Life Out of Death—Violent FX and Its Vivacious Power

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Abstract

This article examines the use of digital visual effects in violently disturbing films and how they reformulate them into newly observable cinematic imagery. It discusses how visual effects show cinematic violence as producing vitality and “life” as much as destroying it in Zack Snyder's *300* and *Watchmen*, and Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller's *Sin City*.

KEYWORDS: Cinema, digital, effects, life, Zack Snyder, 300, VFX, violence

“When artists are able to bring characters to life and keep them alive, they should not leave death to the special effects department” (Morgenstern 49)

Joseph Morgenstern’s musings on violence in film come from a review of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), written in order to clarify his initial (negative) feelings about that film. It was a period when existing censorship and certification of films was changing with new types of cinema and, most importantly, when new ways of visualizing violence was emerging. Then, as now, cinematic violence was a polemical issue for the public and for critics. And for those involved in its creation, violence offered new ways of expressing aspects of the form and creating meaning from it. It is important to note that the way in which violence was beginning to be shown from 1967 was through and dependent upon the special effects that Morgenstern notes. Explosive squibs—packets filled with theatrical blood detonated to create dramatic plumes of blood to show the effects of a gunshot—were one of the mainstays in the industry from the 1950s onward. They created the visual splendor (and graphic evidence) of violence. Such special-effects techniques, overused in Morgenstern's eyes, are the starting point of this exploration. Its aim is to examine how spectacular visual effects (VFX) are explicitly and vitally used in creating imagery that is not just destructive to onscreen characters, but is creative too.

By examining the violence created primarily in Zack Snyder's *300* (2006) and *Watchmen* (2009), and Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller's *Sin City* (2005), the intention here is to explore how digital VFX do not merely show injury, duress, and death upon the body of the human. Indeed, despite Morgenstern's intimations that VFX artists should not create death, in fact, effects artists' ability to create said violence demonstrates vitality and verve, vivaciously animated. In creating violence and death, they do something more, producing a form of life, or something like it. Though the existence formed by these VFX is positioned toward the end of characters' lives, what shall be shown here is that they demonstrate a situation in between life and death.

From this stance, it is possible to view the movement and imposition of digital effects into the mise-en-scène through compositing as a means of creating spectacular instances of life, despite their inherently violent and possibly disturbing means. In their work on violence in society published in 1993, Albert Reiss and Jeffrey Roth note that violence is “behavior by persons against persons that intentionally threatens, attempts, or actually inflicts physical harm” (2). More broadly, Violence Prevention: A Vision of Hope (1995) discusses American society and the ways in which media inculcate a sense of aggressive behavior in adults and children (73). Sponsored by the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Justice, and the CDC, this policy paper notes that cinematic and video-game violence showing graphic dismemberment is modeled by people and used in their own conduct. The [Violent Prevention] Policy Council propose that producers should reeducate viewers away from the notion that violence is glamorous. The council, including educators (Peter Mehas), welfare reformers (Eloise Anderson), and social and community operatives (Bong Hwan Kim), comment that trailers whose content show “thrilling, action-packed entertainment” inundate the prospective audiences in order to entice them (Violence Prevention 78). It is this factor that is often continued within the films' actual scenes. As director Brian De Palma has noted, cinema is a “kinetic art form,” with dynamic motion and movement being used in violent ways in order to construct scenes of visceral and spectacular impact (qtd. in Prince 2).

PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE

In the modern era of cinema, it is almost impossible to escape the impact of digital technology, even more so within the commercial filmmaking environment in the creation of such spectacular scenes. Perhaps the zenith of digital visual effects comes within the creation of comic book, graphic novel, and superhero adaptations. So often the exploits of those with superhuman powers and strength, or indeed the stylish graphic imagery (and violence), needs the addition of digital VFX to aid and enforce their adventures on screen. Films that feature digital violence within adaptations of certain graphic novels and comic books reveal that the very visceral and intense nature of the violence used is concretized by the techniques used to build it. The violent disruptions committed upon bodies are also inscribed upon the basic visuals through VFX techniques; these ironically bring a new form of verve and existence to the screen.

In his analysis of film violence, James Kendrick denotes the difficulty in easily distinguishing what the term (and the visual form) of violence means within cinema. He begins by stating: “When talking about this often heated topic, common sense is often our greatest enemy. After all, everyone knows what violence is,” highlighting how easy it is to recognize fist fights and such (Kendrick 6). However, despite this being apparently clear, he continues:

the very obviousness of film violence—so visceral, so attention grabbing, pounding our senses and cutting right through our emotional core—often blinds us to the startlingly complexities and unexamined assumptions of every cinematic jab, gunshot, fistfight and explosion. (Kendrick 6)

Quoting a score of academics and their works, as well as various empirical and sociological studies, Kendrick highlights how film violence has changed over the course of cinema's history. He begins by stating how film violence is constructed subjectively, noting that different generations construct their own definitions and meanings. Certain techniques and styles (such as montage violence) become mainstreamed and the “norm,” whilst others come into play, changing violent imagery's nature and its forcefulness within different societal and cultural contexts (Kendrick 10–11). Ultimately, Kendrick sees violence in narrative cinema as “best understood as a perception,” and that “violence is an elastic, sliding, flexible term” (13).

Consequently, when we begin to view violence—in terms of style, graphicness, or indeed form—it is important to note that violence is malleable in how it is seen and read, and in how it is reacted to. With this is mind, the films under discussion here, principally Zack Snyder's films *300* (2006) and *Watchmen* (2009), and Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller's *Sin City* (2005), all feature violent content, but also make use of complex machinations of digital technology and techniques that enable disruption and violence in a creative vein. At once, through their visual effects, these films do indeed make enormous use of death and violence and they also play with our perceptions of it. No longer will violence as it is displayed and psychically responded to in this context be singular and seen as conclusively life ending. Instead, it becomes part of an evolutionary form in the film's unspooling length. Heretofore, violence was purely and evidently destructive—at least in previously defined ways. Now, violence (in its digital form) takes the flexible and sliding capacities available through digital means and begins to make new, animated, and lively forms from the destructiveness.

LET’S GET GRAPHIC

In Costas Constandinides' discussion of how graphic novel adaptations and similarly themed films use visual effects, he notes how effectively cinema uses technology to interpolate the graphic form, highlighting the ability of violence to flex and grow in meaning and, indeed, in its making of meaning. Of *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis 1999) and its use of bullet-time sequences, he states that “what the frame contains is an impossible and un-filmable action that is realized through virtual cinematography and graphic elements” (Constandinides 83). Their creation produces what he sees as a form of “in-between-ness,” or the visualization of imagery that is not quite live action and not quite something else. Of this in-between-ness, Constandinides says, “these films perform the narrative and visual style of their source texts through time-segments that are neither filmic in the traditional sense of realist film narrative nor static” (80). These in-between visualizations of other media that could be viewed as emanating from comic books or indeed animation (of the media form as well as life and vivacity) are known as “cinegratography.” Cinegratography is a term developed by Lev Manovich and is centered upon the hybridity of modern cinema, allowing the cinematic to meet graphic indivisibly (qtd. in Constandinides 38–39). It is a description that can be placed upon so many sequences within similar films, from characters breaking free of the constraints of reality and even of gravity, to characters being violently assaulted in extreme and spectacular ways. These are impossible and un-filmable moments; they are developed and visualized via the creative styles of other media forms. There the graphic form is blended with the cinematic to create something new that breaks away from the norms previously seen in live-action film. Constandinides argues that, “cinema moves toward a process whereby live action footage becomes graphic in order to aestheticize blood/bleeding and amplify the balletic attributes and artistic explorations of slow motion violence” (82).

How do such aestheticizations operate and what do they mean? In the first instance the films in question, by their very basis, show far blunter depictions of violence that rely more forcibly upon graphic interpretations, more akin to cartoons, animation, and video games, all of which use hand-drawn and digital graphics in their creation. Moreover, such developments of this style can also allow violence to be used as a starting point for something new, an arena of in-between-ness that is situated between life and death, showing a sense of vitality. Here digital VFX, in its construction of violence, amplifies the meanings contained within and alongside the amplification of said attributes to create something anew in between the living and dead.

Examples abound in many recent films throughout the world, from Japan's *Zatoichi* (Takeshi Kitano 2003) and certain other Asian productions, to those produced by American studios, such as *300*, *Watchmen* and *Sucker Punch* (Zack Snyder 2011). To a considerable degree, the visuals contained within the frames of such films wholly revolve around the imposition of graphic elements—explicitly illustrative of comic books—that would otherwise be impossible and unfeasible, ergo, unreal. One instance of this is in the aforementioned reimagining of *Zatoichi*, where we see plumes of blood exiting from the cuts created by the titular and infamous blind swordsman during fight scenes. Indeed, director Kitano notes the importance of using graphic sensibilities in creating the visual violence in the modern film's making and context, stating they “give the film an almost cartoon-like tone, which is more suitable” (Kitano). To create these moments of the story, and of the violence shown as part of the story, the VFX is employed to create blood spurts, cartoon-like loss of limbs, and other cuts and moments of bodily excess. These are doubly graphic (both violent and comic-book-like), as well as being both virtual and impossible in actual (real-world) terms. Kitano and his coworkers planned and executed live action shots, which then had digital elements placed into the frame through compositing. These elements, the blood spurts and cuts, positioned as they are as pieces of digital violence into the original live-action footage's form, operate not just as violent acts, but also as violent actions arranged by the filmmakers in postproduction. The VFX, placed onto and into the frame, carries through on a deliberate intention to inflict a sense of quasi-physical harm, like violence itself aims to do, to force new elements into the frame. This begins to show the creative possibilities inherent within digital violence, where the VFX added into the live-action shots adds a sense of vitality and new life to the (now) completed and extant live-action photography.

A similar arrangement of this is executed in Zack Snyder's *Sucker Punch*. During an early fight sequence in which heroine Baby Doll (Emily Browning) faces off against a trio of samurai, we see a series of shots that rely heavily upon digital VFX to complete the scene. These use elements that combine graphic depictions of movement, the striking of fleshy bodies against one another, and the entanglement of swords and bladed weaponry against other blades and (again) flesh. One early instance shows Baby Doll being approached by one of the samurai, a huge, towering figure who stops just ahead of her. Baby Doll attempts to draw her sword from her back, only for the giant to kick out at her. This sends her tiny figure quickly backward, crashing through the doors of a palace. We cut to the inside and track along the side of the interior as Baby Doll continues flying backward in two shots. The first shows these are doubly graphic (both violent and comic-book-like), as well as being both virtual and impossible in actual (real-world) terms. The second matches the motion in a wider shot as she hurtles high above the palace floor. A third shot, from behind Baby Doll and the doorway, sees her landing roughly beyond a row of candles, the force of her landing spewing up the stone tiles on the palace floor. A quick shot of Baby Doll looking at and beyond the camera then cuts to her point of view as the door explodes open. We see the samurai rushing forward, then engaging in a fluid and highly stylized fight. This uses sweeping shots of the samurai swinging his weapon with increasing speed before he strikes Baby Doll, throwing her backward. Subsequent shots show the pair striking at each other, the enormous samurai either inflicting massive destruction upon the temple floor or throwing Baby Doll back huge distances. Baby Doll herself never seems to suffer any ill effects from this and manages to strike with amazing power, despite her far smaller size.

In this scene, we see a series of graphic elements that move beyond realistic forms of violence, relying far more upon graphical forms. Though Baby Doll is essentially still played by actress Emily Browning, at key moments, such as the pre-fight approach toward the samurai and during lapses in the fighting when she has landed, a considerable amount of the scene uses digital shots to create her flight through the air as well as other aspects of her being attacked. Baby Doll's principal form within this scene, and within other similar scenes, is based upon her body being graphically represented through digital means. These include the quests against steam-punk Nazi soldiers, a dragon, and the final battle to defuse a bomb aboard a train, which use balletic movement slowed down in postproduction. Likewise, manipulations and the replacement of bodies allow similar depictions of violent graphicness akin to comic books and video games.

We do focus upon Browning as Baby Doll's face and body, seeing her reactions. At certain points, we follow her movement as she jumps up to strike back against her opponent. This requires physical exertion employed by the actor, as well as hoists and wire-work to move her through the air. In opposition to this, the majority of the scene relies on the compositing of the palace's interior space and its contents—including the splitting wood and cracked stonework of the floor. Baby Doll's motion in this action scene—and the violence enacted upon the space and combatants that it shows—seems more situated in the environment of a video game. Nonetheless, it is not quite within video games' aesthetic environment. *Sucker Punch* still features the real Browning and it is still considered a film, one that uses a visual style that is, in part at least, grounded in a relatable reality. The temple and the samurai have much more realistic definition, perhaps due to a higher budget and the context of their position in the history of popular cinema, but at the same time the use of motion and style demonstrate an in-between-ness. Therefore, the scene (and its violence) becomes another example of cinegratography, where the energetic movement, violence, attacks, and their aftereffects (the huge distances covered by Baby Doll as she recoils through the air and her ability to stand up and carry on), are akin to video games.

Though *Sucker Punch* is presumed to be less overtly violent,1 the film was criticized by some for its content. In Australia, Michael Bodey wrote: “*Sucker Punch*, frequently placed its female protagonists within scenes of voyeurism, extreme pain, fetishisation and torture, yet was granted an M for ‘frequent action violence and mature themes.’” Similarly, in America, Kerry Bennett stated in her review: “the gratuitous and sometimes bloody violence, along with frequent insinuations of aberrant sexual behavior, should be adequate reasons to discourage kids from seeing this film.” Nonetheless, the filmmakers replace expected “realistic” and traditional plumes of blood with visual depictions of energy whenever wounds are inflicted upon the samurai. These appear as glowing outbursts from wounds inflicted by Baby Doll and have an unearthly look to them. The energy exits the samurai in gravity-defying ways: bright plumes that burst outward with a vivacious, life-like means. Though signposting the ending of the huge character's life, the dissipations also seem to show a continuation of that life. Moreover, the energy of the attacks, the stylized use of slow-motion and gravity-defying leaps, and the overt strength of the characters is strongly reminiscent of games such as *Ultra Street Fighter IV* (Capcom 2010) and *Mortal Kombat X* (NetherRealm Studios 2015). The design of characters, and the bending (or replacement) of violence in the films' reality, evokes the fighting genre of games more than it does cinematic fight scenes. The nature of the film and its use of green screen, digital effects, and compositing, and its narrative basis and style, all point toward new, animated ways of showing violence on screen. These visualizations of action and violence, which are caught somewhere between CG animation, video games, and cinema, show us vivacity through both the VFX elements and their implementation.

MAKING EXCESSIVE VITALITY INTERORITY EXTERNAL

In his discussion of cinematic violence, James Kendrick states: “Some would argue that film violence is a form of actual violence in that it can cause psychological distress and even act directly upon the body” (8), invoking similar theories on actual violence mentioned earlier. In these, there is a perception that movie violence may cause people to inflict physical harm on others. This aspect becomes conceptualized within the films under discussion here. However, these films do not inflict physical distress on spectators' bodies. Instead, the digital violence creates distress and disruptions upon the body (or visual basis) of the film itself. As noted previously, the way in which VFX techniques are used to deliver digital violence instill such violence by inserting new components into the frame, such as blood or some form of vital fluids exiting bodies, or the imposition of new elements such as bodies, body parts, or physical attributes that are rendered asunder. This work follows cinegratographic lines, where it is placed invisibly into the frame, offering us new ways to explore violence. Such disruptions allow the films to approach violence as a means to manifest aspects of new life.

These disruptions are an extension of what Kristin Whissel describes as excessive vitality, a factor of VFX where she notes that characters and creatures are endowed with “interiorities defined by extreme emotional states and uncontrollable impulses or instincts” (92). Whissel develops this idea in order to remark that such VFX create a charge within the hero creatures that emblematize a “mediation” between life and death (92). Animated visuals, most especially those produced through digital means, link together life and death—bringing vitality to that which ordinarily has none, such as individual inked cells, a puppet, or clay, etc.—and by modern extension, digital coding. These essentially dead objects and elements are brought to life by the creators, and in Whissel's eyes, operate through bodies' overburdened deadly excesses in order to compensate for their lack of actual existence. Whissel explores this through characters that she sees as extreme examples, such as giant apes, genetically enhanced dinosaurs, and other overtly engineered characters such as Dren from Vincenzo Natali's *Splice* (2007). In each instance, the characters are given prowess that equates to death by being “designed, animated, and presented in a manner that equates them ontologically to deadliness” (Whissel 99). Whissel ultimately notes that the creatures seem most alive by showing violence perpetrated by them, as well seeing their death in spectacular and protracted fashion (103).

Digital violence, and the ways in which its impacts and effects are seen—such as blood and the body under assault—is a forceful and further exponent of this idea. Whissel notes that digital creatures' abilities “seem most lifelike when their deadliness and mortality are on display,” (99) and this becomes compounded and concretized when explicitly considered upon visualizations of digitized violence itself. The violence seen, showing literal harm, blood, and outright manifestations of death, also demonstrates vitality, bringing some sort of life to the screen through digital means. This continues Whissel's notion of Gollum's first moments in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson 2002). The sight of digital blood and digital augmentation in the fight between Gollum and the Hobbits, detailing punches and physical suffering, similarly shows death as life, or something—some sense of vitality—in between. The vitality seen is forcibly and expressly continued directly in the films under discussion here.

In the opening scene of Snyder's adaptation of *Watchmen* (2009), we witness a fight between an unknown assailant and retired superhero William Blake, aka The Comedian, that plays out within the confines of the latter's high-rise apartment in New York City. The film's certification,2 its generic basis within superhero comics, together with the combatants and the nature of the fight, sets up a violent and stylized conflict that befits the graphic novel's adult tone, much of it played out in real time. Numerous elegant displays of punches and gunplay, knives being thrown, Blake's wrist being broken, and the impacts of the knives against wood and plaster, are slick and fast-paced in terms of motion and editing. Beyond the inherent fast-paced and explicit “live action” violence that might be expected in a film of this rating and genre, there are instances of digital slow motion through VFX, highlighting violence as life. One of these is a slow-motion shot of Blake being punched in the face amidst a flurry of hits seen in a wider composition. We cut in closer to see the punch being delivered: the fist bludgeons Blake's cheek, arcing the bone and skin upward, the chin flopping about, together with spittle exiting from his mouth. VFX company MPC enhanced the original shot of actor Jeffery Dean Morgan, manipulating the live action through digital effects, which creates the first of a series of disruptions to the film's shots, enhancing the importance of violence, as well as creating new vitality through the same. As Blake is punched, and the violence of the hit disorders his face, the violent disruption to the live action—via the VFX enhancement—creates an added vitality to the imagery.

The use of slow motion allows a spectacular, excessive, and protracted deliberation of the violent action, showing Whissel's conception of the ways in which digital VFX mediates life and death, where vivacity occurs at a point of violence and death. The onscreen violence that is used to evoke intentions of injury, incapacitation, and the destruction of Blake simultaneously operates in a way that provides a sense of existence. This is similar to Whissel's example of characters being eaten alive, where we see them “being already dead while still living,” such as when unfortunate characters are eaten in *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg), perceiving the beginning and subsequent (indeed decisive) end of the moments of their death (105). While showing the beginning of death, such VFX is noted by Whissel as additionally illustrating how the digital format shows a sense of life. Such practices are viewed by the writers as distinctly non-living and therefore dead, but the frames of a film or visual motion of the digital file come alive with the new additions during the moments of characters' death.

The final part of the scene sees one continuous shot of Blake being hurled across his apartment, through a large window into the air beyond, and then down toward the street; the iconic yellow smiley face button that comprises both the novel's and the film's logo—spattered with his blood—falls momentarily into shot toward its close. To produce this, the filmmakers used a green screen set with actor Morgan suspended on a harness being propelled backward to mimic the accentuated blow by his character's assailant. A computer-generated apartment interior, skyline exterior and buildings, window glass (and its shattering), and the smiley button are added into the original basic shot. The image of the Comedian's motion is slowed down, showing one of many elements being manipulated to achieve the stylized effect, and to produce an added sense of spectacle and emphasis toward the action, as well as mirroring the comic book panel's freezing effect. The addition of the CGI elements, the slowing down of their motion, and their compositing onto the green-screen live-action photography, highlights a further set of additions to the imagery that causes and consolidates the film's level of digital violence.

At this point Blake is set to die; the violence carried out on his body and the forces exerted upon him by his assailant send him through the window, where he plummets to the ground below. In the final shot of the scene, his corpse finally lies prostrate and bloody on the sidewalk. Concurrently we have seen literal violence committed and visualized onscreen, through the attack and Blake's death, and we have seen a succession of digital violence performed in order to achieve this. As a consequence (and ironically), the screen visually pops spectacularly with life, vitality, and verve through the enhancements provided by the VFX upon live-action photography. In addition, digital compositing is used to put the whole sequence together, and this necessary digital violence directly reflects Whissel's arguments on the ways in which the deadliness and mortality of digital VFX simultaneously display a vivid sense of life.

The impact of the blows seen in slow motion and digitally augmented would in real life damage cells, break teeth, and cause blood to flow freely, and the effect of the images in the film is designed to generate these ideas within the viewer. We can see the damage and the life exiting Blake's body, a factor amplified in the subsequent shots as he flies backward through the window and into the exterior air.

Such ideas are perhaps most consciously solidified in Snyder's adaptation of *300*. This film, which closely resembles the graphic novel's stylized approach to visualizing characters and especially blood—often in distinct silhouette-like form against backgrounds—used a considerable level of VFX to create its overall visual composition. Shot in studios dressed with basic structures and a few pieces of mise-en-scène (such as wheat crops) to create a basis for landscape, with large blue screens surrounding the studio's walls, the filmmakers added into this basic live action the various Spartan backgrounds, structures, and other topographic elements. This in itself shows a further set of disruptions and theoretic violence to the original shots, a facet seen in other Miller adaptations such as *Sin City*, as well as in their sequels *300: Rise of an Empire* (Noam Munro 2014) and *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For* (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez 2014). In each of them, as well as many similar films, we continually see additions to the original filmed matter that attempt to bring the cinematic entity to life. It is in such additions where we see a series of visual elements that disrupt, cut up and cut into, and violate the original body of the live action. However, it is perhaps within films such as *300* that we see such additions best—through the impact of the bloody digitized violence.

The destruction of Spartan and Persian bodies through digital means, where digital VFX is used to create sights of spears and swords puncturing arms and torsos and, more spectacularly, the blood bursting forth into the air as a result, can be seen as a proponent of this. This expands Whissel's notion surrounding the externalization of internal components, such as tendons and the lower dermis in *The Mummy* (Steven Sommers 1999), or the jaws and alimentary canals of the pit slugs in *King Kong* (Peter Jackson 2005). In doing so, we are able to examine further the emblematic power of digital VFX to mediate upon life and death, literally cutting to the chase.

In *300*, the visual emblems are life and its very essences—blood and its ability to carry and provide life—that spurt out into the open air. Rather than being pumped about the body by the heart, providing oxygen and animation to the body and brain, we see it spreading out across the screen in an energetic and vivacious balletic play that builds vitality into the final scene. Before completion, this was just a basic, lifeless, unadorned set and blue screen. Though the blood no longer carries life to the Spartans and Persians, instead showing apparently mere death and destruction, it is at these very moments that the film comes alive and is (literally) animated. The portentous dialogue spilt by Gerard Butler, Rodrigo Santoro, and David Wenham as Leonidas, Xerxes, and Dilios, respectively, and the glowering mood these scenes evoke before and between battles, are replaced by the flowing and stylish aesthetic of blood unfurling within the frame, even as it brings about the death of the bleeding characters. The digitally animated blood acts as an extension of the internal components of the body that Whissel discusses in her work.

One particular sequence that effectively espouses this occurs when the character of Astinos (Tom Wisdom) and Stelios (Michael Fassbender) fight a group of Persians at around the 48-minute mark. The sequence plays out in a series of shots that work with the pace of the action: either speeding it up to increase the dynamic motion of the figures, or more importantly slowing it down to show greater amplification of the blood being spilled and limbs being cut apart from bodies and torsos riven. And, because we see blood flowing in slow motion, the violence of the blood as it floods outward is caught in the frame at the same time that the victim is shown to be still alive, redoubling Whissel's ideas of those being dead while still alive. Additional sets of similar shots and scenes are used frequently within *300*, where images are digitally developed to jump in closer and then move just as dynamically back outward to show successive animated spurts and plumes of blood, and hacked off body parts, in a way that graphically and spectacularly produces a sense of vibrant, vivacious life. Similarly, scenes within *Sin City*, including Marv's capturing of the cannibal Kevin at the farm, develop analogous conceptualizations of life meeting death. Here, as with the Spartan's bloody death as life heroics, we see Marv punch Kevin, producing a stream of animated blood from his mouth, and in a later story we follow Detective Hartigan as he takes down the Yellow Bastard—a disfigured character who suffers from a debilitating condition that turns his skin a jaundice-like yellow pallor. This effect was partially created through prosthetic additions to actor Nick Stahl's body, creating a potbelly, a bald head, and oversized nose and ears (resembling the vampire, Nosferatu). In order to finalize his sickly yellow look, the filmmakers used blue-colored makeup (due to the green-screen backgrounds) and then colored the character's body in postproduction. Created through the imposition of digital blood, and a series of enhancements made to the blue makeup, the filmmakers once again succeed in modifying both these and other shots discussed here, in order to create violence through violent disruptions, digitally creating existence out of death.

Furthermore, these sequences show the liminal position of both the characters and their hold on life, as well as the digital VFX. Life is aligned with death, death with life, as the digital meets the analogue, and CGI meets flesh and blood. This perhaps emblematizes violence and how such action is carried forth by man, but it also ironically shows us a sense of life being created. Note that during the sequences in *300* and its sequel, as well as other films in Snyder's recent canon, characters, and more importantly the blood or vital essences within them (including the giant Samurai of *Sucker Punch*), are visualized through speed and composition. They appear to float in the air, caught midway between inaction and action. Due to the speed ramping effect and the use of digitally animated bodies and blood, the extremely slow speed of the imagery enables a sense of being active and vital, even the moments of extended death create new possibilities. Though the bodies of the characters in *300* are beginning to lose their vital charge, the animation of the blood and visceral violence conducted upon them, as seen through digital VFX, allows a shared space to be built. We begin to see an ironic shift and redoubling of life as it switches from inside to out.

BLURRED LINES

Such an extension of death into new life and vivaciousness, where we see the actual bodies of characters undergoing digital violence as well as real flesh and blood meeting digital CGI, is a feature discussed at length by Laura Mulvey in Death 24x a Second (2006). Mulvey examines the old and new—cinema and digital—and how their aesthetic meeting brings new life to cinema and its history (21). Of cinema and its position in history, Mulvey states: “Like the central panel of a triptych that has blurred at the edges, the cinema reaches both forwards and backwards” (22). From here, she says the arrival of digital technology manages to create a “complex dialectic” (26) in which the notion of the stilled image evokes ghostly presences—something caught between life and death. This in itself creates a further emblem for digital VFX to demonstrate how we engage in and with cinema today: by pausing electronic devices during home viewing. Mulvey discusses the ability of DVD (and now digital streaming) as breaking down the structures of spectatorship and the linear ways in which spectators watch films, where digital practices move to renew the film's life, over and over, after the credits roll. Issues from this are further consolidated when we take such concepts and apply to them to the ways digital violence is executed. No longer can the visualization of a character's death be seen as its endpoint. As noted above, it becomes something at least liminal, a conduit to new ways of approaching violence and meaningful associations. When we see the start points of death for characters such as the Spartans and Persians in *300*, as well as other instances of violence conducted upon characters, we are seeing the beginning and continuation of a new vivacious cinema. As Mulvey notes, this is Gorky's “Kingdom of Shadows” renewed and it shows, institutionally, how cinema reacts to its surrounding ideologies and modes of address (36).

The creation of violence through digital means sees aspects of linearity regarding existence and life no longer ending bluntly. Instead, through the digitally accentuated slow motion of characters in fight scenes and the imposition of digital VFX, which animates bodies, body parts and blood, death is extended and it endures. Cinema has always had an extant life beyond the initial capture of its making. Though the film camera and later the digital camera capture the initial image, it has never remained as a mere image, one that lies like a Sphinx within a catacomb. Just as André Bazin theorizes the ability of photographic systems to be a means of objectively embalming bodies, this arrest has always been temporary. As he notes “cinema is objectivity in time” (Bazin 14), and time is always moving.

Particularly now, in the digital age, we are able to see a range of such rearticulations, playing and replaying of and with imagery. Thus, when we see Spartan warriors being flayed, Marv dragging a policeman's head from the side of a car over the tarmac of *Sin City*, or Baby Doll hacking apart a samurai, we are no longer in the domain of fixed systems. All of these creations of violence are predicated upon the original body of the imagery being given a new existence. The way in which this onscreen violence is seen and the means by which it is produced—that most often leads to characters' deaths—shows a mediation of the graphic possibilities of modern cinema and its visuals. Here we are seeing life meeting death, where the vivacious and vital possibilities of digital technology make something come alive anew beyond the initial capture and its reckoning.

Digital violence continues its precedence and allows us to consciously evaluate not just death but life as well, and on multiple levels. Seeing instances of violent action in the films discussed here, it is notable that the use of slow motion in concert with digital effects allows us to scrutinize more fully not just a sole position of mortality from that violence, but the nature of cinema in the creation of its form. Though critics such as Morgenstern might be morally right to argue that the creation of death should be left alone by VFX artists, here we see that in fact creating and producing digital violence is a vivacious conceit. As Carl Jung noted in an interview with Jonathan Freeman, “to shrink away from it [death] is to evade life and make life purposeless” (438). In the context of these cinematic productions at least, violence and violent death can be seen similarly: where death meets life it is not the end but the purpose of life.

Notes

1. *Sucker Punch* has a rating of 12A in the UK, PG-13 in the United States, and an M (for mature) in Australia.

2. *Watchmen* was rated 18 in the UK, R in the United States and MA 15+ in Australia.

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