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# Let's Pretend: The Societal Significance of Stage and Screen Violence, and the Role Fight Professionals Play.

## ABSTRACT

This article argues against the perceived and much-flouted notion that cinematic and other fictional violence begets real violence. It argues instead for a re-evaluation of this fictional and often exaggerated violent entertainment as a cultural necessity, a barometer or even a leveller, whereby, society, seeks it out for reassurance in a current sea of troubles. By employing highly-skilled martial artists and stage combatants, the violence is elevated beyond reality yet reflects a need to see action and reaction being taken by heroes with a will to reset or impose their own moral ideology.

## KEYWORDS

Martial arts, cultural studies, philosophy, paradigm, psychology, stage combat

Traditional Martial Arts have often influenced and been influenced by performing arts, historically, on stage and in modern times, in both live and recorded arts. In Cantonese Opera and Japanese Kabuki, martial arts formed an integral part of the performer's training, in European Opera, fencing was a crucial part of the performer's development. More recently, we have witnessed practitioners incorporating martial arts into their theatrical practice, including Meyerhold, Suzuki, and Mroz. In all of the above cases, a deep skill and understanding of the martial arts have been of paramount importance to the theatremakers.

This is even more evident in cinematic development. Since the birth of cinema, action has been pivotal in individual film plotting and the narrative of cinema's rise to the mass cultural popularity it enjoys today. A whole field of specialists is now employed on most major productions that oversee this action: the stunt team. These are experts in their own right, ensuring that the action and violence are carried out safely, dramatically and technically.

The field of stage and screen combat, therefore, is an integral part of the theatre and cinema industries. It requires a great deal of financial and time investment by individuals training to succeed in this field, and by studios and theatres to provide the quality action entertainment modern audiences increasingly have an appetite for. The investment is seen as sound; most of the highest-grossing films and theatre of all time include extended scenes of violence or violence serves as a major component within the narrative.

Examples of Movies that have grossed \$1 billion+ that use violence frequently

| Rank | Title                        | Worldwide Box Office | Year | Violent Content                                                                                                                                            |
|------|------------------------------|----------------------|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.   | Avengers: Endgame            | \$2,790,200.00       | 2019 | Fantasy Violence:<br>Historical weaponry (Axes, Shields, Spears, Staff, Bow and Arrow)<br>Futuristic weaponry (Lasers, Photon blasters)<br>Unarmed combat. |
| 4.   | Star Wars: The Force Awakens | \$2,068,200.00       | 2015 | Fantasy Violence:<br>Futuristic Weaponry based on Historical weaponry (swords, firearms, lasers)                                                           |
| 8.   | Furious 7                    | \$1, 516,000.00      | 2015 | Contemporary Weaponry (firearms)<br>Improvised Weaponry.<br>Car chases and crashes.                                                                        |

|     |                                               |                |      |                                                                                                       |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|     |                                               |                |      | Unarmed combat.                                                                                       |
| 24. | The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King | \$1,119,900.00 | 2003 | Fantasy Violence<br>Historical Weaponry<br>(Swords, Axe, Bow and Arrow, Trebuchet, Clubs)             |
| 25. | Skyfall                                       | \$1,108,600.00 | 2012 | Contemporary Weaponry (firearms)<br>Improvised Weaponry.<br>Car chases and crashes.<br>Unarmed Combat |

The appetite for fictional violence is not a new trend; if we look at the highest-grossing cinema with inflation-adjusted figures, we can see a remarkable similarity in older movies reaching the £1 billion mark.

Examples of Movies that have grossed \$1 billion+ (with inflation-adjusted) that use violence frequently

|     |                    |                         |      |                                                                                     |
|-----|--------------------|-------------------------|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.  | Gone with the Wind | Adjusted \$3,400,000.00 | 1939 | Unarmed Combat<br>Domestic Abuse                                                    |
| 15. | The Exorcist       | Adjusted \$1,850,000.00 | 1973 | Unarmed violence and stunts.                                                        |
| 19. | Ben Hur            | Adjusted \$1,700,000.00 | 1959 | Unarmed combat.<br>Historical Weaponry<br>(Swords, Shields, Whips)<br>Chariot race. |
| 28. | Thunderball        | Adjusted \$1,500,000.00 | 1965 | Contemporary Weaponry (Firearms)<br>Unarmed Combat.                                 |

These lists do not include the huge raft of other successful films and franchises that rely on violence, including The Matrix, John Wick, Die Hard, Bourne, Rocky, and Rambo. The genre with the most films ever produced is The Western, which arguably always features a violent act as either the fulcrum or climax of the narrative. Therefore, it can be stated that the appetite for violence on screen has always been high, perhaps even growing over the last century.

This could be due to the number of films being made compared to previous generations. In 1921, 2,511 films were produced. In 2015, 9,387 films were produced. This figure does include submissions to film festivals seeking distribution. However, the growing trend is evident, and with more films being produced, the proportionality of violent content increases; it can be argued that more people engage with fictional violence regularly. The role of the fight director is secure and in great demand. However, is the increased access to fictional violence a positive cultural development?

The answer can vary depending on the artistic intention and the art form in which we experience violent acts. We have long witnessed violent acts in live performance; however, in theatre, so much violence comes from the text or words spoken. That being said, my focus is very much anchored in the literal sense. The most prolifically produced playwright of all time, Shakespeare, wrote a bounty of violence within his works, the great tradition of Greek theatre, often centred on war and/or the repercussions of it. A plethora of contemporary playwrights sought to drive violence closer to us; Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill spring to mind.

Catherine Cusack spoke of working with Sarah Kane on *Phaedra's Love*.

'Led by Sarah, we all felt the hypocrisy of how violence was being portrayed in our society. At arm's length, in the paper in salacious detail, on canvas - these were acceptable. But right in front of them on stage, with authenticity, seemed to upset people in a variety of ways.'

So, is there a difference between live violence and violence on screen? At first enquiry, it would appear so. It becomes a paradox that observing real-world violence on the news can seem less real. This has become even more the case in a world where any of us can capture historically defining moments with our own mobile phones. In some ways, it has led to a distanced spectatorship, almost a Brechtian alienation effect.

However, witnessing simulated violence, live, right in front of you, in the theatre can have a deeper emotional impact and physical reactions. Should this, then, force theatre practitioners to consider the use of violence from both an artistic and ethical perspective more than filmmakers? Do they have a bigger responsibility towards the treatment of violence and its spectatorship than filmmakers? I would argue that they already do, but once again, it is the fight director who must bridge this gap. He must consider the effect the action is having on the audience and not whether it simply looks good. More on that later.

Some years ago, I was asked to choreograph the fight scenes in a production of *Titus Andronicus*. The director wanted a level of realism that included blood and gore. Alongside this, he wanted me to choreograph the rape of Lavinia, Titus' daughter. Once we had created the scenes, they were to be previewed before the board of the production company in question. The director felt he had an obligation to check this depiction with them before committing to live performance. The cross-section of the board led to surprising and wide-ranging opinions on the

violent acts before them. Some were appalled. Some were excited by the brave showing of sexual violence and felt it added more sympathy for the character. Some simply didn't understand the director's need for it.

So, why did the Director want it? He was looking for authenticity; he wanted the audience to *feel* uncomfortable. He wanted to show the brutality of the real world in which Shakespeare had set his play. In his vision, this would better aid the audience in understanding the context and the characters' behaviour. Whichever way they interpreted it in that board meeting, every single person had a very strong reaction to the action. Somehow, it simply felt very visceral to them.

This production was a learning experience for me as a fight choreographer. It reinforced how a fight director and director must work closely together to ensure that creative goals are met, but that the emotional reactions are considered for both the cast and the audience. In this case, slight changes were made following the preview, yet the director still achieved the vision he hoped for in the final production. The violence did impact the audience in a variety of ways, similar to the board.

That is not to say that I haven't experienced the same level of response at the cinema. I was sitting watching *Antichrist*, by Lars von Trier, when several people abruptly left the auditorium. This was during a scene that involved genital mutilation and sexual violence. Both of these scenes involved very intimate acts of violence, so perhaps that makes the violence have more impact, no matter which medium it is delivered by. A physical conflict whereby the perpetrator can look the victim in the eye, or where self-harming takes place, can have deeper psychological resonance.

Was the violence in either case necessary? Does the audience actually need to see it?

Violence, in and of itself, matters. It is a ubiquitous force that can erupt anywhere in the world at any time. It deals with basic human needs, emotions and instincts; results in deep pain, fear, power/powerlessness, and death. The stage and screen allow us to contemplate these very things without the deeper psychological, sociological or physical traumas. Good storytelling is, at its base level, about cause and effect. Most violence is about cause and effect; by playing with the two, simulations of violence can allow us to come to terms with or explore real-world action.

How that violence is portrayed, and the connection between the artistic intention and the audience readership, becomes vital.

Quite often, when reading reviews or taking part in a debate about violence on stage and screen, we hear the words 'gratuitous' and 'over-the-top' as a way to discredit the work in question. Although this is not something that is ever attributed to slapstick comedy, the oldest and arguably the most popular form of comedy to date. Whereby exaggerated violence can become essential to the comedy, but that would involve us diving into a psycho-philosophical

debate on *schadenfreude*, and that is for another time. Perhaps, then, this is the thin line or, at times, chasm between intention and readership that should be avoided. However, in a cinematic age of superhero and fantasy overload, perhaps the violence will become 'over-the-top', but can we keep it necessary? Is it a crucial action for the characters' aims and motivations? Is it vital to the plot? If so, then you have avoided gratuitous.

We can assume that today's audience is savvy enough to know that a demi-god with the power of thunder has more power than you or I, or that if supergalactic powers meet in a cosmic war, then the level of violence may be exaggerated. However, as an audience, do we still get something from it?

In these circumstances, it can simply be reduced to good versus evil, right versus wrong...The Avengers must defeat Thanos, who has become a galactic despot with the aim of wiping out half the known universe's population. Three heroes out to save the cosmos, weaker than the enemy and against all the odds. This is simply scaled up from a classic western, whereby a lone gunslinger must face off against tyrants who are terrorising a small town or peaceful farmers; see *High Plains Drifter*, *Pale Rider*, etc. The question of ethical or moral stance is laid out for us, albeit in a fun and engaging mode of escapism.

Scaled down furthermore, we return to the more intimate acts of violence, specifically unarmed combat between fewer combatants. This can often have a more immediate impact. We all sense the act of being punched with a strong force before we properly and cognitively process it. The unarmed 1-2-1 violence can seem more real, plays more into instinctive reactions before the grey matter interprets the information. We can relate to the pain being experienced, and this seems to affect us on a subconscious level, resulting in flinches, jumps, and sharp intakes of breath. Once our brain takes full hold of the information, it can result in a multitude of responses, pleasure, horror, and pain. Some of these responses can occur simultaneously.

The fight director must have the ability to deliver on all of these, from the epic superhero smackdown to the intimate reality-based human combat. In each case, all the information contained within the script, the director's interpretation and the audience's expectations and reactions need to be considered and hopefully, managed. The idea of scale is an important one, not just in terms of the numbers of combatants and weapons, but in terms of the scale of the violence. The same level of visceral violence we may encounter in a Clint Eastwood western or a gritty crime thriller would not be comparable to a Marvel film. Whether that be mass battle or hand-to-hand combat.

Even in 1-2-1 combat, we need to have someone to root for, all of the character's motivations and journey to that point must have a purpose and us as an audience to invest in it. Of course, we are now familiar with anti-heroes whose methods can often be brought into question, but the result usually forgives or demands the means. Once again, it can boil down to good versus evil or right against wrong. I am sure most people would agree that a better methodology of

resolving conflicts would be peaceful negotiations. Would that spectatorial experience leave a seemingly deep impression?

With that in mind, we start to tread into the 'Media Effects Model'. The theory that watching or engaging with simulated violence causes people to display violent behaviour in real-life. Whilst this has proven to be a popular theory, most of the evidence remains circumstantial. The real world is a violent place, and violence onscreen and stage proliferates; however, it is not easy to factually apply a connection between the two. Or rather, it is not easy to fully establish the cause and effect in this relationship.

Are you drawn towards violence and so seek it out in your entertainment, or did engaging with violent content in your entertainment choices make you violent? This is where the simplicity of cause and effect breaks down. This is a far more complex issue. Other factors can muddy the waters, for example, the character committing the violence, the glamorisation of violence, and sexual attractiveness being associated with the violence.

Another side to the argument discusses that media violence does not directly encourage aggressive behaviour, but convinces people that they live in a very violent world and that the only course of reaction is violence itself. This breeds a state of fear. Clearly, that can have a negative impact on society and culture.

However, violence can inform us about the society in which the violence took place; their cultural attitudes, norms, and ethics. Thus, simulated violence portrayed on screen and stage can be reflective of that society or challenge that society and culture. Therefore, we now fully enter the realm of the director and fight director. This is because we are now talking about performance and representation. The decisions the creative team is making about the way in which the violence is presented to the audience.

Writers and directors will usually have a vision for the action so that it sits neatly within the performance framework of the world they have created. It is down to the fight directors, choreographers and performers to realise that vision and ensure it is convincing, entertaining, sits within the context of the story and world, suits the characters and is safe for the performers. Fight directors often bring with them a wealth of cultural martial knowledge and can impart that to the performers and directors who ultimately pass that on to the audience.

'In the UK industry, I usually found when you come on a job, you're very much seen as a creative. There's a recognition and culture of training in stage combat - of the craft, of the profession that is fight directing, and of what you can contribute creatively across the project. There's also an understanding that you should get trained actors and an experienced professional to choreograph your action, rather than getting your mate in who's done a bit of martial arts.'

Dr. Lyndall Grant, stage combat tutor and fight director.

A fight director can take simple stage directions and create minutes of stage action that fit seamlessly into the plot and narrative. Indeed, many a confrontation within Shakespeare's plays is instructed as;

*They fight. Exeunt!*

Whilst choreographing a sword fight between Richard III and Richmond in *Richard III*, some years ago. We gleaned so much information from the dialogue, the director and the actor's interpretation of the characters, that we were able to choreograph a 3-minute sequence that took in different skill levels and schools of training of the characters, the context of the battlefield and the characters' physical and emotional state at that moment. A truly collaborative creative process.

In Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*, the final act concludes with a mob scene and a rape. In its original form, it is written as eight lines of stage direction and one of dialogue. In the original stage production (1996), this action whizzed by in minutes. In a revival in 2005, directed by Anne Tipton, this scene became 15 minutes of action. However, even here it was deemed too restrained by critics:

'To have a chance of working off the page, it requires an almost reckless bravery in the staging. Anne Tipton's production has a steely elegance, but it is too well-mannered and restrained. It shies around the grim comedy and doesn't come close to the extremes of farce and violence demanded by the climatic mob scene. If *Phaedra's Love* is really going to hurt us and make us flinch, it also has to make us laugh.'

Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*, 2005

However, others felt that this epic action at the climax had a reductive effect:

'My experience watching the Bristol production was that everything that had come before, the seven scenes that led up to and contextualise the explosion of violence at the end, was erased from my mind. On leaving the theatre, I found it hard to remember anything other than the violence.'

Lucy Nevitt, *Theatre and Violence*, 2013

Clearly, in both productions, very different decisions were made regarding this ultimate act of action and violence. For the second director, the violence was clearly of paramount importance. For some, it wasn't violent enough, for others, the violence was too distracting. Crucially, though, the violence becomes a talking point and gains media coverage; in short, the industry and audiences are holding discourse about the violence in deeper ways than simply good versus evil and right against wrong.

The fight director in each case had very different briefs based on the same eight lines of stage direction and one line of dialogue, yet the interpretations from the director and the skills and

understanding of the cast allowed them to create very different and divisive action. Good fight directors will do this. As previously mentioned, they bring with them a range of martial knowledge and skills, quite often to a high standard, including martial arts, fencing, history, and different cultural traditions. They also have a good understanding of anatomy for cause and effect.

They use this knowledge and understanding to change the way the audience engages with the performance. Physical reactions are not only taking place on stage by the performers but also in the stalls or cinema seats by the viewers. A quickening of the pulse, sitting forwards, a sense of constriction, a sense of relief. A complete focus that is almost immersive is very common. Yet despite all of this, the audience sits in the knowledge that the actors are actually not trying to maim or kill one another.

Several years ago, a colleague and I had the privilege to choreograph fight scenes on a very interesting project. The production was a series of Shakespeare scenes, where the characters were in physical danger through either combat, attempted suicide or other medical emergencies. The production was produced by working with St John Ambulance, who would then intervene during the scenes and administer emergency first aid, explaining to the audience what they were doing as they worked. We were tasked with the sword fight between Romeo and Tybalt, and so we choreographed the action to inflict wounds agreed with the ambulance service.

This project highlighted what a fight director considers when creating combat. However, the audience was able to see the full extent of the repercussions by introducing the first aid intervention. It also worked to drive home the severity of the character's intentions and actions and acted as an educational addition to the well-known scenes. The director had used stage combat in a novel and thought-provoking way, which could have a positive legacy beyond the immediate engagement with the performance.

This idea has perhaps been taken a step further by Bryan Doerries, who produces performances of Greek tragedies for soldiers returned from conflict, addicts, prison communities, victims of natural disasters, and other vulnerable people. Through his work, many groups of people have explored coping mechanisms in cases of trauma, loss, incarceration, and liberation. The potential for therapy and a deeper understanding of these areas has been illustrated by Doerries' work. With even further emphasis on the fictional violence elements, perhaps there is scope to develop this model further.

More of an understanding of the role of fight director methods may help here. The fight director applies stage and screen combat techniques and principles, along with his other martial and cultural knowledge and works closely with the performers to create illusions of violence and to tell a story. Some of these principles include: Victim Control and Reverse of Energy. Both of them place the actors in a controlled system, constantly communicating with eye contact and physical contact.

This perspective of victim control, whereby the aggressor is feigning control and the victim leads the action, for example, a hair-pulling scenario, would look something like this;

- The Aggressor pretends to grab the Victim's hair
- In reality, the Aggressor has no hair in his grip
- The Victim would clamp the Aggressor's hand to their own head
- The Victim would then move about as if they were being dragged or pulled, etc
- The Aggressor simply follows the movements to act out the intention

Reverse Energy can best be described with a stranglehold:

- The Aggressor moves to initiate the strangle
- The Victim grabs the Aggressor's wrists as if interrupting them, but actually brings them to their own throat (or nearly)
- At this point, they reverse their respective energies, that is, the Aggressor tries to pull away, whilst the Victim keeps his pulled in. This reversal of energy achieves the required amount of muscular tension, and yet the Victim is in no danger.
- A simple drop of the chin can cover up the small distance between the Aggressor's hands and the Victim's throat.

I have greatly simplified this, of course, as all of this requires a great deal of skill and trust from the performers.

“Stage combat involves more than just hitting stuff. In order to achieve that, you need balance, structure, proprioception, control, physical sensitivity, compassion, empathy and complicity. I think stage combat's one of the hardest forms of performance because you've got choreography, the illusion, the blocking, things like distance. At the same time, it's doing all of that while your emotions are heightened, both as an actor and a character.”

Dr Lyndall Grant, Stage Combat Tutor and Fight Director

The fight director and the performers have tricked the audience; an act of deception has occurred, which still delivered an emotionally impactful scene or sequence. This, then, is the pinnacle of engaging with violence in a non-harmful way that allows us to contemplate and discuss violence in the world. This ability to represent intimate acts of violence, war atrocities, sexual violence, the use of deadly weapons, without actual bodily harm being done, and to do so convincingly, provides us with the opportunities to reflect, engage and re-interpret violence in our own society and historical societies.

Perhaps, rather than looking to shift the blame of a violent society on violence on stage and screen, we should embrace the performance and representation of combat arts as a way of exploring contemporary and historical violence and ultimately see if it can help us deal with, cope, survive and come to terms with it and further still, explore other deeply embedded issues

within our society. By using Doerries and others' works as a starting point, and through working with fight directors more closely, other theatre and filmmakers can explore new ways in which fictional violence can have a positive influence and effect on society.

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