

Faster, Camera Man! Kill! Kill!

There's something to be said for a film that can thrill us, entertain us, frighten us or make us laugh. However, not every movie that competently achieves these goals is necessarily more than thrilling, scary or funny. There are movies that simply work on a fundamental level, ones that hook an audience immediately and don't require more than one viewing or a coffeehouse dissection with friends after you've exited the theater. In many cases, we've become accustomed to turning *on* a movie and turning *off* our brain, sometimes looking for an escape from reality or other times soothing a boredom on a rainy afternoon. But as Roger Ebert once said, "A movie is like a machine that generates empathy." And no matter what level of artistry a film aspires to, empathy is the common denominator. I've discussed before the merits of a popcorn blockbuster and I've delved into the power found in the murky symbolism of what's considered an art film, but the one thing they both have in common is an empathy toward its characters and story. This empathy is the most effective tool in absorbing an audience and opening a door to a different world. Now, the depth in which that world is explored is up to the filmmaker, but one thing is for certain, we want to involve the people watching our films.

The word empathy, when it comes to the movies, is tricky. The standard definition is that you simply *feel* for the characters, identify with their struggles, root for them to succeed, but depending on the film's intent and how ambitious its aims are to involve you, empathy can become a difficult and out-of-character commitment for the viewer. This comes directly from the suspension of disbelief every single person unconsciously agrees to when turning on a movie. This suspension of disbelief can apply to that impossibly unrealistic action sequence in the latest shoot 'em up or it can be as serious as abandoning your personal moral code to root for a character that's evil, but the film has supplied rationales that you accept because you know in the back of your mind: hey, this is fiction. The television series *Breaking Bad* was enormously successful in this. Contrary to what you told others, or even yourself, you relished Walt's exploits, detaching yourself from your true judgements about his actions. If it were real life, we would have watched in disgust the news coverage of a family man turned murderous drug kingpin. Instead we eagerly watched as the characters sunk into deeper depravity, cheering them on and even feeling a shared empowerment when Walt fully transformed from the "weak" everyman to the assertive and powerful Heisenberg in the famous "Say my name" sequence. This happens, not because we're all secretly bad people, but because the empathy we feel toward these characters combined with suspension of disbelief, helps us see the movie's

greater theme or artistic comment. These themes often redeem the movie for its depiction of violence (or what-have-you) by blossoming into a cautionary tale or a realistic depiction of the consequences that follow misdeeds. There is no better, and less “preachy,” way for an artistic filmmaker to make their point than showing things as realistically as possible. This also helps dramatically, because a film without conflict is flat-out boring. No one wants to see a good man continue to succeed for two hours nor do we want to be browbeaten with subjective morality.

Where some films can be considered *bad art* is when they corrupt this empathy we’re so selfless in offering and make a movie that reenforces childish, cruel, ignorant world views. Though this is an unpopular opinion, Quentin Tarantino is habitually guilty of this. Considered by many as pop art, Tarantino’s films are damaging and not because they are violent, but because of the way he uses his violence. To defend his irresponsible cartooning of American Slavery in *Django Unchained*, he justified the violence in the film by calling it “cathartic violence,” stating that the graphic death depicted was justified because it used revenge against corruption as a motive. What Tarantino fails to realize is: there is no such thing as cathartic violence. Another blatant violation of our relationship with the movies is *Caligula*, crossing boundaries with villainous glee, or the much more subtle misstep *The Night Porter*. In this instance, the film too obviously enjoyed being taboo — exploring the sadomasochistic relationship between a Holocaust survivor and her Nazi tormenter. We got the sense that the filmmakers were winking at us, waiting for us to flinch, and in essence, completely disrespecting the sensitive material. It abandoned any ambition to tell the story and instead relied on shock value to electrify us, only succeeding in delivering bad tastes in the mouths of any audience member whose moral compass pointed northward. Roman Polanski said filmmakers have a duty when dealing with violence and that was to always treat it as realistically as possible. Otherwise it would be disrespectful to those who suffered violence in the real world. I agree with this statement. I believe everything should be on the table in terms of subject matter. If it happens in the world, we should be able to make films about it, but filmmakers and other artists should be held to a higher standard of morality, because we can’t control the world, we can’t always know right from wrong with things as complex as war, but we can control what we put into the world as art, what judgements we make as outsiders.

This brings me to the final phase of empathy for a film, and that is the lack-there-of. For most of us, we’ve spent our lives being pandered to by motion pictures, given movies that are target-marketed, preview-tested and vacuumed-packed for us to swallow, digest and excrete. It’s been the industry’s goal to *please* us, give us ideas and images that don’t rock our boats so badly that we capsize, but what about the movies that have no intention to please us? What

about the movies that make their points by forcing us to have zero empathy for its characters? The film *Man Bites Dog* comes to mind. A French mockumentary about a film crew following around the charismatic serial killer Benoit as he kills men, women, children and frolics on the beach nude while vomiting because of bad mussels. The film goes to great lengths to show his murders transpire realistically. The camera never cuts away as he casually carries on a conversation about the added difficulty and unpredictability of killing a child — while he's suffocating a 8 year old under a pillow. We hear him rant about architecture, see him interact with the film crew, and watch him visit his loving grandparents. There's plenty to identify with... until his next nauseating murder takes place and we remember he is a monster that most films don't have the gaul to depict. Also, the film is quite funny, often times teetering on absurd. We laugh as he tells us about weighing down the corpse of a midget so they don't float. As the movie progresses, the film crew gradually becomes involved in Benoit's crimes. Why, I thought, make the film in the mockumentary style? Perhaps it was a way of showing our relationship with the violence that takes place in more conventional cinema. Maybe it was showing us, the audience, slowly losing sight of the line between reality and fantasy as we watch the good guys mow down 10, 12, 15, 25, 100 bad guys per action film and never think twice. I know Terry Gilliam likes to linger on the nameless 'bad guys' that meet their ends in his films, just so we have time to think for a moment: *that's a human being dying in front of us*. This was not a philosophical thought that entered into the minds of the filmmakers behind *Star Wars*, for instance. I recently showed *Man Bites Dog* at a free movie night I host at a local theater called Cinemondays. There was a small crowd of 10 or 12 people. Some chuckled awkwardly, some audibly moaned, one person left with 25 minutes remaining in the film. I sat beside my girlfriend who had never seen the movie. I watched her squirm. I watched her body suggest it wanted to get up and leave the theater. She hated the film. It hurt her to watch it. She had zero empathy for everyone involved. But an hour after seeing it, she looked at me and said, "It's brilliant." And what I'm sure would please the filmmakers more, she was less in the mood to watch *Die Hard*.