THE REPRESENTATION AND AESTHETICISATION OF VIOLENCE

by

ALLAN CAMPBELL THOMPSON

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SUMMARY

An act of violence, be it personal or institutional, is an event that would distress most witnesses. Yet the representation of violent acts in fictional forms such as literature, drama and film often aestheticises that violence, with the result that it is possible to experience it without such distress. However, despite various conjectures being offered, no single and universal theory is possible. An aesthetic response to a representation of violence is influenced to a large extent by the degree of aestheticisation produced by the author and/or director. In addition, the aestheticisation of violence is dependent upon, and an inevitable consequence of, the representation of the violent. This dissertation is an endeavour to explore the issues that the paradox makes evident, to critique various hypotheses that have been offered as a solution, and to speculate upon a more comprehensive theory of the representation and aestheticisation of violence.

KEY TERMS

aesthetics; aestheticisation; catharsis; drama; film; literature; philosophy; representation; tragedy; violence

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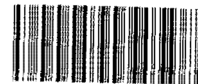

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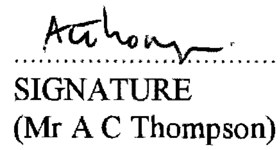

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INTRODUCTION

> We won't know anything about extreme acts of violence (which we do seek to know if for no less good reason than to explain the nature of humankind in the wake of the Holocaust) until some author makes such acts intimately believable, that is, believable not as acts of description (for that is easy enough) but as intimate personal states so intimate that we enter them. That is why we are likely never to know: Where is the author ready to bear the onus of suggesting that he or she truly understands the inner logic of violence?
>
> - Norman Mailer[1]

The problem of the representation and aestheticisation of violence - particularly in the areas of literature, fine art, and film and television - belongs to a sphere of aesthetics that has long challenged thinkers in the fields of philosophy, literary theory, psychology and sociology. The central paradox, as I have come to understand it, may be phrased as follows: How is it that an act of violence, that would be considered distasteful and perhaps even objectionable by most people who witness it in reality, is able to be represented in such a way that can be considered morally justifiable and even gratifying by many of those same observers, audiences and readers? Another way of putting this may be: Why is it found by such audiences (as well as by extension the authors, playwrights and film directors who create the representations) that the representation of violence through a fictional or imaginative medium is tolerable whereas the experience of violence in the every day 'non-fictional' world is a phenomenon that is to be avoided as something that would potentially cause distress?[2]. A common answer, touched upon by Norman Mailer in the

[1] Mailer 1998:1075-76

[2] As the distinction between the representation of fictional violence and the representation of non-fictional violence is not always obvious owing to various factors such as cultural domain, the mode of representation, and so on (see the following chapter), I would define non-fictional violence as an event or occurrence that occurs during a specific time and at a specific place, and which is witnessed, either by spectators, or by the participants in or victims of that violence. Journalism, history, and the dramatic or narrative recreations of such events are examples of non-fictional violence rather than being historically specific events themselves. It should be noted that the scope of this study largely excludes non-fictional representations and instead concentrates on the representation of violence in fictional contexts.

above quotation, is that the close proximity of historically situated (non-fictional) violence - with the Holocaust as the extreme example - creates the conditions for the study of the aspects of human nature that would allow for such violence: fictional violence, for Mailer, has the potential to be both instructive and admonitory regarding the narrative, both past and future, of the human race. However, as he points out, there are few, if any, authors who have the necessary insight into a 'logic of violence' that will allow their text to transcend the merely descriptive and allow for any intimacy of belief. The quotation is taken from a review of Brett Eaton Ellis's 1991 novel, *American Psycho*, a text that caused a public outcry when it was published in New York as a result of its extreme and graphic descriptions of violence against women[3]. Yet it is interesting to note that Mailer's reaction is not one of disgust at the descriptions of the violence that go beyond what even a society used to violent representations in its art and entertainment deems appropriate (his own novels have often been the target of accusations of misogyny and gratuitous violence), but is, instead, an aesthetic response: the violence in *American Psycho* is unacceptable because it is poorly written. Yet the descriptive nature of Ellis's treatment of acts of violence is but one means of employing and representing violence, albeit the most obvious and most censured means. Consequently, one of the purposes of this dissertation will be to outline and discuss the various means of the representation of violence, as well as to place such methods within the framework of the aesthetic experience.

The actuality of the representation of violence raises a number of seemingly basic questions, and the most fundamental of these is: What is violence? As mentioned above, the personal, physical use of force is the most commonly perceived notion of the violent. Chapter one will offer a more comprehensive definition of violence which includes frameworks for psychological as well as physical acts of violence. In addition, any act of violence (psychological as well as physical) is perpetrated within the ambit of one or both of two differing but non-exclusive categories: the personal, and the institutional. The second basic question dealt with in this chapter is how such

[3] The term 'graphic' is used in the sense of an imaginative device in which the meaning is foregrounded, providing various clues for unmediated visualisation. In other words, a graphic description does not allow for much freedom of interpretation, but allows for an immediate 'picturing' of the scene so described. Graphic violence, then, is violence of low aestheticisation portrayed in a 'readerly' manner which ensures immediate closure.

violence is represented. The entire notion of representation as a philosophical and literary concept is frustratingly difficult to conceptualise. The means of representing violence is central to its critical and aesthetic reception, with the principal elements being the mode of description (graphic and mimetic, or allusive and metaphorical) as well as the context of the representation (factual or fictional). Thus the outcry following the publication of *American Psycho* can be vividly contrasted with the acclaim and laudatory reception afforded to the novel *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) by Ann Michaels, in which the metaphoric style of the composition cloaks the reality of the violence, hence aestheticising that ultimate instance of violence to which Mailer refers, the Holocaust. The success of recent Holocaust novels such as *Fugitive Pieces* and Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (1999) is due as much to such linguistic aestheticisation as it is to the deliberate foregrounding of compassionate individual characters whose nature becomes a counterpoint to the violence of the concentration camps (violence that is never actually described or portrayed in graphic terms, but rather alluded to, or obliquely referred to, in a manner that suggests that such violence is no more than a contextualisation for the development of the fictional plot)[4]. It is interesting to note that graphic violence in fiction is often open to condemnation, whilst the factual representation of violence is often lauded as being, for example, 'brutally honest'. Recent award-winning television documentaries on the violence in conflict zones such as Sierra Leone and Chechnya are examples of this. The paradox of the public acceptance of representations of factual violence in the media is illustrated by the recent controversy that surrounded the publication of Binjamin Wilkomski's *Fragments*, a memoir of his life as a child in Auschwitz. Acclaimed as a 'brutal but honest portrayal of life in the camps, shocking in its detail but emotionally moving in its honesty', the work was subsequently discredited as a fabrication, a fictionalised account purporting to be fact. Suddenly Wilkomski's prose, admissible as a factual memoir, was accused of being sensationalistic, exploitative and dishonest. His depictions of violence and suffering, unobjectionable when perceived to be genuine, were condemned as being a fabrication, even when those same depictions accurately reflected the experiences and horrors suffered by victims of the genocide.

[4] Holocaust films such as *Schindler's List* and *Jakob the Liar* are perhaps more shocking than literary texts in their visual representations of violence and suffering, yet it is again the unfolding of the lives of individual characters, rather than the event itself, that is foregrounded through the context of the representation. The violence never dominates; implication replaces description.

Time magazine (June 14, 1999) emphasised the hypocrisy of the phenomenon of public perception of context in an article on the Wilkomski controversy, arguing that "the warrant of personal witness increases the impact of a book. It is questionable whether *Fragments* would have caught the world's attention had it appeared as a novel. Indeed if read as fiction this volume could be seen as an unpalatably sensationalist work, using the Holocaust to exploit the imagery of raw horror"[5]. Yet, if it was found that *Fragments* was actually a true account, would the critical reception of the work reverse itself again to accommodate the 'warrant of personal witness'? And is it not so that Schlink's and Michaels's novels also 'exploit' the Holocaust to create their own fictions? The conclusion to be drawn from this incident is that representations of 'real' violence can be enjoyed, empathised with and considered 'palatable', while fictionalised accounts are expected to be aesthetically sanitised or morally justified in order to become acceptable as literary works as opposed to texts of journalism or history.

Chapters two and three will examine the implications of the third basic question: How is the representation of violence aestheticised, and what is the effect of this aestheticisation? This is the basis of the paradox outlined earlier: how are descriptions or representations of violence made attractive or pleasurable to the reader or spectator when the subject matter is offensive or even reprehensible within a real-life experience? And why are such representations found by many to be aesthetically pleasing? Some possible answers to these questions have been touched upon in the preceding pages, but the debate continues with no universally acceptable solution possible. Theorists of aesthetics and philosophers have long been in dispute as to the nature of the phenomenon, ranging from the Aristotelian notion of pleasure in imitation (despite the unpleasant nature of the subject so imitated); to Edmund Burke's insistence on the fundamental voyeuristic and sensation-seeking element in human nature, particularly when faced with "uncommon and grievous calamity" (Burke 1757, in Feagin and Maynard 1997:326); to twentieth-century theories that create an amalgamation of psychology and aesthetics which claim that a type of 'meta-emotion' is possible that allows for a delight in the recognition of one's own feelings of sympathy and empathy for fictional characters faced with recognisably violent and/or painful experiences

[5] Unless, of course, the portrayals had been suitably aestheticised, as in *Fugitive Pieces* (see Chapter two).

and situations. A further influential, yet controversial, theory is that of catharsis, which claims that it is possible, through the experience of violent entertainment, to purge (or harmonise) pre-existing or possible negative emotions extant and dormant in the audience or reader.

However, as Zillmann has pointed out (in Goldstein 1998:179ff), there is no single quality of violence or a single circumstance of its employment in fiction that can adequately explain the attraction of spectators and readers to its depiction. The concept of violence as entertainment (or at least satisfaction) in an aesthetic realm is likely to remain controversial, particularly as patterns of behaviour such as negative reinforcement result in increasingly graphic and gratuitous representations of violence in literature, film, television and other media. Consequently, this study is not an attempt to provide an ultimate answer to the paradox outlined above, but it is rather an endeavour to begin to explore the issues and problems that the paradox makes apparent, to critique various hypotheses that have been offered as a solution, and to speculate upon various avenues that may lead to a more comprehensive theory of the representation and aestheticisation of violence.

As this is a dissertation of limited scope, the study will be focused primarily upon the representation of violence in a fictional context, and the ensuing paradox that the experience of such violence may often be construed as being a pleasurable or beneficial experience by many of its spectators and readers. It is therefore essentially a work of aesthetics, in the sense of the word that is "typically used to refer to what is valuable about experiences as perceptual experiences" (Feagin and Maynard 1997:3), and as such the scope of the theories and philosophies employed must of necessity be limited to this area of study. That is not to say that other theories and philosophies have been ignored; rather, they have been taken cognisance of but not emphasised in the course of my reading and preparation of this dissertation. For example, many of the theories of representation that have been proposed by the post-structuralist and deconstructionist schools, particularly those by thinkers such as Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson, are beyond the ambit of the definition of aesthetics given above, as are the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan, Kristeva and others. Where certain writers or thinkers have made specific contributions to the field of aesthetics with which I am concerned, then such texts will, of course, be considered.

However, any detailed discussion of these philosophers and critics, and their schools of thought, in relation to the representation of violence will not be possible. As far as the notion of representation itself is concerned, the emphasis is again primarily on the aesthetic, including the various theories of mimesis as well as the aesthetic philosophies of, *inter alia,* Hume, Burke, Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The linguistics and philosophy of language associated with the thought of Frege and Wittgenstein also have some relevance here, particularly in terms of the discussions regarding representation, sense and meaning. In addition, various psychological theories (including those of Zillmann, Goldstein and Garver) are important for investigating the notion of enjoyment and pleasure through violent entertainment.

CHAPTER ONE

THE REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE

The focus of this section is on the question of what violence actually *is* and how it is represented. That is to say, it will not deal with the reasons for violence, or with the consequences of violence. What is important is the notion of violence and the nature of violence, and its representation. The word 'violence' comes via Old French from the Latin *violentia*, meaning impetuosity, although the roots of the word lie in *vis* (force) and *latus* (to carry). Its present participle *violans* is a possible source for the modern English 'violence', and is therefore, etymologically speaking, indicative of a sense of forcefully carrying forward. Robert Audi gives a particularly comprehensive definition of violence as "the physical attack upon, or the vigorous physical abuse of, or vigorous struggle against, a person or animal; or the highly vigorous psychological abuse of, or the sharp, caustic psychological attack upon, a person or animal; or the highly vigorous, or incendiary, or malicious and vigorous, destruction or damaging of property or potential property" (Audi 1972:62). Consequently, following this definition of violence, the idea of violation is far more germane than that of force[1]. The idea of violence being inextricably linked to force is often false in its assumptions, as violence may take many forms, both forceful and otherwise. The common use of the term 'violence' to denote *physical* force alone is limited and limiting in any discussion of the phenomenon. Whereas force is undoubtedly an element in some forms of violence, it is a sense of violation that is common to all. By violation is meant that denial of another's right to his or her body and dignity (the Kantian 'autonomy'), or the denial of the autonomy and sovereignty of one country by another; such denial being an ethical response to the autonomy of others[2]. Following this line

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[1] The source of the word 'violation' comes from the same root as 'violence', which suggests that violence is both forceful as well as a violation.

[2] The question of the ethics of violence raises some complex philosophical issues, and much depends on whether the argument comes from a consequentialist or a non-consequenstialist point of view. However, some ethical dimension is usually obvious in any act of violence: "The concept of violence is a moral concept, but not one of absolute condemnation ... The fact that we would require an excuse from [the

of thought, violence may be classified (following the theory of Newton Garver) into four different kinds, based on two criteria: "whether the violence is personal or institutionalised and whether the violence is overt or a kind of covert or quiet violence" (Garver 1972:49).

Using Garver's criteria as a guide, the four kinds of violence can be summarised as follows. First, there is overt personal violence. This would include the physical assault or use of force on the body of one person by another. Muggings, rape, assault, torture: all of these examples are overtly personal, although not necessarily exclusively so as overt personal violence is frequently one of the consequences of overt institutional violence. Overt institutional violence, the second category, would include, *inter alia,* civil and international wars, police violence and capital punishment: in other words, the legalised and state-sanctioned violence of a country or institution as applied against another state or institution, or against individuals opposed to that state or institution. Thirdly, there is covert personal violence. Once again, it is the use of violence by individuals against other individuals, but with the difference that the effect is primarily psychological. Covert personal violence is characterised by such methods as non-physical intimidation, the withholding of information or the creation of misinformation, the implementation of devices for mental distress, and so on. The fourth and final type of violence is that of institutional covert violence, characterised chiefly by the entrenchment and enforcement of ideologies upon a population by the state. Slavery, class/race/gender oppression, control of the media and the flow of information as well as various forms of propaganda are examples of this type of violence. It should be emphasised again that the four types are not mutually exclusive - institutional violence almost always involves the use of individuals who employ overt personal violence as a consequence of the sanction given them by the state, and often personal violence affects the ways in which the state will react in an institutional manner (examples include the deployment of riot police, detention without trial, special 'anti-terrorist' laws, and so on). Likewise, covert personal violence is often accompanied by overt personal violence, which in turn may be state-sanctioned and ideologically determined. In addition, there may be degrees of violence, although these are difficult (if not impossible) to quantify into a systematic and monolithic whole. It can only be with some

perpetrator of the violence], or some justification of his behaviour, indicates that a person's doing an act of violence puts the burden of proof on him; but it doesn't suffice to show that the case has gone against him yet" (Garver 1972:59).

inter-subjective agreement that any comparison can be made between, for example, overt personal and covert institutional violence, and this can be achieved only within the limiting confines of direct comparison of individual cases.

The notion of violence in the human experience exists in two principal forms. In the first place, it is an *event*; that is, it occurs or has occurred in a temporal and spatial dimension, involving a perpetrator of that violence, as well as a victim of that violence (although the perpetrator may also be the victim, as in suicide). Such an event includes the violence of nature (storms, earthquakes, the hunter-prey relationship), in addition to the violence done by humans to each other as well as by humans to animals and the natural world. Secondly, violence exists as a *representation*; that is, as some means of articulating the cause, or effect, or occurrence of violence. Such representation exists in two principal forms, namely the factual and the fictional. The former may occur through the media of reporting, journalism, documentaries, historical documents, histories, autobiographies, biographies, and so on. Representation of violence of a fictional nature occurs in descriptions and depictions of violence in poetry, novels, short stories, film, drama, television etcetera. A question to be asked is whether one of these forms of representation can be more realistic, and therefore more accurate than the other, and consequently more authentic, and if so, whether or not such representation has an ethical and/or aesthetic validity lacking in the other. For example, is the 'factual' description of the battle of Waterloo given in 1968 by David Howarth in his history *Waterloo: A Near Run Thing* (1968) of greater validity *as representation* than the 'fictional' account provided by Victor Hugo a hundred years earlier in his novel *Les Miserables*? An answer to this question would involve various criteria of representation, that is, elements such as historical accuracy, aesthetic intentionality, and the nature of the readership. In addition, the notion of the representation of violence (in this dissertation, at least) will be based on the premise that it is primarily, but not exclusively, realist in nature, and that the interpretation of it is neither monolithic nor fixed, but contingent upon various theoretical positions. In order to justify such a claim, it is necessary to investigate the notion of representation itself, and to examine how representation affects the notion of violence in terms of both fictional and non-fictional texts.

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum* (revised version 1845)[3] is a particularly pertinent example of the representation of violence in fictional literature. Its portrayal of violence in various forms, particularly that of psychological violence, has ensured that the effect of such violence in this short story is of a far more subtle nature than that of an average horror or thriller narrative. The plot concerns the experiences of Poe's narrator, who has been captured and condemned by the courts of the Spanish Inquisition, and who faces the unnamed and unnameable horrors of the Inquisition's dungeons. Threats, implications, physical violence, the unknown - all are employed to create a dark but compelling tale of the fascination with, and implications of, violence in fiction. One of the forms of violence represented by Poe is the institutional violence associated with religion. Maurice Bloch (1998:163-178), in an essay on the relationship between violence and religion, argues that the two concepts are far more closely related than is generally realised. The three types of violence associated with religion are, first, the violence caused by religion, such as religious wars and intolerance; secondly, the way religion may accompany violence, such as the part religion plays in military or ideological activities; and lastly, the violence that forms part of the religion itself, such as ritual sacrifices and symbolic representations of violence (for example, the importance of the crucifix in Christianity). The narrator in *The Pit and the Pendulum* is subject primarily to the first two instances, although the latter use of violence may be inferred metaphorically: the Spanish Inquisition has long been a metaphor for institutionalised intolerance and many writers have used the violence of religious prejudice in general as a basis for their fiction. (Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Miller's *The Crucible* are examples of texts that use the theme of such oppression). Poe's opening paragraphs emphasise this aspect of the fear caused by such violence: "Inquisitorial voices" of "black-robed justices" pronounce "the sentence - the dread sentence of death" (261). The capital trial, which is not included in the story except for the pronouncement of the death sentence, is a prime example of institutional violence, as oppositions between authority/individual contempt/fear perpetrator/victim are generated: in the beginning, the judges of the Inquisition have a "stern contempt of human torture" as opposed to the narrator, who is forced to accept the "decrees of what to me was Fate" (261). The religious oppression which characterises this opening section is notable for its use of the violence caused

[3] All page numbers refer to the Penguin Classics edition (1986), *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*.

by religion as well as the violence accompanying it, as per Bloch's analysis, yet it also presents the narrator as a type of sacrificial victim for the violent religion represented by the Inquisition. In particular, his incarceration in a dark dungeon/torture chamber with a nameless horror in the pit evokes images of episodes in legend and mythology where victims are sacrificed to, or are compelled into an impending conflict with, mythical creatures such as dragons, Krakens and the like (examples include Grendel and his mother in *Beowulf*, the dragon Fafner in Teutonic mythology, and the Gorgons of Greek mythology). This is further emphasised by Poe when the narrator refuses to describe the horror glimpsed in the pit:

> Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced - it wrestled its way into my soul - it burned itself on my shuddering reason - Oh! for a voice to speak - oh! horror - oh! any horror but this! With a shriek, I rushed from the margin, and buried my face in my hands - weeping bitterly. (275)

Such imagery associated with the nameless horror in the pit is a particularly good example of the representation of extreme psychological torture. Not only is the narrator in pitch darkness - the pit is like the "blackness of eternal night" in which "the intensity of the darkness seemed to oppress and stifle me" (264), but he is ignorant of the fate which awaits him, and this is enough to create a high degree of anguish - "by long suffering my nerves had been unstrung, until I trembled at the sound of my own voice, and had become in every respect a fitting subject for the species of torture which awaited me" (267). The threat of violence - in other words, the application of covert or psychological violence - is vividly apparent in this case as being both personal as well as institutional[4]: "there was the choice of death with its direst physical agonies, or death with its most hideous moral horrors. I had been reserved for the latter" (267). Although the narrator speaks of the 'tyranny' of the Inquisition, it is individuals sanctioned by that authority who create

[4] The structure of the story also follows a distinct shift from threat to actual violence, from covert to overt action. The opening and much of the following are explicitly psychological - the sentence, the anticipation of death, the unknown darkness of the pit, the rats, the threat of the pendulum. Yet, subtly at first, and then with more emphasis, the overt possibilities of that violence appear. The use of thirst and starvation against the narrator, the attack by the rats, the horror in the pit, and finally the heated iron walls forcing him to the pit are all examples of increasing personal overt violence, and only the *deus ex machina*-type conclusion allows for relief from that violence.

the conditions for the violence, who silently watch and wait for the narrator to meet his end: apart from the 'black-robed judges', those involved in the violence provide him with water just out of reach, watch him from above, and control the devices that are designed to first torture and then kill him:

> I had scarcely stepped from my wooden bed of horror upon the stone floor of the prison, when the hellish machine ceased and I beheld it drawn up, by some invisible force in the ceiling ... My every movement was undoubtedly watched. (274).

This psychological violence, both institutional and personal, corresponds to the theory that violence is less about force than about violation. Any human rights that the narrator thought he possessed, both physical and mental, are routinely violated until they no longer have any meaning. He is denied even the right to his own life:

> Was I left to perish of starvation in this subterranean world of darkness; or what fate, perhaps even more fearful, awaited me? That the result would be death, and a death of more than customary bitterness, I knew too well the character of my judges to doubt (265).

Perhaps even more horrifying, though, is his loss of dignity, the removal of his essential autonomy as his own humanity is consistently reduced by those who plan and observe his deterioration: "Long suffering had nearly annihilated all my ordinary powers of mind. I was an imbecile - an idiot" (271). This, together with the narrator's gradual acceptance of his fate and dismissal of hope, indicates the chilling possibility of the institutional destruction of personal autonomy. The sequence of tortures: the dark pit, the descending blade, and the gradually closing and heated walls, are all a result of "monkish ingenuity" (270), that is, again both institutional as well as individual violence.

Randall McGowen, in a discussion of Truman Capote's 'factional' novel *In Cold Blood*, writes that "Capote's language provides insight into another dimension of the issue of violence, not just its ability to spread fear, but its power to produce disorientation. The world is made to seem strange and uncertain. The violent act sets the perpetrator outside of society, not just morally but beyond our rational conception as well. Violence has become the domain of the other" (in

objectified ?

Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1989:140). The language Poe uses in *The Pit and the Pendulum* is explicitly aimed at creating just such an opposition between perpetrator/victim. What is notable in this invention is the fact that although the former are never described (apart from the 'black-robed' judges of the trial), their creation of a nightmare world is reflected in the decorations adorning the walls of the dungeons, as well as in the layout of the cells themselves. Both, of course, are used to increase the violation of the individuality of the narrator by fabricating his world as 'strange and uncertain':

> The entire surface of this metallic enclosure was rudely daubed in all the hideous and repulsive devices to which the charnel superstition of the monks has given rise. The figures of fiends in aspects of menace, with skeleton forms, and other more really fearful images, overspread and disfigured the walls ... In the centre [of the pit] yawned the circular pit from whose jaws I had escaped (268).

This, together with the monstrous torture machines, the silent but watchful monks, the increasing terror of the narrator, is seen as if it were part of a nightmare characterised by images of unconsciousness, death and madness: "I felt my senses were leaving me" (261); "A deep sleep fell on me - a sleep like that of death" (267); "I took frenzied pleasure in contrasting [the pendulum's swing] downward with its lateral velocity ... I alternately laughed and howled" (271). Even the conclusion emphasises the notion of waking from a nightmare: "There was a loud blast of many trumpets ... An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss" (276).

The representation of violence in *The Pit and the Pendulum* occurs predominantly through the use of images of psychological violence (both personal and institutional), as well as, to a lesser extent, through images of overt personal and institutional violence. It exploits and emphasises the idea of violence as a profound psychological and physical violation rather than as a superficial bodily assault. The representation of violence in Poe's text is clearly mimetic; that is, it presents the reader with situations that are familiar, if not empirically verifiable. Yet the question remains: how is such representation made possible, and how is that representation to be interpreted?

One of the central problems in literary studies and philosophy is that of representation, with even a satisfactory definition of the concept being frustratingly elusive. Defined as a tautology, representation occurs whenever something represents something else, yet the complexity of the structure 'x represents y' is compounded by the fact that "the existence of a relation between two things entails that they exist, but this is not true of representation ... yet all representations represent something" (Honderich 1995:769)[5]. The most obvious form of representation is pictorial representation, and this has often been extended to the field of linguistic representation by claiming that a word or group of words (a sentence) creates an association in the mind with a type of 'mental picture' of the object referred to. The problem with this 'picture theory' line of thought is that much thought is not pictorial at all, but rather conceptual and/or abstract. In addition, pictures (mental or otherwise) cannot provide an explanation for the logical structures of thoughts and sentences. Any attempt to explain linguistic or mental representation would have to take into account the meanings of words which, used in combination with one another, allow for meaningful sentences.

A further notion that serves to complicate the issue of representation is that of resemblance. In the representation 'x represents y', x may resemble y, but y does not necessarily resemble x: resemblance is not even a necessary condition for an instance of representation. Nelson Goodman has argued strongly against the equation of representation with resemblance: "A picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it ... No degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference. Nor is resemblance necessary for reference; almost anything may stand for anything else" (Goodman 1976:55). Following this line of argument, any picture that represents an object, or any sentence or passage that describes an object, refers to that object and consequently denotes it: "Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance" (1976:6). For example, a literary metaphor of a lion may *symbolise* courage, but it still ultimately *depicts* a lion without necessarily *resembling* it. In this sense of representation the surface of a picture, or the image or concept invoked by the linguistic structure, does not necessarily resemble what it depicts - what is more important is the state and

[5] This paradox is particularly true of fiction, where the person or event or situation represented does not actually exist independently of the text.

mind of the viewer/reader/spectator: "The Kantian dictum echoes here: the innocent eye is blind and the virgin mind empty ... The copy theory of representation is stopped at the start by an inability to specify what is to be copied" (Goodman 1976:8-9). Other theorists have disagreed with Goodman's claims, most notably Malcolm Budd, who has insisted on a form of the picture theory of representation[6] (although his concern is primarily with the visual arts). The ability of literature to represent, on the other hand, is linked to the more complex problem of the nature of the meaning of language and linguistic structures. A conceptual issue is implied by this aspect of representation: whether or not a representation refers to a particular object or person. Shakespeare's history plays, for example, refer to both historical figures (such as the royal personages) as well as to fictional characters who never actually existed (Falstaff, Pistol etc.). Yet even the so-called 'historical' figures are represented fictionally, with the result that their point of reference is obscured by literary and linguistic license resulting in *all* the personae (as *literary* creations) being representative of literary characters. Yet the problem remains: how is it possible to represent something that does not actually exist? For, "if we construe the relationship between a sentence and a state of affairs on the model of the relationship between a name and an object, a sentence for which there is no corresponding state of affairs should be meaningless ... in short, *misrepresentation* should be impossible" (Summerfield 1996:101). Although Goodman argues against a resemblance theory of representation, Wittgenstein, on the other hand, argues for a 'fitting theory' in which "signs point in virtue of resembling other things, and they point to what they resemble" (Summerfield 1996:102). The nature of the fitting theory is twofold. Firstly, the representation is independent of what is represented: by representing what is resembled rather than what actually *is*, the representation may represent what does not exist as well as what does exist. Thus, a unicorn may be represented although no such creature exists because the representation is a juxtaposition of various familiar elements (a horse, a horn, the colour white, etc.) that make up the notion of the unicorn. This leads to the second point, that the fitting theory is characterised by an internal structure, rather than being dependent upon external references. In other words, the relationships between the elements within the representation guarantee that representation. The problem, according to Wittgenstein, is how we can talk about things as they are as

[6] See Budd 1995:45-82

well as as they are not: "When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we - and our meaning - do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean - *this is so.* But the paradox (which has the form of a truism) can also be expressed in this way: *Thought* can be of what is *not* the case" (Wittgenstein 1958:44e No. 95). In the earlier *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argued that every proposition has the potential to be false: "It is impossible to tell from the picture alone whether it is true or false. There are no pictures that are true a priori" (Wittgenstein 1996:43 Nos. 2.223-4). Similarly, a textual representation cannot be considered a priori true without investigating the state of affairs which it purports to represent, and this leads again to the problem of fictional representation.

Kendall Walton, in an essay on the role of make-believe and representation, considers novels and other forms of fictional representation to be a specialised type of psychological game, in which words are symbols not dissimilar to the symbology of pictures. Language is therefore a type of 'prop' in the game of make-believe, and the skill of the author in creating descriptions, evocations and representations is vital in stimulating the imagination of the reader. The imagination, though, is also dependent upon empathy, the ability of the reader to understand, and learn about, the characters and their experiences. Thus, the more plausible the representation of these characters and experiences is perceived to be (although not necessarily the more 'realistic' the perception), the more enriching the experience of the reader becomes. A picture theory is therefore inadequate when attempting to explain representation in literature, because to gain the understanding that words can convey is not possible if words were merely imitations of visual forms, or if they were merely signs. Rather, "they are props in games of make-believe in which spectators participate visually and psychologically" (Walton 1994:296). Representation, particularly of states of affairs that obtain in the world, is concerned not just with the material or the concrete, but also with the social, psychological and philosophical world. Depending on the genre and style of writing, representation may also have a subversive or negative effect on the perception of reality. J. S. Mill argued in the nineteenth century that any object may furnish the occasion for the creation of a literary work, yet the descriptions generated do not describe things as they are, but as they

appear. Fictional representation is therefore essentially based upon imagery, although the emotions generated by the fiction may be genuine[7]. In any discussion of literature, reality has no independent existence - what is 'realistic' is what is believable: "Fictional reality is only validated by the reader's acceptance of artistic illusion, not by mere replica" (Durix 1998:45). Representations in a novel are therefore valid in the Aristotelian sense if they are recognisable, or if they allow for a credible mental conception of what has not been seen before (for example, in the genres of science fiction and fantasy) or of what is not empirically verifiable (as in *The Pit and the Pendulum*).

The roots of the conceptualisation of representation lie in the arguments surrounding the idea of 'mimesis' in Classical philosophy. Both Plato and Aristotle employed mimesis as a key aesthetic concept of representation, although their conclusions regarding its functioning and value were more often than not in opposition[8]. It should be noted, though, that the translation of mimesis into the English 'representation' or 'imitation' is not wholly satisfactory, as the translation cannot achieve the liberty of expression implied by the original, which includes, *inter alia*, objects imitated by pictures, essences by names, reality by thoughts, and so on. In addition, it may also be used for the imitation by musicians of divine harmonies, the representation of the virtues by the good man, and the representation of the 'Form of the Good' by the wise man. Nonetheless, despite its central aesthetic importance, mimesis for Plato is anything but a laudatory *artistic* technique. In Book X of *The Republic* representation is seen as something at a third remove from the truth (with 'truth' residing in the Forms, the absolute models for individual physical or moral things or qualities) with the consequence that poetry has "a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters .. it waters [our desires and feelings of pleasure and pain] when they ought to be left to wither, and makes them control us when we ought, in the interests of our own greater welfare and happiness, to control them" (Plato 1975:436-7). Representation for Plato is therefore little more than an impoverished and dangerously influential copy of a copy of the truth. In

[7] For a discussion of the effects of literature that is 'insincere', see Budd 1995:86-94.

[8] It should be noted that the term *mimesis* was but one term denoting a form or representation in the Classical Greek lexicon. Others were *methixis* (participation), *homoiosis* (likeness) and *paraplesia* (likeness): see Beardsley 1966:33ff.

contrast to this highly politicised representation of representation is the aesthetic theory of Aristotle, for whom imitation and representation are natural aspects of human experience, with the recognition and awareness of imitation being a fundamentally enjoyable experience. Consequently, imitation becomes the aesthetic objective of art, even if it represents the unpleasant or the socially unacceptable: "And since learning and admiring are pleasant, all things connected with them must also be pleasant; for instance, a work of imitation, such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and all that is well imitated, even if the object of imitation is not pleasant" (*Rhetoric* I xi, quoted in Beardsley 1966:57)[9]. Similarly, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle writes that: "Also inborn in all of us is the instinct to enjoy works of imitation. What happens in actual experience is evidence of this; for we enjoy looking at the most accurate representations of things which in themselves we find painful to see, such as the forms of the lowest animals and corpses" (Aristotle 1965:35). It was Aristotle rather than Plato who most influenced the development of a theory and practice of representation in the great flowering of Western art during the Renaissance period. Despite Plato's rejection of the ethical and instructive use of any (imitative) art not sanctioned by the State, it was Aristotelian mimesis that became the most important influence on the age: "the imitative arts were the only aesthetic precedent for the 'Fine Arts' of the Renaissance, and the principle of imitation could be replaced only after the system of the latter had been so firmly established as no longer to need the ancient principle of imitation to link them together" (Kristeller 1965, in Feagin and Maynard 1997:97). The art of the late Renaissance era was accordingly characterised by the ideal of accurate representations of the whole of the visible world (including realist landscapes, portraits, biblical and historical representations, etc.), as well as of the inner, psychological, world of the individual (as in characterisations in drama and opera, as well as an emphasis on the emotions, rationalisations for actions taken, and so on). However, the fact that music, painting, sculpture and poetry relied to such an extent upon representation did give rise to a number of aesthetic and ethical dilemmas. For example, the accurate representation of a corpse in a battle, or of subjects of a more sensuous or erotic nature, could easily offend certain sensibilities if the emotions aroused by the object of the representation were not sufficiently tempered by the artifice of the imitation. Consequently, there were tensions between the

[9] The implications in this statement for the representation of violence are considerable, and these will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

conventions of structure and representation, as well as between accuracy of description and the expressive license of poetic language. Nevertheless, this period, in its adoption of the Aristotelian notions of imitation and representation laid the basis for the aesthetics and practice of Western art for the next three hundred years.

Mimetic representation was also an important feature of the Romantic philosophy of art. This can be seen in Hegel's *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* in which he proposes that art is 'the pure shining and appearing of objects as something produced by the spirit which transforms in its inmost being the external and sensuous side of material ... this is a marvel of ideality, a mockery and an ironical attitude to what exists in nature and externally". Representation is central to this notion: "It is to this, the mode of representation, that the artistic law of the 'characteristic' refers, inasmuch as it requires that every particular element in the mode of expression shall subserve the definite indication of its content and be a member in the expression of that content" (Hegel 1993:20-21). Representation is therefore a means of extracting the sensuous from the material, the 'characteristic' from the everyday. This is the beginning of representation as idealism, as a mirror of the 'characteristic', in which representation becomes similar in nature to Plato's Forms. Arthur Schopenhauer's *magnum opus*, *The World as Will and Representation*, reinforces the dualist doctrine that the world is bifurcated into the mundane world perceived and the 'real' world revealed by thought and reflection. The entire universe, following this line of thought, is therefore no more than each individual's perception of it, or, in other words, each individual's representation of reality. Art in such a philosophy is not so much a representation of reality but a means of perceiving what is beyond that representation (akin to Hegel's concept of the 'characteristic'), thus becoming a catalyst for escaping the strictures and conventions reinforced by such representation, allowing for a more perfect awareness of reality. Schopenhauer's thought became a strong influence on the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose nihilist doctrine claimed that the human intellect is essentially a dissimulating power, claiming (falsely) that it can give us a true knowledge of the world. The result of such thinking is that every concept "is a falsification of what it purports to represent: every concept originates through equating the unequal" (Megill 1985:48-9). No longer is art a mere representation of reality - reality is itself merely a representation, and art a means of interpreting that representation. The implication here is the radical notion

that there can be no clear distinction between representations of the factual and fictional texts. This extreme aestheticism was a precursor for much of the more radical philosophy of the twentieth century, particularly the literary theories based on linguistic instability and existential uncertainty. The difficulties and complexities of the conceptualisation of representation are nowhere more apparent than in the post-strucuralist and post-modernist schools of thought. In such thinking, representation is no longer linked to reality in any fundamental way; rather it is more often than not accompanied by "irony, illusion and disbelief, with content of more importance than form" (Sim 1998:349). As Nietzsche proposed a century earlier, there is no satisfactory way of representing reality, and post-structuralists such as Lyotard and Derrida continued this line of thinking by concentrating on the ambivalent nature of language. For Derrida, representation is the core issue at the heart of philosophical and critical discourse. In particular he rejects the influential Platonic mimetic model that holds that there is both an original and a copy, and that the original is somehow of more importance than the copy, as well as determining that copy. If this were the case, then the representative would *always* be a substitute, contaminated by its difference from what it represents. Conversely, for Derrida, the element of difference is not *added* to a representation (such as language being considered a substitute for thought); rather, on the verbal level of designation, difference is already differed, it is not a matter of 'originals' and 'copies': difference is intrinsic to language. Derrida's invention of the word *differance* emphasises that linguistic activity can only be perceived graphically rather than phonetically, and is itself constituent of an attempt to divorce the representation from the 'unnameable' original: "What is unnameable here is not some ineffable being that cannot be approached by a name; like God, for example. What is unnameable is the play that brings about the nominal effects, the relatively unitary or atomic structures we call names, or chains or substitutions for names" (in Said 1983:200). Language is not *only* representation, but also the deferring of representation and the beginning of writing, which is itself not a replacement for anything but "an admission that there is only writing when language is to be used, at least as far as the possibility of sustained, repeatable representation is concerned" (1983:201). Under such scrutiny, the very notion of representation acquires a new uncertainty, as texts can only represent themselves as opposed to any type of 'transcendental

signified'[10]. In such a manner deconstruction and postmodernism exposes the hierarchies, doctrines, ideologies and prejudices implicit in any text which simultaneously claims to represent something definite and unshakeable outside of the words of the text, and that something in an external reality exists that is supposed to be a duplicate of those words. In language, presence "could never be present except as re-presence (representation), reproduction, repetition ... language manifests the very meanings that philosophy desires to suppress as embarrassing, marginal, accessory" (1983:195-6). The implication of this line of thought is that any fictional representation is as credible as, not only a factual representation, but also an event in an external 'reality'. Accordingly, the violence in *American Psycho* is no less fictional than a television news report on a serial killer: all representation is self-referential, there is no dividing line between fact and fiction. Even with the knowledge of which is of factual origin and which not, the proponent of such idealism would hold that neither has greater importance nor truth-value than the other; in addition, the source of the representation, be it an event in the world or an invention of a writer, has no inherent significance that dominates the reception of the representation. Following this radical philosophy to its logical conclusion, representations of violence and events of violence must be considered aesthetically equal.

In opposition to this point of view is Marxist literary theory, with its emphasis on realism and a relevant mimetic production. For Karl Marx, literature was part of a larger ideological superstructure, an example of a representation in which the changes do not necessarily correspond to the changes in the socio-economic base. Rather, the development of the arts "can be out of all proportion to the general development of society, hence also to the material foundation" (quoted in Jefferson and Robey 1986:170). The implication of this aesthetic viewpoint is that if ideology itself is no more than a representation of socio-economic and socio-political models and instances, then so too are all the arts, not least literature, the difference being that the model of literary representation is usually out of sympathy with the class struggles that it is supposed to mirror within that representation. Consequently, much Marxist literary theory is concerned with the relationship between the two types of representation, the artistic (literary) and the ideological.

[10]Also known as 'logocentrism', this fallacy assumes that all forms of thought are based on some external point of reference (for example, Truth, Morals, God).

Early Marxist theorists called for a return to the genres of realism, together with a corresponding rejection of 'formalism'[11]. Leo Trotsky, whose theories and arguments created an intellectual basis for the phenomenon of social realism, argued that the idea of art was its ability to function as a tool of society: "From the point of view of an objective historical process, art is always a social servant and historically utilitarian" (Trotsky in Weinberg 1990:822); "Art is a handmaiden - it is a function of social man indisputably tied to his life and environment" (1990:831). However, as the state is (ideally) little more than an expression of the will of society, the ideal of art as a *social* servant is easily transposed to art as the servant of the *state*. Yet Trotsky was considered too liberal by more conservative Marxists in his acceptance of certain products of bourgeois art, and in his granting of limited autonomy to art in general: "a work of art should be judged in the first place by its own law" (1990:830). Nevertheless, he still favoured a vigilant censorship that would not tolerate any counterrevolutionary material. Art should consequently be realist in content, and be able to reflect the social discourse from which it had been created. Marxist aesthetic thought is consequently not concerned with representation in an exclusively aesthetic sense, but rather in the sense of representation in art as a means of privileging the working class and providing a resistance to those who exploited that class by betraying the basic conflicts and evolutions in society. For example, Bertolt Brecht claimed, *contra* Marx, that as reality changes so too does its means of representation. Brecht's views on literature were firmly based on the realist model, with the basic functioning of art and literature demanding the "laying bare [of] society's causal network / showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators / writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting human society / emphasising the dynamics of development / concrete and so as to encourage abstraction" (quoted in Durix 1998:50). Nevertheless, the main problem with such a manifesto is that it does exclude from the genre of realism anything that is not in agreement with the point of view of the working class, and, in addition, it implies that realism is only definable in terms of the criteria of which the (Marxist) critic approves. A more sophisticated theory appears in Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966). Macherey based his notion of representation on the idea that the literary text is no more than an end-product of

[11]This is a term that has never satisfactorily been explained, a blanket definition useful for condemning all art that did not conform to the state-sanctioned call for 'socially relevant' art.

literary 'production'; that is, the author is not a 'creator' as such, but rather the medium through which pre-existing genres, conventions, language and ideology pass in order to become the literary work. In doing so, these elements will be changed from what they are in everyday discourse into something else, namely the representation of these elements in a new guise: not simply a replica of reality, but a 'contestation' of language that allows for literature as analogous to productive labour within a social reality.

The Marxist notion of literature as a 'mirror' of social reality was the central concern of the Hungarian Stalinist critic, Georg Lukács. In Lukács' theory, only realism can "display the contradictions within society and within the individual in the context of a dialectical unity" (Lukács in Weinberg 1990:849). He identified the three great eras of realist literature - ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and early nineteenth-century France - and warned with increasing vehemence against the new trends in literature which would render the world without meaning. Such literature could only lead to a 'glorification of the abnormal', and such distortion of the accurate representation of social reality would lead to a new, sterile reality divorced from the social. In a famous phrase, Lukács declared that "content determines form" (1990:837), and if this is properly achieved then the representation achieved by the literary work will reflect the form of the 'real' world. Lukács' interpretation of Marxist literary theory has become known as the 'reflection model' (see Jefferson and Robey 1986:171), and in effect is a call "for the modern age to move forward into the nineteenth century" (Eagleton 1983:52). Yet the realism he advocates is not limited to a mere mirror-image of society: great writing (particularly the novel) should expose historical realism through the portrayal of typical characters acting in typical situations, and the plot should show an objectively valued (that is, Marxist) insight into social conflict, rather than merely reflecting human nature. If the latter is all that is achieved, then the author - and Zola and Proust are cited as prime examples - is guilty of the same distortions which characterise modern bourgeois art and literature.[12] Also important to Lukács was the notion of the 'ideal type'. This was the character or situation in a literary work which allowed for the combination of the general

[12] Bourgeois literature in Lukács' eyes consisted of the splitting of realism into two branches: Naturalism (the distortion of realism in a superficial manner, for example in the works of Zola) and Modernism/Formalism (the rejection of objective meaning, for example in the works of Joyce).

movement of history together with various individual traits in order to create a distinct three-dimensionality which was, for Lukács, the goal of realism.

Lukács' concept of typicality or the 'ideal type' is therefore central to a poetics of realism. Yet social realism transposed this idea of the 'ideal type' into that of the 'future man', following a direct path from Lukács' insistence that art, by figurative means, typifies "the elements and tendencies of reality that recur according to regular laws, although changing with the changing of circumstance" (quoted in Williams 1977:102). The idea of realism as a dynamic process is in itself laudable, but the ominous reference to regular laws allowed the proponents of social realism the means to "reduce this theory to act as the typification (representation, illustration) not of the dynamic process but of its (known) laws" (Williams 1977:102). The result was that Lukács' notion that creations must unveil inner truths through an artistic representation was subsequently heavily criticised for reducing literary success to a faithful rendering of the social forces at work in Art, which presupposes what can only be described as a questionable judgement of value.

Theodor Adorno, one of Lukács' harshest critics, employed Marxist aesthetics in a manner that was diametrically opposed to the Hungarian's theory of literature. Adorno insisted that art and reality should stand at a distance from one another, which would allow "the work of art a vantage point from which it could criticise actuality" (quoted in Jefferson and Robey 1986:180). Thus Zola and Proust, rather than being guilty of writing works of an 'unmediated totality'[13], actually make use of procedures and techniques that dissemble society and its workings and then reorganise it. Artists, therefore, deliberately place themselves at a distance from reality in order to criticise it. Adorno also challenged Lukács' rejection of Modernist literature, arguing instead that rather than being socially irrelevant and artistically corrupt and useless, the technique of the 'interior monologue', or stream of consciousness as employed by authors such as Joyce was actually ideal for exposing reality as it actually is, for revealing the contradictions and alienations between appearance and reality. This notion of 'negative knowledge' became a key element in

[13]A mediated totality occurs when a representation reveals the true relationship between a human subject and the objective world. The 'extreme' realism of Zola and Proust, however, was considered by Lukács to be a distortion of reality, and hence 'unmediated'.

Adorno's aesthetic theory, which argued for the subversion or negation of false or reified conditions: "Art exists in the real world and has a function in it, yet it is the antithesis of what is the case" (quoted in Jefferson and Robey 1986:189). Consequently, any presumptuously simple or overtly political text which has an antagonistic message for the dominant discourse would be easily targeted and neutralised by that discourse's culture industry. It is only texts that are formally 'difficult' that can evade such scrutiny, thus effectively representing and criticising the social and political landscape. Art is not merely representation, not to be commended for its neo-Aristotelean photographic reproduction of reality; rather it is the essence of reality, in which the object is 'absorbed' into the subject. This is not a rejection of realism in itself, but rather a rejection of realism as the only means to a critique of society. However, realism is an important feature of the representation of violence (and reality), and as such allows for the aestheticisation and response to violence that will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

It was stated earlier that the representation of violence is primarily, but not exclusively, realist in nature. Based on the above discussions on the nature of representation, it is possible to situate the notion of violence within certain theoretical limits of realism. Although the term 'realism' is ambiguous and dependent upon whether the point of view is based upon correspondence or coherence theories discussed earlier, the notion of realism which I have adopted in this study regards the aesthetic use of the term as a means of representation that avoids idealisation, the supernatural or the mystical. The implication of this is that realism attempts to depict or describe events, characters and situations in a manner that is recognisably imitative of factual events, characters and situations, and without rendering them attractive when they are not (although a degree of aestheticization is unavoidable in all representations (see chapter 2)). In other words, it is an attempt to portray a state of affairs that obtains in the world, or a state of affairs that could plausibly obtain in the world (as in Wittgenstein's fitting theory of representation). As a result, even when the depiction of violence is portrayed in a satirical or parodic or even fantastical manner, the imagination of the reader or spectator is not expected to extend beyond the familiar. Take, for example, the following extract from the science fiction novel *Excession* by Iain M. Banks:

> The ship shuddered, the few remaining lights flickered, dimmed and went out. The alarms dopplered down to silence. A series of sharp impacts registered through the companion-way shell walls with resonations in the craft's secondary and primary structure. The atmosphere pulsed with impact echoes; a breeze picked up, then disappeared. The shifting air brought with it a smell of burning and vaporisation; aluminuim, polymers associated with carbon fibre and diamond film, superconductor cabling.. Somewhere, the drone Sisela Ytheleus could hear a human shouting ... The human shout changed to a scream, then the EM signal cut off; so did the sound.
> (Banks 1996:17)

Although the description of this galactic battle takes place in the future, in a society that is the result of a collaboration between the imagination of the author and the imagination of his readers, the description of the act of violence remains intelligible because it is rooted in the experience of the everyday; if not directly, then at least indirectly through other representations, both fictional and non-fictional. For example, consider the imagery of the ship that 'shudders', and the alarms which 'dopplered down to silence': the notion of shuddering as well as the Doppler effect would be familiar to most readers of the novel through personal experience as well as the aesthetic experience of other representations. The violence therefore becomes mimetic, that is, through representation and imitation, the violent act is denoted as something recognisable even within the boundaries of the fictional and the imaginative (again, as per the fitting theory). And yet, the *interpretation* of that event is what becomes important when considering the various theories discussed above. Is it, on the one hand, a realist text that typifies the conflict between classes, or is it a text that through its violence subverts the very tradition from which it has originated, as the Marxist would have it? Or, conversely, is it aesthetically and representationally equivalent to a factual news report on, for example, conflict in the Balkans, as the post-strucuralists might claim? The point to be made here is that the representation of violence is open to subjective as well as inter-subjective critiques, and like so many aspects of aesthetics and literary theory, dependent upon the point of view of the interpreter.

To illustrate the point, the parody and extreme depictions of violence that characterise a novel such as *American Psycho* would be of particular relevance to the theories of Lukács. Firstly, the

portrayal of the main character, Patrick Bateman, is of an individual whose lifestyle and actions are determined by the commercial exploitation of Western brand-name culture. The dehumanising and debilitating results of this exploitation by the capitalist system would be an example of 'typical' realism in the eyes of Lukács. However, just as Kafka was deemed by Lukács to be too extreme in his realism, thus reducing the social import of his text through overemphasis of the individual in society, so too would *American Psycho* be 'over-determined' as well as 'unmediated', and Bateman not of an 'ideal type'; that is, the novel could not be considered as accurate in its critique of social conditioning because of the representation of its violence which dominates the writing. For different reasons, the same text could be considered objectionable by a critic of the New Frankfurt school of thought because its simple vocabulary and teleological plot not only make the book easy to read, but also allow for a greater public disquiet at its content which could otherwise have been more subtly employed in a critique of Bateman's (and, by extension, Ellis's) society. The violence in modernist texts such as *The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner and post-modern texts such as *Giles Goat Boy* by John Barth would likely be considered far more effective (according to Adorno's theories) precisely because the difficulty associated with reading and interpreting these novels positions them, paradoxically, as a means for commenting on and criticising Western society from within its own canonical structures. The position to be taken in this study, however, is that the representation of violence in fictional form, either as personal, overt, covert or institutional violence, is a means to an aestheticisation of that violence (understood in terms of the definition of realism articulated above), which in turn allows for a means of rationalising that violence through moral, aesthetic and psychological positions dependent upon various aesthetic responses to the representation.

CHAPTER TWO

THE AESTHETICISATION OF VIOLENCE

It can be claimed that our experience of the external world may be essentially empirical, that is, that it is based upon the evidence of our senses and the synthesis of that evidence into intellectual patterns (ideas) which are then used to interpret other events of the same nature; or, in the case of fictional representation, to create a paradigmatic model that allows for an awareness that conforms to the dictates of experience. It follows from this, then, that such representations are contingent - they bear a conditional relation to actual events, which, by the very nature of *a posteriori* empiricism, are necessarily unknowable in themselves. Any representation is further complicated by the factor that any reception of the representation (by a reader, spectator, author and so forth) is dependent upon social, artistic and inter-subjective conventions which can result in vastly differing interpretations of our reactions to the same event or description. Thus, any representation, be it fictional or otherwise, is an *aesthetic* representation. By this I mean that such representation is, owing to the limits of language and the nature of the empirical experience, related to what it represents through a single perspective that is (inter)subjective. Consequently, the interpretation and analysis of violence is an empirical act. A news report on Middle East violence, for example, shows the point of view of a particular reporter (or group of reporters) at a particular time - any attempt at a totality of representation is impossible. Likewise, in fictional violence, the violence represented is dictated by the intentionality and socio-cultural positioning of the author of the text, with the further complication that the language used is often employed to determine the reader's response to the description.

The artistic representation of violence, therefore, is more open to interpretation than factual representations such as journalism and the descriptions found in history books - not only is the violence referred to paradigmatic rather than necessarily related to specific events and actions, but the reception of literary texts, dramatic structures and cinematic conventions allows for a freedom

of interpretation that is both subjective and inter-subjective: subjective, as the reader/spectator is a necessary participant in the creation of the meaning of the artistic experience; and inter-subjective in the sense that other readers from similar social structures will, through a process of intertextuality[1], experience much of the work in a similar, but far from identical, manner. It is this type of representation - the representation of fictional events in an artistic (although not necessarily fictional) context - that I call aestheticisation. Consequently, within this context, the aestheticisation of violence may be defined as follows: The representation of empirically recognisable acts or events of violence that are presented in such a manner as to replace the reality of the violence with language or images that allow for a freedom of interpretation of those acts and events, or for a blurring of the real nature of those acts or events, that would not be possible if such an act or event was witnessed in reality. Obviously, the medium or genre, to a large extent, determines the nature of the aesthetic experience, and this will be discussed below. To illustrate the point regarding the nature of aestheticisation, I have chosen extracts from two, very different, novels of the twentieth century. The first extract is taken from an overtly political novel, *Darkness at Noon*, by Arthur Koestler. The second is from a more recent best-selling thriller, *Hannibal*, by Thomas Harris. Both extracts describe a similar event of violence: the first an execution, the second a police shooting.

(i)

> A dull blow struck the back of his head. He had long expected it and yet it took him unawares. He felt, wondering, his knees give way and his body whirl round in a half-turn ... It got dark, the sea carried him rocking on its nocturnal surface. Memories passed through him, like streaks of mist over the water ... A second, smashing blow hit him on the ear. Then all became quiet. There was the sea again with its sounds. A wave slowly lifted him up. It came from afar and travelled sedately on, a shrug of eternity.
> (Koestler 1941:215-16)

[1] Intertextuality implies that, for any writing to acquire any significance whatsoever, it must stand in a relationship to a body of texts which is already in place, and which in turn makes possible any future new writing. Any text is therefore both a result of another body of texts, as well as a pre-text itself for as yet unwritten 'originals'. However, the study of intertextuality is not only a concern with a text's relation to particular prior texts, but also a designation of its participation in the culture and socio-political discourse of any society.

(ii)

> The blanket fluttered, air slammed. Starling shot Evelda Drumgo through the upper lip and the back of her head blew out. Starling was somehow sitting down with a terrible stinging in the side of her head and the breath driven out of her. Evelda sat in the road too, collapsed forward over her legs, blood gouting out of her mouth and over the baby, its cries muffled by her body.
> (Harris 1999:16-17)

Both of the above descriptions are examples of aestheticisation: both are accounts of a fictional event of violence, and both use the medium of language within the form of the novel to create the conditions of meaning for the reader: the reader is able, through the nature of the descriptions offered combined with his or her own social and cultural conditioning, to create an impression or image of what the author is attempting to convey. The crucial point here, though, is that although *all* fictional accounts are examples of aestheticisation, the *degree* of aestheticisation is determined by the intentionality of the author and by the type of language employed in the writing of the text. This is not to say that such quantification is strictly measurable, but rather that within certain parameters, differing types of aestheticisation are discernible.

This is evidenced by an analysis of the two examples given above. Extract (i) is an instance of a prose description that is more aesthecised than extract (ii). I would suggest that this is primarily because of the mode of representation: Koestler's text is reliant on figurative, specifically metaphorical devices that to a large extent cloak the original sense of the violence it describes within a prose that is more 'poetic' and less descriptive. Form becomes more important than content. The passage is figurative in the sense that within it, the descriptions of the sea are used such that "even though [they are] used in none of [their] established senses, nevertheless, what is said is intelligible to a fairly sensitive person with a command of the language ... this sort of thing is possible only if these uses are somehow derivative from uses in established senses" (Alston 1964:97). The employment of metaphorical figuration in this extract contributes largely to the aestheticisation of the violence. In a metaphor, one is using a specific term in a different sense; working through, as it were, that term's original sense, in order to say something about what is referred to by the metaphor. Thus, in extract (i), the loss of consciousness experienced by the protagonist is metaphorically linked to the sense of a vast and darkened ocean. By working through this sense of the ocean as a referent to unconsciousness and death, the author is able to

create the impression that the violence of the character's death is allied to being carried away by the gentle rocking motion of a calm sea as "a wave gently lifted him up". Even his last thoughts are included within the extended metaphor as "streaks of mist over the water". The passage, as a result of its very metaphorical or 'poetic' nature, is removed from any sense of violence that would accompany such an execution in the real world. If the reader were to attend such an execution, and assuming he or she were reasonably sensitive and historically aware[2], then it is more than likely that, as a witness, he or she would be overcome with feelings of horror, outrage, disgust. Witnessing two bullets being fired into the head of a defenceless prisoner would not, I presume, evoke images of a gently rocking sea and a soft mist in the minds of the spectators. Yet the novel, by means of the very language it employs, has achieved exactly that - it has aestheticised the execution. The reader may still be disturbed by the death of the principal character, may still respond emotionally to the scene, but is not likely to react in such a way that would normally result in a *directly* physical or ethical response (at least in terms of the unaestheticised 'real world'). This is not to say that the novel is devoid of violent description. The protagonist does experience the violence of the shooting, first as a 'dull blow', and then as a 'smashing blow'. Both of these descriptions, however, are subsumed within the figurative nature of the metaphor.

In one sense, the aestheticisation of violence is a process whereby feelings of disgust and other negative emotions (fear, outrage, horror, and so on) that would accompany a real-life instance of violence are replaced or superseded by an appreciation of and satisfaction with an artistic or literary technique[3]. This notion is central to the aesthetic theories of Aristotle and Hume, both of whom discussed the very problem of an aesthetic response to something that would normally cause distress. For both philosophers, it is the means of imitative representation (what I would call the aestheticisation) that allows for a favourable response. Aristotle, for example, in his *Poetics* writes that even the sight of unpleasant representations such as corpses or 'lower animals' is made pleasant by the excellence of the imitation (see Aristotle 1965:35, and chapter 1, pp17-19).

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[2] The novel *Darkness at Noon* is based upon the show trials and purges conducted during the Stalinist era in the Soviet Union.

[3] This should not be confused with the Aristotelian notion of catharsis, which will be discussed in some detail in the following chapter.

Likewise, Hume's essay "Of Tragedy" argues that any experience of a representation of tragedy which would in real life cause pain (which, by its very nature, involves violence of one sort or another, be it institutional or personal) is accompanied by two conflicting emotions: the first, dominant, emotion is the pleasure at the manner of representation. The second, subordinate, emotion is the negative emotion caused by what is represented. The former emotion, being the dominant one, absorbs the latter, negative, emotion, without diminishing its intensity, thus increasing the feelings of delight in the aesthetic representation. "The force of imagination, the energy of expression, the power of numbers, the charms of imitation; all of these are naturally, of themselves, delightful to the mind: and when the object presented lays also hold of some affection, the pleasure rises upon us by the conversion of this subordinate movement into that which is predominant" (Hume, quoted in Carroll 1990:180).

However, the problem with Hume's argument is that it does not include instances where the representation is not particularly pleasant, that is, is not used to shield the reader or spectator from the reality of the violence. Such a passage is extract (ii) above. Harris' description of a shooting is very different from Koestler's, although the type of event described is not dissimilar. The difference lies in the intention and the prose. In the first place, Harris's novel is plot driven; that is, it is more concerned with narrating a story than with exploring states of mind, ideological positions and ethical problems. Secondly, the language is descriptive rather than metaphorical. That is not to say that metaphors do not occur in the course of the novel, but rather that such that exist are subordinate to the demands of the teleological nature of the plot. In addition, the representation may be largely unfigural, but aestheticisation does occur as the result of the use of techniques such as spatial arrangement and dispositions of inanimate items - including the 'fluttering' blanket and the air that 'slams' - which provide a structural link to the animate individual (Evelda Drumgo - the victim of the violence) through careful use of semantic orchestration. In terms of its *degree* of aestheticisation, though, most of this narrative reads like a newspaper report. The violence of the passage is described in such a manner as to ensure that the reader is left with little to construct within his or her imagination: the author has determined the nature of the representation so that the reader has no choice but to follow it as he or she would in a film of a similar nature. This is an excellent example of what Roland Barthes called a 'readerly' text, that is, a traditional literary

work (such as this novel) in which both the reader and the author rely on certain conventions, with the result being a 'closure of meaning' that satisfies the expectations created in the reader by those conventions[4]. Thus, in this passage there is no hint of a "shrug of eternity", nor is there any notion of a gently rocking, nocturnal sea. Rather, "the back of her head blew out", and there is "blood gushing out of her mouth". Description has replaced figuration, and the question to be asked is how such a graphic[5] use of language can still fall under the definition of aestheticisation.

It was argued earlier that there exist different degrees of aestheticisation. Extract (ii) is an example of a text that is minimally aestheticised, whilst extract (i) is aestheticised to a higher degree. The former, though, is still an example of fictional writing, despite earlier parallels to a more journalistic mode. It may rely on realistic descriptions rather than metaphorical or figurative language, but it remains fictional in the sense that the violence described has no direct reference to a historically situated event of such violence[6], and is a product of the imagination of the author. Rather, what is important (using the terminology of the linguistic theory of Gottlob Frege) is the 'sense' of the description. If two expressions have the same reference, but present it in different ways (for example; 'Shakespeare' and 'The author of *Hamlet*'), the mode of expression is the sense of the expression. Sense therefore determines the thought expressed by the sentence in which the expression occurs - the sentence being the only possible meaningful utterance to Frege - whilst reference determines its truth or falsity. However, sense is not subjective; rather it is the common property of many people. It is the idea those people have of the object (referent) that is peculiar to each individual. A related theory of sense and reference, following the thought of Frege and Wittgenstein, has become known as the 'cluster' theory. This theory holds that a name refers to that object (if any) that most - but not necessarily all - of a number of characteristics denote.

[4] A 'readerly' text is the opposite of the 'writerly' text, in which the text violates such conventions and thus "forces the reader to work to produce a meaning or meanings which are inevitably other than final or 'correct'" (Hawthorn 1994:164). This is not to say that *Darkness at Noon* is a 'writerly' text', but rather that the nature of its aestheticisation allows for a greater freedom of imagination within novelistic conventions than does a text such as *Hannibal* which is more specifically descriptive.

[5] See Introduction, footnote 3.

[6] Note that even if a fictional description has reference to a historically situated event (such as Victor Hugo's description of the battle of Waterloo in *Les Miserables*), that description is still only *contingently* associated with the event, as the description attempts to convey the sense of the event without (usually) claiming to be a direct representation of it.

Some descriptions may have a greater weight than others. Thus the name 'Aristotle' does not refer to only one description associated with the Greek philosopher, but rather to a number of characteristics which together make up the referent Aristotle. The fact that he was a philosopher carries greater weight than the fact that he was tutor to Alexander the Great, although both characteristics add to the denotation. The sense of a term determines its reference, but the reference may be a grouping of characteristics that together constitute a fictional character or event. Thus, in literature, "apart from the employ of the language we are interested only in the sense of the sentences and the images and feelings thereby aroused. The question of truth would cause us to abandon aesthetic delight for an attitude of scientific investigation ... It is the striving for truth that drives us always to advance from the sense to the reference" (Frege, in Davidson and Harman 1975:120). The reader's intention in reading a novel such as *Hannibal* is unlikely to be one of 'scientific investigation'; the truth value of the text is not important. What is important, however, is the sense that such a text conveys. When one is engaged with a fictional text, one is concerned with the collection of properties attributed to the characters and events of the text, rather than with any specific, verifiable, point of reference: "For there is no antecedent reason to presume that the theory of proper names for factual discourse and the appropriate theory for fictional discourse need be the same" (Carroll 1990:85).

Consequently, both extracts are aestheticised in that they allow for the construction of a fictional world in the imagination of the reader in which the violence described is without a specific point of reference. However, the mode of representation, involving the degree of figuration, metaphor and other 'poetic' device may determine the extent to which the notion of violence is cloaked behind language, or made graphically obvious. Also important is whether or not the text is governed by considerations of plot and structural and textual properties, and to what extent the text is 'readerly'. A further aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is the genre, or the medium of representation. The aestheticisation of a fictional work in literary form is largely dependent upon the way in which any reference to violence in the external world is either obscured or cloaked by language, or conversely emphasised by means of a more realist mode of description. Screen violence, however, is another matter, and although it is still subject to

aestheticisation (being fictional and representational), such violence is more likely to be limited as regards the degree of aestheticisation possible due to the visual nature of the medium.

When reading a work of fiction, the reader is forced into a situation where he or she is to a large extent responsible for the imaginative construction of the events in the novel. Even in a specifically 'readerly' novel, the 'facts' given to us by the author have to interpreted and reinterpreted during the course of the text, from a character's appearance, to motives, surroundings and so on. The result of such 'concretizing' is that "the reader makes implicit connections, fills in the gaps, draws inferences and tests out hunches ... The text itself is really no more than a series of 'cues' to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of language into meaning" (Eagleton 1983:76). However, the cinema offers a far more definite type of representation, in which less is left to the imagination. Various techniques of film-making, including angles of shots, close-ups, slow-motion shots and so on are means by which the director can achieve a high level of imaginative aestheticisation. However, certain aspects of the aesthetic experience that are dependent upon a reader's imagination are often more obvious in the screen medium (such as appearances, locations, movements etc.), and this unavoidably alters the nature of that experience, particularly in cases of tragedy, violence, or other potentially distressing representations. Consequently, the violence represented on the screen is almost always portrayed as a direct representation that is akin to witnessing an actual event. Such violence, particularly of the graphic and overtly personal kind, has become pervasive in the film industry, and one of the reasons for this is its ability directly to represent what, in literary form, is left to the imagination: "Presumably because of its ability to present violence in compelling images, cinematic storytelling has embraced barbarian heroes and villains who slash, shoot and machine-gun their way to the things they want, all that without accepting societal impositions or moral curtailments that restrain normal mortals ... There can be little doubt that slaughter of this kind has taken centre stage in the movies. Highly destructive violent encounters are featured with ever-increasing frequency" (Zillmann 1998:180). So, if there is little need to concretise a film in the same way as a novel, how is it possible to aestheticise screen violence? I would argue that such compelling images, usually enhanced by means of special effects and computer graphics that serve to conceal the nature of the violence by subsuming it within the visual power of the

spectacle, create a type of aestheticisation in themselves. There may be little need for a freedom of interpretation[7], but the reality of the violence is no longer experienced as such: it has been aestheticised through spectacle, a sense of wonder has replaced any possibility of distress. The employment of such images are in effect a twentieth-century adaptation of the theories of tragedy put forward by Aristotle and Hume, as the mode of representation allows for a pleasure in the portrayal of the naturally repellent[8].

This is not the only means of aestheticisation, though. Various methods, such as ornamentation of the violence in order to make it visually pleasing and the foregrounding of symbolism, also contribute to the aestheticisation of filmed violence[9]. The 1969 Western film, *The Wild Bunch*, following on the success of the controversial and ultra-violent 1967 version of *Bonnie and Clyde*, has become notable for its portrayals of screen violence. Although the director, Sam Peckinpah, made the claim that the very violence of the film was itself an anti-violence statement[10], the effect was very different. The film critic Pauline Kael wrote that Peckinpah "thought that by making violence realistically bloody and gruesome he would deglamourize warfare and enable the audience to sees how horrible it was. [However, he became] so intricately involved in the process that [the movie] tore itself apart. A brilliantly directed and photographed study in confusion, it played to audiences who apparently didn't take it as an attack on violence, but simply enjoyed it as a violent Western" (*New Yorker* Mar. 21, 1970, quoted in Hoberman 1998:139). An interesting point is that even though the violence of the film was graphic, some of it was aestheticised by attempting to create something artistically beautiful out of the mayhem. For example, the final

[7] There are examples of films in which the violence occurs off-screen, allowing a limited scope of interpretation to the viewer, and as such these instances are aestheticised. An interesting example is the 2000 film version of *American Psycho,* in which most of the graphic violence of the novel which allowed for so much controversy at its publication occurs out of sight of the viewer.
[8] A more detailed critique of this theory of tragedy will be undertaken in the following chapter.
[9] These types of aestheticisation are not exclusively cinematic: making the ugly beautiful is the characteristic of much poetic and metaphorical writing, whilst the symbolism of violence is a feature of many novels, including Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (see above).
[10]Such claims by directors have often served as a justification of the violence in their films. Thus, *Natural Born Killers* (Quintin Tarantino) was advertised as a protest against the media's obsession with sensational crimes, and *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg) was touted as an antiwar film. Both films featured graphic scenes of horrific violence. However, it has yet to be proven that the claim that the representation of extreme violence can serve as an anti-violence statement is a valid one (see the quote by Kael above).

massacre is shot in slow motion, rendering the scene almost balletic and removing much, although not all, of the screen brutality. A spectator would therefore be alternately horrified by the violence of the scene and exhilarated by the spectacle. Making a scene more attractive than it would be in real life is very much part of the technique of portraying the violence in compelling images that mask the reality of that violence. This involves various methods such as the slow motion effect mentioned above, the immunity of the protagonist to any lasting damage, as well as the removal of any after-effects of the violence such as blood, facial damage and cries of distress (cartoons, for example, are notorious for acts of extreme violence in which nobody actually gets hurt. Another example would be the 'James Bond' series of films, in which the protagonist is involved in various violent encounters without ever losing his well-groomed appearance).

Another means of aestheticisation is to allow the violence to stand for something else, as the symbol of that something. The violence is then experienced by the spectator not as an instance of violence in itself, but rather as a trope for a social or cultural reality. Many of the most popular films are explicitly based on a paradigmatic 'good versus evil' struggle, with the corresponding costumes, locations and environments specifically identifiable as belonging to one side or the other. Many instances of symbolism, however, are not as obvious, and may not be appreciated by a spectator (just as the anti-violence message proposed by the director of *The Wild Bunch* was lost on most of its intended audience). An example is the 1979 science-fiction monster film, *Alien*. An infamous scene from this film has an alien life-form bursting out of the chest cavity of a human crew-member before disappearing into the maze of tunnels in the spacecraft. Not many among the film's audience, upon seeing this scene for the first time, would have thought that: "Prehistoric in appearance, the alien embodied the return of repressed infantile fears and confusions about where babies come from and the anatomical difference between the sexes. Its toothy, dripping mouth was hermaphroditic: while the double jaws represented the inner and outer labia of the *vagina dentata*, the projectile movement of the inner jaw was a phallic threat" (Taubin 1992:94). Here, aestheticisation becomes cultural theory; violence is codified and interpreted as representing socio-cultural structures. This is not to say that such interpretation is invalid. The very existence of such a critique indicates that, for Taubin at least, the symbolism of the violence was open to an instance that removed the reality of the violence, allowing for an openness of interpretation that is

the essence of aestheticisation. The same critic expands the symbolism of violence to include institutional violence in an essay on the serial killer movie, claiming that the personal violence of such films is no more than attempt to mask the overwhelming realities of institutional violence on an overwhelming scale: "institutionalised violence - the destruction of millions of lives through poverty and neglect, the abuse practised against women and children, the slaughter of 100,000 Iraqis - has no easy representation. The image of the serial killer acts as a substitute and a shield for a situation so incomprehensible and threatening it must be disavowed" (Taubin 1991:124).

Most of the examples cited above have been instances of the aestheticisation of personal, overt violence. Yet the institutionalised violence identified by Taubin is very much subject to aestheticisation. Political films and novels (from both sides of the political spectrum), authors with a particular agenda, texts that support or deny a point of view with prejudice: all have the potential to aestheticise institutional violence. A recent biography of Joseph McCarthy is a good example of this type of aestheticisation[11]. Although not a work of fiction, the bias evidenced by the author in favour of the years of political oppression caused by McCarthy's Communist witch hunts in the 1950s is an attempt to justify such excesses, resulting in a book that a recent review of the biography called "the most brazen example I know of a growing conservative historiography that seems to proceed from the belief that for far too long *parti pris* liberals have shaped our understanding of the recent past, so it is up to partisans of the right to redress the imbalance and even the score - not by offering new evidence or careful analysis, but by exposing the pretensions and hypocrisies of "the other side" (Sam Tanenhaus in *The New York Review* Nov. 30, 2000:22)[12]. In fiction, such propaganda or agenda-driven aestheticisation is just as common. In a recent film, *The Patriot*, the actor Mel Gibson plays a retired soldier fighting for his family during the American War of Independence. However, being a symbol of 'good' as opposed to the representation of the 'evil' of the English forces, Gibson's character cannot be allowed to hold any morally questionable views. Consequently, all the African-American workers on his plantation in the South of America are not

[11] Herman, A. 2000 *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America's Most Hated Senator* Free Press: New York

[12]Of course the reviewer could be just as biased, but from an opposing political angle. This example highlights the impossibility of a true representation, even in works of a non-fictional character.

slaves (as would have been the norm at the time), but rather have chosen to work for him as he is a 'good man'. The history of the institutionalised violence of slavery is modified, and consequently trivialised, in order to serve the needs of the narrative. Such a denial of historical violence is also a feature of the work of the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, whose projects epitomised Nazi narcissism. There are numerous other examples of aestheticisation designed to accentuate a social or political outlook at the expense of the violence which underlies that position, or helped to create it. Whether it is in a serial killer film which represents the worst excesses of violence in a readily comprehensible manner, or in a novel such as Austen's *Mansfield Park* in which the actuality of slavery is implied (although never stated), institutionalised violence is as subject to aestheticisation as personal violence.

Why is it necessary for *any* violence to be aestheticised? Surely most people are aware of the effects and horrors of the different types of violence in reality, and are not rendered immune to those effects through the experience of an 'artistic' text? I would suggest that the principal result of the aestheticisation of violence is to make the violence acceptable to its audience, not merely in the superficial sense of making what is actually repellent attractive, but rather in allowing for an enjoyment of aesthetic violence. As will be argued in the following chapter, the aestheticisation of violence is in one sense a means of the legitimisation of violence, and this happens in a number of different forms: punitive, cathartic, sensational, and so on. However, as Zillmann has argued, there is no single quality of violence, nor a single circumstance of its employment in art, that could adequately explain the attraction of spectators and readers to its depiction (1998:179-211). The next chapter will attempt to investigate the notion of aestheticisation as related to justification and legitimisation, and to examine the theories and philosophies that have long struggled to resolve the paradox of why fictional violence is found by many to be attractive.

CHAPTER THREE

AESTHETIC RESPONSES TO THE REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE

The representation of violence in fiction and on the screen, by its very nature, effects an aesthetic response: that is, the reader or spectator reacts to what is represented in a manner governed by the aestheticisation of the representation. Knowing that the violence is part of a fictional environment allows for the spectator to experience it differently from the experience of witnessing an act of violence in reality. In other words, the emotional response that results in such a case is an aesthetic response rather than a direct response. This is not to say that the response to the representation is necessarily positive; rather that the aestheticisation of the event creates a framework, as it were, for an indirect aesthetic response, and that the degree of aestheticisation influences the nature of that response.

Research done on college students in America in 1994 by McCauley *et al* is indicative of the claim that actual violence does not have the same appeal as fictional violence. Various subjects were placed in front of a television, and shown three documentary-style films. Each subject could stop the tapes at any time with a remote control. The first film showed a group of diners slaughtering and then eating the brains of a monkey; the second was a series of scenes from an abattoir; and the third showed a head operation on a young girl in which her face was lifted from her skull by surgeons. Based on evidence that the students who watched the films were part of the target audience for action and thriller films of extreme fictional violence, it is interesting to note that only 10 per cent of them watched the three documentaries to the end, and even those few claimed to be disturbed or disgusted by the images they had witnessed. Without an aesthetic framework, the violence had no appeal: "These three films were disgusting rather than enjoyable because they

were loaded with cues for reality and were lacking the frame of dramatic fiction. They were unappealing because they were documentaries, too brief and unrevealing about the people in them to support identification with any of these people" (McCauley 1998:161). In other words, an absence of a fictional framework determined that the possibility of an aesthetic response to the films was unlikely[1], whereas violence in a fictional context allows for such a response.

Consequently, it is possible to state that aestheticisation is a means to an active response to a representation of violence. By an active response, I do not necessarily mean an *enjoyable* response. Rather, an active response is one in which the spectator or reader experiences a type of 'meta-reaction' as the result of an active involvement in the fiction whilst experiencing the representation, even if the emotions generated by the representation are considered negative, including melancholy, anger or depression. The pleasure in the representation is therefore an *effect* of the experience of the representation rather than a mere pleasure in the representation. The implication of this is that the resultant emotional response is of more consequence than the experience of the representation. This sense of representation differs from the aesthetic theories of Aristotle, who holds that imitation and representation are natural aspects of human experience, with the recognition of imitation being in itself a fundamentally enjoyable experience. If this is the case, imitation becomes the central aesthetic point of art. By emphasising the consequences of such experience, on the other hand, the possibility arises of a meta-response to tragedy or violence which would allow for the spectator to experience the emotions generated by a violent event without actually having to experience the trauma of the event itself: "The fact that pleasurable meta-responses to our sympathetic responses to tragedy are appropriate to art but not in life suggests one respect in which aesthetic emotions are different from the emotions of life ... The peculiarity of the responses hinges on the fact that what one initially responds to is not real" (Feagin 1983:313). Representation provides the conditions for the meta-response, and such a response is then deemed pleasurable or not, depending on the audience and the degree of aestheticisation. The question to

[1] McCauley notes that there are people who enjoy real violence, including those who crowd around scenes of highway accidents and flock to public executions. However, although "enjoying real violence may require some other form of distancing or protective framing to take the place of dramatic distance" (1998:162), it is not the purpose of this study to investigate the psychology of the appeal of actual violence, and consequently such cases will not be discussed here.

be asked now is what elements of the aesthetic experience, either as a part of the text or drama itself, or as a part of the response of the audience or reader, could result in a pleasurable response to what is in itself painful or distressing. Various theories have been offered to explain this paradox, including theories of fascination, sensation-seeking, thrill maximisation, fantasy and the justice motive. However, the most influential theory that attempts to explain the paradox of pleasure in aestheticised violence is that of catharsis, and as such it will be considered in some detail.

The first mention of catharsis in a literary-critical context appears in chapter 6 of Aristotle's *Poetics*: "A tragedy is the imitation of an action which is serious end, having grandeur, complete in itself, done in language seasoned with embellishments, each appearing separately in different parts of the work, in dramatic rather than narrative form, accomplishing by way of pity and fear the catharsis of such feelings" (Aristotle 1965:39). Yet what exactly is this catharsis? Is it a purgation, a cleansing, a purification, or a clarification? Of the mind or of the passions? A medical, psychological or literary phenomena? Or all of the above? The notion of catharsis has become notoriously vague in its various manifestations, and nowhere more so than in its literary context. Ever since the discovery of Aristotle's fragment in the sixteenth century, the debate over the origin, meaning and application of the term has been fierce, and yet its influence has been wide-ranging and its theory pervasive. The importance of the concept to an understanding of the aesthetic response to the representation of violence requires an enquiry into the origin of the term as well as its various connotations.

Any definition of catharsis is very much dependent on the critical or philosophical point of view of the writer. For example, Belfiore defines it as the "process of removing the shameless emotions that prevent the soul from acquiring, preserving or regaining emotional excellence" (Belfiore 1992:340). Guinagh's definition is more explicitly psychological, "a conflict model between two forces: one to express emotions, and the other to stop the expression of emotions". (Guinagh 1987:15). Budd offers two differing aesthetic definitions. On the one hand, it is a "pathological theory" which "construes catharsis as purgation and represents tragedy as affording a pleasurable relief of its distinctive emotions by means of a previous excitation of them" (Budd 1995:110). On the other, it is the "refinement or purification of the tragic emotions effected by the disengagement

of the emotions from that concern for the self in which they are found" (1995:111). Such variation of opinion regarding the exact nature of catharsis is closely linked to the fact that the word is used in at least two equally relevant Greek contexts[2]. In the medical context, it refers to purgation (in the sense of emetics, laxatives and so on). In the religious context, it refers to the purification associated with ritual. Accordingly, depending on which sense is employed, catharsis either allows us to rid ourselves of our emotions, or, conversely, to refine them. As a result, tragic catharsis may include physical, cognitive and ethical elements, depending on the context of its employment. In the religious context, catharsis is connected with purification, and it is has been suggested that Aristotle's views on art and particularly tragedy were not wholly secularised when he composed the *Poetics*[3]. The medical context of purgation presupposes the Hippocratic doctrine of the four humours, which argues for the balance of body and mind through the purging of the 'evil' humours. The medical, purgative, understanding of catharsis is an obvious feature of the work of Milton, Twining and Bernays[4]. In this sense, "tragedy gives the public a therapeutic stimulation of the passions and will drive the audience to a crisis, followed by relief and a calm pleasure" (Belfiore 1992:261). A further interpretation is apparent in an ethical context, based on Aristotle's conclusions in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. In the ethical context, the development of character is dependent upon the ability to rejoice and to feel pain correctly, in other words, to do and feel these things at the right place and the right time, and to the right extent. An experience of a representation of distressing violence should, therefore, be able to produce such harmony (through catharsis) by confronting "reasonable fears".

Conversely, the aesthetic interpretation considers change to be the dominant form rather than balance; for example, change from conflict to harmony, from pain to pleasure, or from a physical to a spiritual state. Aesthetic idealism is a particular feature of Hume's essay *Of Tragedy* (1757),

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[2] The word 'catharsis' occurs 161 times in the authenticated works of Aristotle. 128 of these are used in a biological or medical sense, and the remainder are used in discussions of metaphysical, political or aesthetic issues.

[3] See Belfiore 1992 and Brunius 1966.

[4] J. Bernays's "Aristotle on the Effect of Tragedy" of 1880 argued for an exclusively medical interpretation of catharsis, and this account became highly influential in twentieth-century discussions of Aristotle and catharsis.

mentioned in the previous chapter, in which he argues that a process of catharsis[5] results in the subsuming of the subordinate emotions into the dominant emotion without losing any of its force, thus increasing the pleasure of the dominant emotion. Likewise, Arthur Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), argued that "If [a person] does not allow abstract thought, the concepts of the reason, to take possession of his consciousness, but, instead of all this, gives the whole power of his mind to perception ... he who is sunk in this perception is no longer individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself; but he is pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge" (Schopenhauer 1969:179). As a result, the experience of art is cathartic in that it allows for a clearer comprehension of the will, thus allowing the individual to escape (temporarily) from the terror, misery and pain of his or her own existence. Following on from Schopenhauer's concepts of will and transcendence, Friedrich Nietzsche's aestheticism is based on a model in which the so-called Apollonian nature of the human - the need to reason, suppress emotions and intellectualise - is challenged by the opposing Dionysian impulse - the impulse for chaos and sensationalism of emotional experience. The former responds to the latter by channelling that chaotic energy into the formal boundaries of art[6].

A further distinction should be made when discussing catharsis, that between *homeopathic* catharsis - the purgation or purification of emotions by pity and fear of emotions *like* themselves - and *allopathic* catharsis, in which pity and fear affect emotions *unlike* themselves (for example wrath, greed and lust). The Renaissance view of catharsis was strongly influenced by that distinction,

[5] Although Hume never actually employed the word 'catharsis', his notions of tragedy, representation, and the subsuming of emotions are clearly Aristotelian in origin.

[6] Yet another contextualisation of catharsis is that attempted by the field of psychoanalysis. In the 1890s, Freud and Breuer began their science of therapeutic analysis with what they called 'cathartic therapy' (It is perhaps no coincidence that Bernays was the uncle of Freud's wife). Also labelled as 'abreaction' by Freud, cathartic therapy has also fallen under the names of 'explosion' (Perls), 'historical emotions' (Casriel), 'damage repair facilities' (Jackins), and, perhaps most dramatically, the 'primal scream' (Janov). Whatever the label, the psychological theory of catharsis is dependent on four emotions (or rather, the expression of these emotions): crying, anger, fear and laughter. By creating the conditions for a loss of control (usually through conflict), the therapist allows for an increase in tension and the corresponding arousal of distressing emotions to occur in a patient. As the barriers created by the patient diminish, catharsis occurs through such loss of control, resulting in a parallel reduction of tension and negative emotions (see Guinagh 1987:15).

with most following the potential of the allopathic tradition. This can be seen in the view of tragic catharsis as articulated by John Dryden: "Rapine, a judicious critic, has observed from Aristotle, that pride and want of commiseration are the most prominent vices in mankind; therefore, to cure us of these two, the inventors of tragedy have chosen to work on two other passions, which are fear and pity" (quoted in Belfiore 1992:263). However, since Bernay's thesis on catharsis (which argued for a process related to the absolving of guilt through priestly ceremonies, or a medical method of relief), there has been almost universal agreement that, if catharsis is a process involving the emotions *and* an operation on those emotions, then it must of necessity be a homeopathic process; in other words, pity and fear are necessary and able to purge or purify emotions much like themselves[7]. However, as Belfiore argues, this is an unexamined prejudice. As a result of the unquestioning acceptance of the homeopathic view, catharsis theories have been classified in categories that concur with Bernay's conclusions: the medical (purgation); the religious moral (purification); the structural (purification of events and elements of a literary plot); and the intellectual (the process of clarification). Modern scholars have, as a result, either ignored the allopathic view, or attempted to theorise it out of any consideration of catharsis. Yet, "a katharsis should be called homeopathic only if it is a process in which like acts on like because it *is* like; and allopathic only if it is produced by means of things with different or opposite qualities ... In the specific case of tragic catharsis, for example, it is important to try and determine how, in Aristotle's view, pity and fear are like and unlike the other emotions on which they produce catharsis, and whether or not they affect those other emotions because they are like or because they are unlike. Only then will the labels homeopathy and allopathy be truly meaningful" (Belfiore 1992:267).

The debate over the function of catharsis (purgative, purifying, or clarifying) and its nature (homeopathic or allopathic) is complicated by the fact that Aristotle used the term only once in a literary context, and then in specific relation to tragedy. In addition, the *Poetics* is not even an

[7] The dominance of this view is evident in Dorsch's 1965 translation of the *Poetics*, in which the relevant section on tragedy is translated as "pity and fear bringing about the *purgation* of such emotions" (1965:39, my italics). The deliberate use of the word 'purgation' instead of the usual 'catharsis' is overtly homeopathic.

aesthetic work as such but rather a kind of 'manual' for tragic or dramatic structure. It is therefore instructive to examine the theories of catharsis as applied to the representation of violence in drama and fiction, rather than confining the discussion to the speculative arena of abstract theory. Scheff (1979) examines the role of catharsis in drama by distinguishing three principal types of drama. The first is the drama of ideas, the Apollonian drama in which the audience, from an aesthetic point of view, is *over-distanced* from any emotion. Informative and/or intellectual drama and propaganda are features of this type. The second, Dionysian, type is drama that provokes violent and intensely emotional reactions. A strong emotional feeling without resolution results in a state of emotional distress rather then any discharge. This second type, aesthetically speaking, is *under-distanced* from emotion, and is strongly represented in the modern media. The final type is the drama orientated towards catharsis, which attempts to be not too far nor too close to the emotion generated by an experience of the action. This last type, which does not attempt to repress or suppress emotion, and which does not allow for any sensationalism of the emotional experience, is achieved through a specific identification/awareness which is created in the audience. The task of the playwright or author is to create the conditions for the audience or reader to become both observer and participant, firstly by providing scenes which touch upon common shared emotions, and secondly by allowing for an emotional involvement that does not overwhelm the spectator. Additionally, the writer must have knowledge of, and be in touch with, his culture, milieu and audience. Audience identification in particular is crucial to the cathartic process. Fictional characters need to embody the ideal values of the audience as well as to be recognisably similar (in age, stature, intellect etc.) to their audience. Identification is at its strongest when processes of inclusion and exclusion are occurring simultaneously and visibly; the audience having a shared awareness with certain characters, while others are deliberately excluded. John Booth, in a study on Jane Austen's *Emma*, writes that "by showing most of the story through Emma's eyes, the author ensures that we shall travel with, rather than stand against her ... The sustained inside view leads the reader to hope for good fortune for the character with whom he travelled, quite independently of the qualities revealed" (quoted in Scheff 1979:157). This technique, the 'sympathy through the use of inside views', is an excellent example of awareness control, which has become one of the fundamental bases of the appeal and power of drama in general. Dictating the amount and kind of awareness that the audience shares with a character

provides the best possible chance for catharsis: "For those characters to undergo distressful experiences similar to those which have occurred to members of the audience, control of the degree of shared awareness can produce practical identification, where the audience takes the role of the character, yet is conscious of its own point of view at the same time. With respect to those characters in these scenes, the audience can achieve a balance of attention" (Scheff 1979:159). For example, this theory argues that identifying with a character in a violent situation discharges the audience's own tendency to be violent, since there is a corresponding balance of attention. The structure of awareness is therefore a desire independent of the story line and is specifically employed to create a balance between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements of drama, as well as to allow for a proper amount of identification with the characters which should lead to a balance of attention and the possibility of a discharge (in the medical sense of cathartic purgation) of distressful emotions.

It should be noted at this stage that the emotions referred to by Aristotle are confined to pity and fear. He does not say pity *or* fear, nor does he allow for the inclusion of any other passions or emotions. He defines these emotions as follows: "Our pity is awakened by undeserved misfortune, and our fear by that of someone just like ourselves - pity for the undeserving sufferer and fear for the man like ourselves" (Aristotle 1965:48). However, as discussed above, the emotions involved in any tragic catharsis, be they the pity and fear of Aristotelian tragedy, or the emotions that are said to be supplanted or purged in the process of such catharsis, are *aesthetic* emotions, that is, the pity and fear felt by the audience is not the same as the emotions that would be felt by those same people if faced with a similar tragic situation in reality[8]. Feagin's theory of the meta-response is one example of the theory of aesthetic emotion; another is that articulated by Barnes (1995), who argues that it is not plausible that tragedy rids us of or refines our emotions, as we do not feel real pity or fear, but rather quasi-pity or quasi-fear. These theories do not, of course, attempt

[8] Nevertheless, "the view that there are aesthetic emotions that differ qualitatively from real life emotions is not Aristotelian. Aristotle believed that pity and fear are painful emotions, in tragedy as in real life, and that tragedy gives pleasure not because the pity and fear it arises are of a special, "aesthetic" kind, but because the contemplation in which we engage in aesthetic situations is pleasurable ... Far from regarding the tragic emotions as "disinterested", Aristotle believed we cannot experience pity for another who is 'like' us unless we first experience fear for ourselves" (Belfiore 1992:271).

to deny the aesthetic power of tragedy and violence. Rather, they are a means of theorising about the pleasures one receives from what would be painful emotional experiences in reality, but which can become cathartic experiences in the theatre or in literature. Yet the idea that people seek stimuli which provoke negative emotions seems to be in contradiction to the principle that avoiding pain is one of the primary motives in human behaviour. The theory that thrill-seeking is an attempt to resolve earlier or inherently painful experiences and or emotions has raised some serious objections to the whole appropriation of catharsis by the literary critical establishment, and these objections have in turn reopened a debate over the validity of using Aristotelian thought to apply to modern-day aesthetic experiences, including drama, literature and the other arts.

The first problem with using the notion of catharsis to explain the paradox of pleasure in experiencing a painful or distressing representation is the almost unhesitating acceptance of Aristotle's account of tragedy, including the use of the terms catharsis, pity and fear. As Barnes has pointed out, Aristotle's reflections had some effect on the classical stage, and, for a certain period, they became highly influential on modern dramatic theory and practice. Yet the Aristotle of the *Poetics* is discussing not the modern English notion of tragedy, but rather the Greek *tragodia*, and although the English notion is derived from the Greek, it does not necessarily follow that Aristotle's fragment can be considered as a comprehensive and definitive analysis of the Greek form. The *Poetics* may be based on an intimate knowledge of Greek theatre, yet it is empirically based, and does not set out to be a definitive theory and account of *tragodia*. Thus, "Aristotle's theory of poetry is defective in the way in which his theory of politics is defective: each is parochial. The reason is not that Aristotle lacked the imagination to picture different forms of social and cultural life: rather, it is that he followed, self-consciously, a certain method of study which is inappropriate to its objects" (Barnes 1995:284). However, his work does has have some value in the study of tragedy, particularly early Greek tragedy, as well as the work of playwrights such as Racine, but it is not adequate to deal with the tragic powers of Shakespeare, Ibsen, or Chekhov, or with the nature of tragedy as understood by modern, contemporary theorists, critics and audiences. If this argument is true, then it follows that the unquestioning use of the Aristotelian words ‘pity’, ‘fear’ and ‘catharsis’ is also problematic when applying them to modern conceptions of tragedy and literature. For example, pity has always been considered as a kind of

sympathy. St Augustine in his confessions, for example, proposes that our sympathetic pity will give us a form of cathartic pleasure, a view frequently echoed in the eighteenth century by *inter alia* Adam Smith and Edmund Burke. David Hume, on the other end, recognised the problem inherent in the cathartic nature of pity, criticising its philanthropic moralism by concluding that if it were true, then a hospital would be more pleasant to attend than a ball (quoted in Brunius 1966:53). According to this point of view, catharsis, with its attendant emotions of pity and fear, can have no beneficial effect on virtues, ethics or morals. Malcolm Budd is equally critical of the frequent opinion that the emotions can be tranquillised after, and as a result of, a painful excitement of those same emotions, arguing that such a line of thought diminishes Aristotle's thought, "depriving the experience of tragedy of a rationale for anyone who does not have a morbid tendency to experience these emotions to excess" (Budd 1995:110). The point is that this interpretation of catharsis fails to identify pleasure *in* the tragedy and the emotions it excites; rather, it identifies pleasure in the escape *from* pity and fear. If one discards the purgation theory and embraces instead the purification theory, effected by the removal of the painful emotions from the boundaries of self-concern, one is still faced with three fundamental problems. First, pity and fear are not necessarily impure, in need of some form of emotional filtration. Secondly, a purification theory does not explain the removal of pain from the experience of pity and fear when these are no more than responses to the fate of fictional characters in tragedy. And thirdly, it is not clear how imaginary identification transfers pain into pleasure: "why should the exceptional nature of the tragic protagonist make sympathetic identification with her a pleasurable rather than an especially painful experience?" (1995:112).

Part of the problem with the notion of catharsis seems to be an implausibility in the idea that catharsis removes a harmful excess of pity and fear, as it is not consistent with experience that we are inherently possessed with such an excess. On the contrary, it seems more probable that for most spectators, an experience of aestheticised violence does not relieve a pre-existing excess of pity and fear but rather arouses a number of emotions in which we may be deficient. The notion that tragedy relieves people of such an excess is actually Platonic rather than Aristotelian. In the *Republic*, Plato argued that poetry satisfies that part of the soul that is "starved for weeping", and compared the fear aroused by poetry to the fear of pain that is consistent with cowardice (see

Republic Books 3 and 10). Aristotle's view is more concerned with fear of wrongdoing: "if, then, tragic katharsis relieves people of a fear that prevents them from harming kin, it is hard to see how this can be beneficial" (Belfiore 1992:273). That this is not a new objection to catharsis is proven by the comments of Maggi in 1550, which criticised the Aristotelian view by arguing that "if tragedy freed the spectators from terror when terror concerned criminals, tragedy would make men more ready to commit crimes ... If the mind were deprived of pity, how would we perform work for the needy?" (quoted in Belfiore 1992:273).

Of course, if the above arguments are valid and catharsis is actually not beneficial in any moral, ethical or even aesthetic sphere, then many of the justifications for pleasure in tragedy and violence which depend on cathartic theories become somewhat less convincing. A modern theory of catharsis argues that displays of violence "help people deal with real fears of things within and without themselves, even enabling them to rehearse their own deaths, disappearing for the inevitable ... (such displays) help audiences to confront personal guilt indirectly, so that they might initiate real or imagined sins through the controlled trauma of the film experience." (W. Rockett, in a study entitled *Developing Whirlwinds: Terror and transcendence in the cinema of cruelty* (1988), quoted by Zillmann in Goldstein 1998:184). Exposure to violence, then, is thought to be able to free the spectator from all fears, phobias and other ill emotions. Yet the application of such theory has to presuppose that conditions already exist that allow relief to manifest itself. The problem that arises is that "the presumption of fears, deficiencies, or impulsions is thus paramount ... Unfortunately, it is this presupposition that gets in the way of providing testable verifiable proposals" (Zillmann in Goldstein 1998:184). The principal psychological argument against the cathartic nature of violence and tragedy is that the encountering of any relief-providing stimuli allows for the phenomenon of negative reinforcement, in which the desire for further exposure (and thus increased relief) can be traced to extraneous initial encounters. Thus, the more one is exposed to violence (ostensibly for relief from fears and negative emotions), the more one needs to be exposed, and the greater the degree of violence portrayed has to be, in order to acquire the necessary relief.

Consequently, it is clear that the entire notion of catharsis is open to controversy. The Aristotelian view that tragedy allows for a catharsis of those emotions that would otherwise cause violence (as opposed to the view that exposure to tragedy creates the conditions for violence in the spectator), seems insufficient when faced with the plethora of meanings, implications and theories that have been generated by one paragraph in section six of the *Poetics*. There is no clear-cut conclusion to the nature of tragedy, the pleasure obtained from it, nor the role of catharsis, pity and fear in that experience. Each theory (be it purgative, purifying, structural, clarifying, homeopathic or allopathic) has its own merits and shortcomings, and, as with all theories, each is able to be justified in certain specific contexts and situations. However, the unquestioning view of catharsis as an unproblematic justification and explanation for pleasure in the representation of violence can not be sustained. It is necessary, therefore, to examine various other theories that attempt to explain aesthetic pleasure in the violent.

Edmund Burke's essay "The Sublime: Of Delight and Pleasure" of 1757 offers an early articulation of what has become known as the sensation-seeking theory of violence. According to Burke, the vast majority of mankind is highly attracted to the violent and the tragic, to the extent that "there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity" (Burke 1757:326). Following this line of thought, Burke argues that the attraction of violent entertainment is not, as Aristotle and Hume would have it, dependent upon the excellence of the imitation; rather, "we shall be much mistaken if we attribute any considerable part of our satisfaction in tragedy to a consideration that tragedy is a deceit, and its representations no realities. The nearer it approaches the reality, and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power" (326)[9]. Although Burke does offer the suggestion that terror is the source of the 'Sublime', which allows us to think and empathise with others as well as to find pleasure in representations of the violent,[10] his thesis that the average human is governed by a desire for sensation

[9] In ritual and spectator sports, there appears to be a close correspondence between the realism of the violence and its appeal to an audience (Bloch 1998; Guttmann 1998). However, writers such as McCauley, Cantor and Goldstein have claimed that in the medium of film, television, plays and fiction violent imagery should carry clues as to its unreality or it will risk losing its appeal.

[10]Burke's view of tragedy and violence is that whatever excites ideas of pain and terror "is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling ... the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure" (325). Thus through terror which 'does not press too close',

(albeit, safe sensation) is consistent with certain psychological studies (see McCauley 1998:150) which find that persons with a high need for sensation or thrill maximisation have tendencies towards disinhibition, boredom and the need for more extreme experiences. Thrill-maximisation has been accredited to the 'civilising process' in which aestheticised violence allows for filling the void left by the decreasing opportunities to experience the real thing. (Elias and Dunning (1986), in Goldstein 1998:217). Similarly, Vicki Goldberg (1998:27-52) has argued that as the dying and dead become removed from personal experience, then images of violence have increased. The idea is that as society becomes more 'civilised', and consequently comparatively 'unexciting', then the need for sensation, for an excitement that violates society's norms without actually challenging those norms, is the result. In addition, those who fall into the category of sensation seekers are more likely to respond positively to violent fiction that is at a low level of aestheticisation, as in novels such as Ellis's *American Psycho*, Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, and Harris's *Hannibal*. Representations of institutional violence (without corresponding representations of personal violence) and highly aestheticised violence as in Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* and Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* will not offer the required stimuli for thrill maximisation. However, such sensation seeking often results in little more than habituation (also known as the negative reinforcement discussed above), as those who initially respond to the scenes of violence experience an attenuation of this feeling with repeated exposure.

Another element that contributes to the enjoyment of aestheticised violence is the 'justice' motive, that is, the violence that is enjoyed by the spectator is punitive. From *Beowulf* to a modern action-thriller film, the fictional genre is dominated by situations in which the harmony of the social order is threatened by an external force, and can only be restored by the intervention of an heroic figure who is recognisably a member of the society under threat, and who is able to restore order to the social fabric. Excessive violence in the case of such a hero is condoned or even applauded, with the result that the violence itself is justified because it is punitive, and hence enjoyable. However, the violence of the protagonist has to balance out the violence perpetrated by the threatening element, so that "any gruesome retributive killing has to appear just, and this appearance has to be prepared by witnessing the party to be punished perform increasingly despicable heinous crimes. This is to say that escalations in the portrayal of righteous, enjoyable violence necessitate

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the reader is able to acquire a form of vicarious pity which further intensifies that pleasure.

escalations in morally enraging, evil, and distressing violence" (Zillmann 1998:206). However, it is likely to be only audiences and readers who experience the suspense of the distressing violence who will find the resolution offered by punitive violence aesthetically satisfying (See Scheff's theory of catharsis and empathy (1979:45ff)). To return to an earlier example, Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum* is an instance of a fiction that deliberately uses the technique of a build-up and release of suspense in order to create an effect of resolution. Throughout the story the narrator is faced with a series of violent episodes, based fundamentally upon the institutional violence of religious oppression[11] (in this case, the Spanish Inquisition), but projected upon his person through personal violence. The structure of the story also follows a distinct shift from threat to actual violence, from covert to overt violence. The opening and much of the following is explicitly psychological - the sentence, the anticipation of death, the unknown darkness of the pit, the sound of the rats, the threat of the pendulum. Yet, subtly at first, and then with more emphasis, the overt possibilities of that violence appear. The employment by the "black-robed judges" of thirst and starvation against the narrator, the attack by the rats, the unnameable horror in the pit, the gradually descending pendulum, and finally, the heated iron walls forcing him towards the pit are all examples of increasing personal overt violence, and only the *deus ex machina* fashion of the conclusion allows for relief from that violence. Throughout, Poe creates an element of suspense by describing situations which threaten the life of the narrator, and then offers relief by allowing him to escape just in time: the escape from the swinging blade by allowing it to cut through his bonds, and the arrival of friendly forces just before he is forced into the pit are the two most prominent instances of this[12].

Fiction such as Poe's writings, as well as modern novels and films, relies on certain conventions of violence that largely correspond to the theories of enjoyment of that violence. Thus, the justice motive is employed to allow the audience/reader to applaud the demise of the threat to the hero, or it is deliberately excluded (as in *Darkness at Noon*) in order to create sympathy and/or empathy

[11] See page 10 for an outline of the various forms of religious violence.

[12] Of course, the increase and resolution of suspense is a common feature of modern fiction and film. The horror film, in particular, relies on a technique of a sudden release of intense suspense, only to immediately afterwards introduce the object of that suspense in order to shock the audience.

for the protagonist; suspense is employed, only to be resolved; realism is stressed, even when highly aestheticised, in order to involve the spectator in the machinations of the plot and create the conditions for a suspension of disbelief. The effect of these conventions can be clearly seen when the 1995 German film *Funny Games*, directed by Michael Haneke, is analysed. Haneke's intention in the film was to deconstruct these conventions of fictional violence by creating the conditions necessary for them, and then bypassing the expected consequences. The structure of the film is one common to a suspense/horror film. A family (husband, wife and young son) are on holiday at their home in the mountains of Austria. Two men enter the home, and proceed to terrorise the family in a narrative that is particularly disturbing to the viewer[13]. This is largely the consequence of the film being, in one sense, a parody of the conventional violent film because of the way in which the perpetrators of the violence, as well as the scenes of violence themselves, are presented. Firstly, the two men have no motive for their actions, other than the desire for 'fun' (hence the title *Funny Games*). In addition, they are both well dressed, normal looking characters, which in itself rejects the convention that the element or person that threatens society must either be terrifying (most obviously in monster films such as *Alien*,), intimidating, or physically unattractive: in other words, the external appearance of the threatening Other is usually a projection of the evil it intends to commit. Secondly, a sense of unreality is introduced into what is otherwise a realist film by allowing one of the men to give occasional asides to the audience, as if inviting them to approve of, and thus be complicit in, the violence that occurs. Thus, by continuing to

[13] A review of the film by Jeff Shannon reads as follows: "It is impossible to have a neutral opinion about the Austrian thriller *Funny Games*--a movie so relentless in its ability to shock that it gained pariah status on the film festival circuit in 1997. In the warped tradition of *A Clockwork Orange*, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, and *Blue Velvet*, this is a film - directed with electrifying audacity by Munich-born Michael Haneke - that addresses the controversy of screen violence by making the viewer as guilty as the Leopold and Loeb-like killers who terrorise a young family of three during their summer vacation. They arrive as friendly neighbours, seducing the family with phoney congeniality, but soon *Funny Games* reveals its devious strategy, turning savage and appalling ... and completely captivating for those who can endure the terror. There's actually less violence than you'd see in a typical American horror flick such as *Scream*, but Haneke's forceful staging effectively fulfils his agenda of viewer complicity; we vividly experience this doomed family's fate and feel helpless to save them. So helpless, in fact, that Haneke dares to offer a hint of respite by giving a victim the upper hand, only to 'replay' the same scene with the darkest of outcomes. *Funny Games* is guaranteed to outrage some viewers with its manipulative schemes, but there's no denying the film's visceral impact, generated by Haneke's expert handling of a superior cast" (Editorial Film Review:http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/).

watch the film at the specific invitation of the killers, the viewer not is not only made forcibly aware of the artifice of the medium, but also (paradoxically) becomes party to the violence that is to follow. By removing the sense of aesthetic distance normally experienced in film, the director is able to remind the audience that although the experience may be fictional, its very aestheticisation of the violent is as immediate and, potentially, as much of a violation as actual violence. Throughout the film, whenever there is a possibility of a resolution of suspense, nothing that would conform to the conventions of the genre is allowed to occur: for example, Haneke allows an element of tension to develop between the two men, but this does not develop into an expected conflict or rift between them. Similarly, a knife left in a yacht early on in the film would seem to indicate that later on one of the characters could use it in order to exact punitive violence upon his tormentors, and effect his escape. However, in this film, just as the knife is discovered by the mother and the possibility of an escape is aroused in the viewer, it is casually thrown overboard by one of the men. In another example, when the son manages to escape the house and seeks help, he is soon discovered and brought back: the anticipated alleviation of suspense never happens. The third way in which the film is parodic is in the way that any overt personal violence is not shown directly to the audience. All they are offered are clues to its occurrence: the sound of gunshots, a glimpse of blood on the wall, and so on. The visual emphasis is on personal covert violence, such as threats and the ensuing anticipation of overt violence. The deaths of all three family members are not shown: the son is shot while the camera concentrates on his mother in the kitchen[14]; the father is executed with the camera on the face of his killer, and the mother is casually thrown off a yacht to drown while the scene continues with the bland conversation of the two killers, as if nothing of importance has happened. As a result of this, there is no possibility of catharsis, nor is there any use of the justice motive to allow the spectator to passively accept what he or she has witnessed. The story ends with the two men arriving at the home of some new victims, with no intimation that their killing spree will be brought to an end. The only scene that allows for direct personal violence is when the mother is able to shoot one of her tormentors, but in keeping with the parodic nature of the film, his friend is able to use the television remote to restore his friend to life by 'rewinding' the scene, and continue his game. Thus, the supposed punitive justice is

[14]This in itself is a violation of the convention in popular films that children are not usually the victims of extreme personal violence.

reversed, and the resolution of suspense is negated. By deconstructing aesthetic violence in this manner, Haneke is able to create a film that is more disturbing than most graphic horror and action films, and this is principally the result of allowing the structure of the film to create expectations in the audience that certain conventions of fictional violence are to be developed, only to negate those expectations. The result is a highly effective critique of the nature of violence in an aesthetic medium.

Finally, two points need to be emphasised. First, there is no single explanation for the appeal of violent literature and other forms of entertainment. Various theories, such as thrill-maximisation, the justice motive and catharsis go some way to explain certain facets of the phenomenon, but each should be taken on its own merits and not considered as an all-encompassing theory. The differences in the psychology of people and cultures ensure various responses depending upon the socio-cultural milieu, and the various degrees of aestheticisation of violence allow for various degrees of emotional response, either positive or negative, to the representation. The second point to be emphasised is that the nature of the response to a representation of aestheticised violence is not only related to the above theories, either singly or in combination, but also by the degree of aestheticisation which determines the extent to which the reader or spectator is removed from the violence itself. A novel such as *American Psycho* elicits a far stronger response to its violence than *Darkness at Noon*. Similarly, the institutionalised violence of slavery implicit in *Mansfield Park* has a negligible effect on the reader's response to the text. The violence that usually evokes the strongest responses, either with approval or approbation, is the minimally aestheticised representation of overt, personal violence: such violence is the most recognisable to the majority of audiences, and as a result it tends to overshadow the other forms of violence and their representation[15].

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[15]Although covert personal violence is used as a means of increasing suspense and tension, it is usually as a means to an episode of overt violence. It is rare that the threat or anticipation of violence in fiction is not answered by an actual act of violence in the text or screenplay.

CONCLUSION

An act of violence, be it personal or institutional, forceful or psychological, is an event that would distress most people, either as witnesses to the event or as victims of the event. Yet the representation of such acts in fictional forms such as literature, drama and film aestheticises that violence in such a manner that the violence may be experienced without such distress by readers and audiences. This dissertation has investigated various theories that have been offered to account for this paradox, including those of catharsis, moral justification, the justice motive and meta-emotional empathy, but no single theory is able adequately and comprehensively to explain the issues and problems raised. Three basic questions were articulated in the introduction. With regard to the first - What is violence? - the notion of violence was shown to be far broader than the common idea of a physical attack; rather it embraces a variety of psychological and physical violations within personal and institutional structures. The second question as to how the representation of violence may be effected was more problematic: aesthetic theories as diverse as Marxist notions of realism, post-structuralist uncertainty, and the linguistic 'fitting theory' suggest that the notion of representation is largely contingent upon the point of view of the theorist. For the purposes of this study, the representation of violence was taken to mean a realist representation that involved an empirical response: that is, the descriptions and depictions of violence, no matter the fantastical or alien nature of the context of that description or depiction, were recognisable as existing, or possibly existing, in an independent reality accessible to the experience of the reader or spectator. The third question, that of the aestheticisation of violence, resulted in the notion that such aestheticisation is dependent upon, and also an inevitable consequence of, the representation of the violent, as the representation itself foregrounds the artifice of fiction, thus creating the conditions for aestheticisation. However, the nature of the aesthetic response to a representation of violence was shown to be influenced to a large extent by the degree of aestheticisation produced by the author and/or director of the fictional text. The degree of aestheticisation, or the means by which the author cloaked, embellished or in some other manner

diminished the full emotional impact of the violence (or, conversely, attempted to foreground the violent act itself through means of graphic and extreme descriptive passages or scenes), is largely responsible for the aesthetic response of the reader or audience, which in turn becomes a means of explaining the paradox of fictional violence.

Owing to the limited scope of this dissertation, the notions of violence, its representation and its aestheticisation were situated within the boundaries of fictional forms. In addition, the discussion of the response to such representation was necessarily confined to aesthetic responses. Yet the three basic questions which form the basis for this study can be extended to include a variety of other questions that are in need of further research. For example, the debate regarding the false testimony of Wilkomski's *Fragments* mentioned in the introduction raises a number of questions, such as whether there is a correlation between representations of fictional and representations of factual violence, and if so, why the response to each differs. *Fragments* was initially applauded for its representation of factual violence; then it was vilified when some accused the author of fabricating a fictional account. The question to be asked is that, if the text was found to be factual after all, would the aesthetic response change yet again? In other words, how does the context of the representation affect the aesthetic response to the violence, and how does this context legitimise (or, conversely, render illegitimate) a text? Another area that requires study is that of the relation between representations of violence, both factual and fictional, and various socio-cultural factors. Linked to this would be the role ideology and class structure play in the reception of violence within these spheres. The various theories of the psychology of the reception of violence have been thoroughly investigated, albeit with no definitive conclusion (see Goldstein 1998), yet the philosophy of violence is a domain that is not yet fully represented. Issues to be explored include an investigation into the essence of violence (if any), the boundaries of this violence, and how, and to what effect, the response to violence and its representation form part of the human experience. Although the question of violence and its reception may remain a paradox, a more comprehensive theory of violence in its different forms is necessary for a greater understanding of this paradox.

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