

Violence in Movie Trailers: An Analysis

Introduction and Methods, etc. | By Andrew Parker

The original plan called for propane bombs in the cafeteria, creating an explosion that would send any remaining survivors outdoors into the morning air, where the two student gunmen – and another round of bombs planted in the parking lot – would ensure that anyone attempting escape be met with a certain end. As it happens, the bombs never ignited and the final death toll landed at 12 students and one teacher, along with the wounding of 24 others and the suicide deaths of the gunmen, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. But the shock and horror following the events of the 1999 Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colorado were great enough to inspire moral panic nationwide (“Columbine High School Massacre – Aftermath and Rationale,” 2006).

Though in the final analysis, psychiatrists from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) would conclude that Harris and Klebold were driven primarily by their troubled mental conditions – psychopathy and depression, respectively (Cullen, 2004) – in the months following the attack America turned its attention to the perceived link between pop culture and the creation of violent attitudes in society. Though research in the field had been ongoing for decades, new studies were cited by politicians suggesting that a combination of exposure to real-life violence, as well as violence in film, video games, television, and the Internet created desensitization or lack of empathy in young people (“Hollywood Says No To Violence Link,” 1999) (Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, and Baumgardner, 2003).

Documentaries such as Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* attempted a dissection and explanation of America’s “culture of violence” (Ebert, 2002). The national discussion grew to such an extent that then-President Bill Clinton, no stranger to the Hollywood elite, summoned several top-level industry executives to the White House for a conference on youth violence in 1999. The executives refused to attend, instead sending industry lobbyists in their place, citing research linking media violence to violent behavior as being inconclusive (“Hollywood Says No To Violence Link”).

The conversation continues today. As the level of violent content in popular media has risen in the last 40 years – with film being the rule, not the exception (“MPAA Film Rating System,” 2006) – researchers continue to explore what influence, if any, film depictions of violence have on the viewing audience. Since a number of variables can be cited as causes of violent behavior – heredity, lack of parental presence, and access to weapons among them – researchers often have difficulty pointing exclusively to films as being the cause or motivation for specific acts of violence (“Hollywood Says No To Violence Link”). But regardless of the conclusions reached by any one cultural study, the fact remains that the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the film industry’s trade group, allows violence in films and even condones it to an extent via the use of a film rating system wherein specific ratings such as R (restricted to children under 17 without the presence of an adult) or NC-17 (no one 17 and under admitted) are given to films with a high level of objectionable content (“MPAA Film Rating System”). Since the film industry is a business first and foremost, and since films in genres such as action or horror may actually be more appealing to audiences if they include highly violent sequences, film studios and the companies they contract with often tailor their marketing materials, specifically film “trailers,” or previews, to include the suggestion or outright depiction of such violence (Hindes, 1997). While there is a mountain of previous research on violent content in films, there has been little prior work devoted specifically to the violent content in film trailers, which are widely viewed and discussed among the movie-going public (Hindes). The aim of this paper is simple: to accumulate 50 of the most widely-seen film trailers of the last 10 years and code them for acts of violence to determine the level of violence commonly depicted in modern-day movie trailers. It is believed that there has been an increase in the depiction of violence in movie trailers in recent years.

Literature examining violent content in modern filmmaking is vast and varied. Studies cover topics as broad as the overall effect of film violence on American youth (Funk et. al, 2003), the emphasis on violence against women in trailers found on video rentals and targeted primarily to a male audience (Oliver & Kalyanaraman, 2002), and the different types of violence depicted in films (Owczarski, 2006). While each study cited here is

clearly devoted to the belief that modern filmmaking can often be a very violent venture, the conclusions the research differ wildly. For example, Funk et. al conclude that violence on film can indeed result in the desensitization of the youth audience, while other studies (“Hollywood Says No To Violence Link”) suggest that other factors beyond exposure to film violence play just as much of a role in inspiring violence among youth. Literature focusing on film trailers tends to be more limited and focused on areas of business-related interest, such as copyright concerns (Bick, 2002), and the use of certain marketing methods to elicit audience response from a trailer (Toumarkine, 2005). This paper will examine movie trailers, and not films themselves, for acts of violence depicted onscreen, thereby differentiating itself from previous literature on the subject.

Though the film industry suffered a relative downturn in theatrical attendance in 2005, American studios still managed to rake in more than \$6 billion dollars, according to MPAA statistics. In addition, the industry noted a remarkable shift towards younger viewers last year, with moviegoers between 12 and 29 years old making up almost half of the theatrical viewing audience (“MPAA 2005 U.S. Movie Attendance Study,” 2005), meaning the average viewer today is younger now than ever before. While the MPAA has specific rules about which types of trailers can air before which films – for example, a trailer for an R-rated film cannot air before the showing of a G-rated film – exhibitors and studios are generally given free reign to pair trailers with specific films, so long as the respective ratings and content of each correspond reasonably (Hindes), meaning youth audiences may in many cases be exposed to trailers for PG-13 or R-rated films.

A Federal Trade Commission (FTC) report issued in 2000 found that despite MPAA regulations regarding trailer exhibition, and the actual wording of the film ratings themselves, major studios often target underage audiences in their overall marketing of R-rated films (Wall, 2000). The study reported that, “... of 44 movies rated R, 35 of them (80 percent) were marketed to youngsters under 17.” While trade paper *Variety* reports that a recent shift in the country’s moral climate has forced studios to tone down some of their trailer efforts by reducing the usage of the “red-band,” specifically adult-content trailer (“Trailer Terrain More Sanitized Than Ever,” 2005), many believe this new

standard only applies to sexual content or depictions of controversial actions like drug abuse, and not the presence or occurrence of onscreen violence. In the column, the marketers behind Universal Pictures' 1999, R-rated *American Pie* lamented that while they were forced to excise trailer footage suggesting the actual mechanics of one character's sexual conquest of an apple pie, the studio wouldn't blink twice if they depicted graphic violence in a trailer for a different R-rated film ("Trailer Terrain More Sanitized Than Ever"). Interestingly enough, research suggests that even though films have grown more violent with time, audiences still decry gratuitous violence in cinema and do not see or enjoy films simply because they are violent (Sparks, 2005) ("Moviegoers Unhappy Despite Blockbusters," 1996).

Given the rise in movie violence over the years – as documented by the need for a ratings system that changes with the cultural climate – the possibility that violent content in movie trailers has declined over time seems unlikely. The theory of "ratings creep," long held by industry watchdogs and parent organizations, posits that the level of objectionable content permitted in non-R-rated films – PG-13 and even PG – has risen in recent years as cultural standards have relaxed ("MPAA Film Rating System"). According to the theory, a highly violent, popular PG-13 film released in this decade, such as *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, would actually have garnered an R-rating decades ago, suggesting that even if the industry is in a current state of sexual prudity, violent content is still widely permitted – and that allowance trickles down to the studios' trailer marketing efforts. Because of the continued relaxation of cultural standards regarding the depiction of violence in the media, violent content in movie trailers has actually increased in the last 10 years.

To determine the veracity of this hypothesis, full-length theatrical trailers for each of 50 select films released from 1996 to 2005 were coded for violent content. These particular trailers – five for each year – were chosen because the films they represent were the top five highest-grossing films of the year in which they were released (see attached). Since these films went on to become the top money-makers of their respective years, it can be deduced that they were either the most publicly anticipated and/or effectively-marketed

films of the year in which they were released, and therefore the most worthy of analysis due to their apparent effectiveness and popularity in the marketplace. While studios often release short “teaser” trailers as early as a year prior to the release of some films, the average full-length movie trailer runs about two-and-a-half minutes in length (Toumarkine). All 50 selected trailers fall at or around that length, meaning no teaser trailers will be analyzed. In the event that two or more theatrical trailers were available for download, the first one to be released was selected, as first trailers generally represent the studio’s primary marketing push while later trailers are devised to present specific story, thematic, or content elements to an audience (Hindes).

Two content coders were enlisted for the project – the author of this paper and another member of the Fall 2006 COMM 597 thesis class. This is to ensure that both coders were USC graduate students with a strong interest in communication theory and practice, familiarity with multiple forms of media, and most importantly, a willingness to actually sit down and code 50 movie trailers. The participants coded for specific types of violence, as outlined on the attached coding manual as a means of defining for the coder which events in each trailer can be specifically categorized as “violent.” The rate of occurrence of each individual type of violence was also recorded. Each trailer was also coded for MPAA rating and studio of release to determine if these factors had an impact on the level or type of violence depicted. The end data was compared between the coders for reliability, then analyzed in the Results section of the paper.

Movie trailers are widely viewed and discussed among the theater-going public, and can be a major factor in determining audience enthusiasm for a particular film. By analyzing 50 of the most widely-seen trailers of the last 10 years, this paper will demonstrate that there has been a recent increase in the level of violence depicted in movie trailers. It will demonstrate if a film’s MPAA rating or studio of release determine the level of violence depicted in visual marketing materials. As films themselves grow more violent and American cultural values more tolerant, violent content in theatrical movie trailers is on the rise.

METHOD

Theatrical trailers were chosen by popularity and effectiveness, selecting trailers for the top five grossing films in each of the last 10 years, due to the fact that the studios anticipate hit films in advance and make major marketing pushes for specific titles each year (Hindes). These trailers were mostly located online at movie databases such as Movie-List (www.movie-list.com) and the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com); trailers that could not be located on these sites were viewed from the special features section of the DVD title of that film.

After viewing each violent occurrence, the two coders, working separately, were asked to pause the media player or DVD and note the type of violence depicted and the trailer in which it occurred by consulting a coding manual that outlined the nine different forms of violence that could be perceived or recorded for the purposes of this paper. Broad definitions and depictions of violence were chosen as examples, since the actions of violence depicted in a trailer cannot be viewed in context of an entire film and therefore cannot be coded for specific meaning relevant to the film itself or society in general, i.e. violence attempted against women, a specific minority group, or in suppression of a lower social class, etc. The American Heritage Dictionary's simple, secondary definition of the term "Violence" provided a good starting point: "The act or an instance of damaging action or behavior," (www.dictionary.com). In addition, each film was coded by year released, studio of release, and MPAA rating to determine if there had been a general increase in violence in movie trailers, if different studios marketed their films more violently, and if the MPAA rating of a title determined the level of violence depicted in its trailer, respectively.