repercussions to crimes, but does not stimulate the same sympathetic response as depicted by *The Outsiders*.

Sympathy in Cinema

Teaching through film has the ability to capture interest of many audiences, including younger, adolescent groups while still performing the primary act of portraying the intended theme of each film. Most themes revolve around human issues or problems in society that pertain to the real world. As violence occurs in the world around us regardless of personal experience, allowing non-tangible access to knowledge about graphic violence assists in teaching the sympathy necessary to positively handle these issues with some learned knowledge. While the term empathy and its idea of trying to visualize oneself in another's position is correct in some cases, in most it is sympathy where an understanding of the situation is formulated and compassion is presented in

return. Empathy is too complex for a short time period and not entirely effective in maintaining emotional positivity while understanding the situations occurring on screen.

In *A Clockwork Orange* compassion and sympathy can be created towards the victims of rape and torture, while attempting to feel empathy for each situation would cross the line of overexposure to graphic content. It is more common to feel sympathetic towards new situations instead of mentally putting yourself in that situation, especially if the content is excessively violent. Film does not consistently evoke empathy, but rather gives an understanding of new situations and allows sympathy towards both the film and in the real world in the case of this scenario being experienced personally.

The use of film as a vessel to teach sympathy and portray real life graphic violence allows media to impact a large audience. The two films combined cover a wide range of problems, one having more graphic content than the other, and address both the consequences and the emotional impact this has on all the characters involved. What truly allows for sympathy to be created is the mixture of point of view camera angles along with the close ups that express the emotional turmoil the victims go through. Even though it is still a controversial addition of graphic violence, there is also the plot build up giving us context as to why and how these things happen. Graphic violence in the two films is a valuable asset in allowing the viewers to connect with the characters of the film as well as carry their developed sense of sympathy into the real world.

Desensitization

The theory of desensitization to violence is a “diminished response to a stimulus after repeated exposure” and can be applied to graphic violence in cinema. Evidence of this has been studied through experimentation with results that show depressive and anxiety levels reducing with

continuous exposure to violent forms of media including film. This leads to a subsequent reduction in signs of empathy and sympathy with overexposure as well. Desensitization stands to conflict with the idea that exposure to real-life violence will inspire sympathy to that violence when experienced off screen. Studies suggest a correlation between emotional response to graphic violence, but the idea of teaching empathy through cinema and the levels at which exposure to violence is given have not been thoroughly examined.

This concept brings several new areas of thought attached to the research question of sympathy being created with the use of graphic violence in film. These two primary questions ask what is considered “overexposure” to these type of films and are there distinctions between films that draw the line between normalizing violence and creating sympathy towards the victims? One distinction between cinema as opposed to video games that contain graphic violence is that film has the appeal of complete voyeurism where the viewer does not participate in the violence or undergo any physical suffering. Nonetheless witnessing pain and conflict in any form has a powerful emotional impact that leaves a lasting impression as well as newly acquired knowledge on what exists in our world.

While *The Outsiders* is focused on victimizing the main characters and the events taking place, *A Clockwork Orange* has repeated exposure to graphic violence with no emotional connection that is consistent with the concerns of desensitization. To refute this however, a film in general is limited by time and focus of the viewer as well as the choice of how much graphic violence an individual experiences at any given time. That being stated, once the two films were cross analyzed it became clear that *The Outsiders* has considerably less graphic violence with a larger emotional connection created between the main characters. Desensitization means that there

simply are boundaries limiting how much exposure to graphic violence is beneficial to creating sympathy through film.

Conclusion

After a thorough evaluation of each film it has become apparent that the depiction of the protagonist is a quintessential aspect of how sympathy is created in cinema. Even though both films do contain graphic violence that showcase pitiful downfalls, the establishment of clear lines dictating the protagonist of the film adheres to morally correct actions is what aides this violence in turning into sympathy. The protagonist of *The Outsiders* is victimized by the poverty pronounced in the mise-en-scene along with camera angles that allow the viewer to examine the facial features of each character and respond to emotion. In contrast, the close ups of Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* create a detachment due to the cruel facial expressions as well as the incriminating acts he participates in. This difference in the development of characters, even though they are all dynamic, is what establishes the boundary between creating sympathy through cinema and desensitizing viewers to further violence. Both films contain graphic violence that capture the viewer's attention while highlighting the emotional toll this has taken on each character- this is why viewers are compelled to sympathize with these events even without personal experience. (As all of this has been proved through the analysis of different film elements, it is also important to note that this occurrence is a product of eliciting emotion in order to convey a major theme.)

Directors and screenwriters aim to portray a message through the film they create, a feat that would not be successful without the personal connection created between the characters of the film and its viewers. In order to display the class separation between the Greasers and the Socials in *The Outsiders*, film director Francis Ford Coppola chose to maintain the camera focus on abuse

in the lives of the Greasers as opposed to the higher social class in order to direct sympathy in favor of the less financially inclined characters. The addition of plot to explain the rough behavior of the kids as well as Ponyboys aptitude for academics contrasts the lesser depiction of gang violence in order to establish them as protagonists. Struggling youth is consistent through both films, but Alex's conscious decision to partake in heinous acts of "ultraviolence" as opposed to Ponyboys actions being subject to circumstance is what deprives the *A Clockwork Orange* of sympathy towards the main character. Typically being betrayed by a fellow gang member would encourage the viewer to sympathize or wish for justice. Unfortunately, vindication serves out of Alex's favor as he is condemned to pay for the crimes he committed without remorse. This conveys that there are repercussions to negative actions which limits free will for the betterment of the community. This specific theme complicates the use of graphic violence and does not encourage complete sympathy.

Despite controversy surrounding graphic violence used in film, rather than desensitize a young audience, this violence encourages sympathy and even situational awareness towards a vast array of issues that exist both on and off the screen. Although there were limitations in the knowledge acquired in desensitization as there is a lack of field evidence, there was still a substantial amount to support the research question. There are consequences to taking part in the controversial actions, death in *The Outsiders* and prison in *A Clockwork Orange*. Using the graphic violence and depicting it with camera angles that focus on the emotions of each character while the mise-en-scene sets an atmosphere where the viewers are able to identify with what is taking place allows for sympathy to be created. Graphic violence does not function in this manner when the main character is shown to be unrelatable as a sociopath and antihero who deserves what

is happening and cannot portray the necessary regret towards violent action. A clear, reliable protagonist to contrast the violence occurring on screen is able to convey the emotional trauma that graphic violence causes which allow for it to be identified and refuted in the real world. The visual impact of seeing crime in many forms is effective in capturing attention and creating a striking image of what the effect of violence has on humans. In conclusion, Francis Ford Coppola's *The Outsiders* (1983) and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) establish the correct form necessary for graphic violence in film to create sympathy towards the events and characters who suffer in each film, and carry this learned sympathy from the screen to what occurs in the world around us.

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