

My piece explores how we use design, market and sell ideas and goods. How is it that we can persuade one another to go to war, smoke cigarettes, and feed ourselves and our children unhealthy garbage? Conveniently, product design and marketing are the perfect tools for this. If your product is inevitably cancerous, just put it in a nice box, make sure it looks good in the hand, and pay celebrities to use it. History has repeatedly shown us that it is both that these tricks are simple, and effective.

Each panel represents a different potentially harmful product or ideology that humans have glorified: cigarettes, high fructose corn syrup, and violence. Each “cement” wall uses source material from real advertisements from between 1950-1970, and is adhered to the wall using the same methods used by street artists and large corporations alike. Each panel was then oil painted individually.

Beckett H.
California

On Physical Violence

Beckett H.



I recently watched the movie *Django Unchained*, a country western written by Quentin Tarantino. The movie takes place pre Civil War, with two main character, Django, a freed slave and his partner, a German bounty hunter. The beginning of the movie is highly entertaining with scene after scene of the duo killing dozens of outlaws in ways that just seem to get more and more creative as they go. Later in the movie, the tone changes, and they travel to the largest slave plantation in the south to save Django's wife. The first few scenes of the plantation are extremely graphic and poignant, showing images of plantation owners betting on slave fights, brutally whipping them, and dogs mauling runaway slaves. Yet about thirty minutes later, Django had single handedly killed every plantation worker and blown up the entire plantation. The entire scene was extremely gory, but since it was a pre-civil war cotton plantation, it seemed about right. It forced me to question the line between how we define killing and murder, since in many ways he was doing both. Yet, violence in the context of the movie was far more than just entertainment; it was about freedom, justice, hope. Violence was used to restore his humanity and strength, get justice on those who enslaved him, and protect his freedom from those who believed he didn't deserve it. It forced me to think about violence more broadly, both in the context of popular culture and history. In what ways have, and do, societies use violence to protect and destroy the things they believe in? There are so many types of violence, both physical and more conceptual violence; Violence through words, economic violence, environmental violence, cyber violence, and so many more. Yet what I found most interesting was physical violence, the driving force of humans to hurt or kill other humans, and our own satisfaction with watching it. I believed Quentin Tarantino in *Django Unchained* had hit this concept right on the head through both his story line, imagery, and the watching experience he created. Humans observe and partake in physical violence as means of justice, purely for pleasure, and simply because we are human.

Whether it be punching an enemy in retaliation or starting a war, humans use the idea of justice to rationalize physical violence and killing. One of the most infamous acceptances and promotion of violence was Malcolm X's movement during the civil rights movements. While Martin Luther King promoted an entirely peaceful and nonviolent movement, Malcolm X justified violence in the context of the defense of black lives. In contrast Dr. Martin Luther King didn't believe violence was justifiable since he believed non-violence would be more effective, Malcolm X criticized him stating, "that's what you mean by non-violent: be defenseless."¹ Hundreds of thousands of black Americans were lynched, killed, and beaten post slavery, and The United States prior and throughout the Civil Rights Movements was incredibly unsafe for black Americans. The violence in Malcolm X's movement was a reaction to the incredible racism and violence against blacks, and consequently, any violence in return was more than justifiable². Violence against racist Americans is therefore justified by the logic that it was in the name of justice and fair retaliation. But is this logic consistent or contradictory with the laws and values of greater society?

In America, we still use this principle of justice and retaliation in states in which the death penalty is legal. The death penalty is the ultimate punishment, the taking of one's life justified because of the harm that individual may have caused; in other words, and as stated in the bible's old testament, "an eye for an eye". It is not only punishment for their wrong doing, but it is also commonly justified as a deterrent of future crime. Although this sort of killing can be morally and politically accepted by many Americans, this definition of "justice" is put into question since

¹ "MALCOLM X SEES RISE IN VIOLENCE; Says Negroes Are Ready to Act in Self-Defense." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 Mar. 1964

² *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Ballantine Books, 2015.

taking someone's life under the protection of the law seems morally unjust to many others. Still, actions of violence are justified by the perpetrator because they believe it is in means of "justice" since they defined justice based off their own views. This inconsistently can lead to acts of mass violence that are justified by the individual perpetrators, but seen as completely unjust by nearly everyone else. Ultimately, subjective criteria justify retaliatory murder. For example, when Timothy McVeigh bombed the Oklahoma City Federal Building in 1995 killing 168 people. Timothy McVeigh was a white nationalist who strongly believed that the government was a conspiracy against the white race, and therefore was starkly anti-government³. In his court hearing, he speaks about the importance of a "body count" in his attack, the fact that the purpose of the attack was to kill government officials as means to make his anti-government message heard. While the rest of America agreed this terrorist act was completely unjustifiable, Timothy McVeigh and other white nationalists personally justified this act since justice in their eyes means the dissolution of government and the advancement of the white nationalist agenda⁴. While violence is an incredible tool to attain justice, justice is defined completely differently by different groups. Despite the loose and ever changing definition of justice, violence and death is irreversible and unchanging. Still, groups and individuals are drawn to use violence as a means to get their way. Yet, while justice plays a large role in many acts of physical violence, it is far from the only thing that draws humans to it.

Humans attraction to violence is the direct product of humans attraction to the unpleasurable. Each country and each language has a different term for this dubious trait; In Japan there is a saying: "the misfortune of others taste like honey", The French have the term *joie maligne*, meaning a diabolical delight in other people's suffering and in Mandarin they say *xìng-zāi-lè-huò*⁵. In Archbishop Trench, Study of Words, he expresses how curious it is that we as humans have created terms for this phenomena, "for the existence of the words bears testimony to the existence of the thing."⁶ In German, we call it *schadenfreude*. Incidence of *Schadenfreude* exist throughout our entire lives, and many in more secretive ways than others. A common example of *Schadenfreude* is given by Frances Power Cobbe, an Irish writer and social reformer, who exposes the *schadenfreude* in punishments like flogging or spanking stating that "if no hidden abominable gusto accompanied the indecent and cruel act, it is certain there would not been one whipping for ten thousand which have been actually inflicted."⁷ Vicious whippings are clear evidence of the cruel side of *schadenfreude*. Slave owners in the United States were known for excessive and violently cruel whipping. Although the whipping was thought to teach the slave a lesson, the extreme excess was a result of *schadenfreude*, the simple fact that the racist slave owners got pleasure from the extreme pain of their slaves. *schadenfreude*, in less extreme settings, can explain humans love of violent movies. The director of *Valhalla Rising*, Nicolas Winding Refn, refers to well done violence in entertainment as "nearly pornographic, pure *schadenfreude*."⁸ Yet beyond the "simple" pleasure brought about by violence, violence brings power and a sense of aliveness. In Tim O'Brien's, *How to Tell A True War Story*, he describes some of the most violent and graphic scenes of his time serving in the Vietnam War; the power felt pointing a gun

³ Oklahoma City (2017), Barak Goodman, Netflix

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Smith, Tiffany Watt. "The Secret Joys of Schadenfreude." *The Guardian*

⁶ *Prose by Victorian Women: an Anthology*. Routledge, 2012.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "10 Famous Directors on Movie Violence." *Flavorwire*, 12 Jan. 2013

at the head of another man, or having a bullet whistle by your head⁹. He states that the closer you were to death, after having survived, it was the most alive you'd ever felt. Even the most horrifying scenes, "the purply orange glow of napalm, the rocket's red glare. It's not pretty, exactly. It's astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not."¹⁰ The beauty in violence and the unpleasurable is unlike other types of beauty. Just as Tim O'Brien expressed, it is a beauty that fills the eye, even if you hate it. For this reason, the beauty associated with the unpleasurable is one to be cautioned by since it is a type of beauty and feeling that can only be attained through violence.

Even for individuals that feel violence is never justifiable, and claim they see and feel no joy in violence, the natural state of humans and their genetics suggest that humans are inherently violent. In Thomas Hobbes', *Leviathan*, the English philosopher considers a society before government with no laws, but instead ruled only by the morals of individuals. In this state, "there is no common authority to resolve these many and serious disputes, we can easily imagine with Hobbes that the state of nature would become a "state of war", even worse, a war of "all against all"."¹¹ In our most natural state, the morals of humans vary far too much. According to Hobbes this inevitably leads to violence since man desires to "make themselves Masters of other men's", to make what they believe is right to be the universal right. Where violence takes place in man's desire to make themselves masters of other men is the "inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for power after power, that ceaseth only in death"¹², leading humans to inevitably resort to aggression and violence as the means to get their way. In terms of *Leviathan*, the simple existence of laws and government prove that the natural state of humans is "war".

Shouldn't human morals be enough to keep one and other from killing? If that were the case, laws would not need to be in place to keep humans from killing each other since it would simply be moral law that keeps us from killing. Another clue that serves as evidence to our naturally violent ways is the second amendment that preserves "the right of the people to keep and bear arms"¹³. While the origins of this amendment route back to times of war, this amendment stays in place to serve as self-defense in modern days. If humans were not naturally violent why would we need to protect ourselves with weapons that kill, or rather in the words of Thomas Hobbes, "why do [we] always carry arms and why do [we] have keys to lock [our] doors?"¹⁴ Perhaps it is the little trust we have in each other's morals that leads us to this conclusion, but genetics and science help further explain this "natural state of war" by providing evidence that humans are quite literally naturally violent. In a paper written by biologist David Carrier, he speaks about the buttressed fist. The buttressed fist is the safest and most effective way of punching with your fist. By being able to keep your thumb closed against the index and middle fingers you are able to punch more safely and with more force.¹⁵ Yet the hand proportions of our early ancestors made them incapable of this fist, and David Carrier's research suggests that over time our hand

⁹ O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. 4th Estate, 2019.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 30 Apr. 2018

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "The Constitution of the United States," Amendment 2.

¹⁴ "Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 30 Apr. 2018

¹⁵ Gabbatiss, Josh. "Is Violence Embedded in Our DNA?" *SAPIENS*, David Williams/SAPIENS, 18 June 2018

proportions have evolved to become more effective weapons.¹⁶ This was just one of the many ways humans seem to have evolved to become more effective biological weapons. Another example of this is the bone structure in our faces, and particularly that placement and structure of our cheekbones to more effectively withstand force¹⁷. Yet when we further remove ourselves from our own naturally violent ways, it seems peculiar that humans observe and celebrate violence in so many different contexts. This is similarly due to a common human trait, a trait that intrigues us in the things all humans have in common. The most common and universally understood emotion, pain and suffering, a product of many types of violence. A simple and unfortunate product of human nature that we're reminded throughout our entire lives is the simple fact that humans fail far more than they succeed. More so, in the words of Tiffany Watt Smith, a writer for *The Guardian*, in pain and suffering there is such a "variety of tastes and textures involved"¹⁸, a certain kind of complexity that seemingly all humans have a sense of. For this reason (alongside *schadenfreude*), humans enjoy watching violent movies that depict death and torture. The universally understood complexity of pain is simultaneously what makes violence so effective. Pain is something everyone feels, so it more strongly connects the audience to the work. This same principle we use in entertainment is what we use in politics and war.

Violence is justified to restore justice, observed and performed for our own pleasure, and an inherent part of the human experience. Violence is extreme, personal, and unforgiving. The same aspects of violence that humans love are the same that kill them. By looking at violence in the context of history and how we interact with it in modern times, we can see trends, make connections, and therefore learn from mistakes and histories. Violence is simple, but simultaneously infinitely complex. Partaking in violence is a lot like playing with fire. It is the most powerful force known to man, and when used properly, it can make positive change more quickly and effectively than any other method. Yet when it is in the wrong hands, people, places, and ideas are crushed and killed. This forces us to ask ourselves, is it a power that we want to continue to take advantage of? Can we come to the terms with the fact that it just may be too complex? Or that its cons may outweigh its pros? I believe that physical violence in entertainment is a harmless thing. While gory and unpleasant at times, the consequences of physical violence in entertainment are close to nothing, and for many, is a positive thing. Yet, I also believe physical violence in real life or politics is never justifiable. Disagreements and differences in point of view should be dealt with in unsubjective ways. Both opposing parties can and should be allowed to change point of view, yet physical violence is unforgiving and cannot be taken back. Additionally, the product of physical violence will always bring more problems with it, whether it be the need for retaliation or lasting physical or mental injury.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Smith, Tiffany Watt. "The Secret Joys of *Schadenfreude*." *The Guardian*

Bibliography:

- “The Ultimate Punishment: A Beginner's Guide to the Death Penalty.” *Amnesty International*, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/04/the-ultimate-punishment-a-beginners-guide-to-the-death-penalty/.
- “OPINION: Ohio's Death Penalty Is Back, and That's a Good Thing.” *The New Political*, 20 Sept. 2017, thenewpolitical.com/2017/09/19/death-penalty-good/.
- Oklahoma City (2017), Barak Goodman, Netflix
- X, Malcolm, et al. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Ballantine Books, 2015.
- “MALCOLM X SEES RISE IN VIOLENCE; Says Negroes Are Ready to Act in Self-Defense.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 Mar. 1964, www.nytimes.com/1964/03/13/archives/malcolm-x-sees-rise-in-violence-says-negroes-are-ready-to-act-in.html.
- Metz, Nina. “In a Brutal World, Why Do We like Violent Entertainment?” *Chicagotribune.com*, 25 Aug. 2018, www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2005-04-17-0504170489-story.html.
- Smith, Tiffany Watt. “The Secret Joys of Schadenfreude.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 14 Oct. 2018, www.theguardian.com/global/2018/oct/14/the-secret-joys-of-schadenfreude-why-it-shouldnt-be-a-guilty-pleasure.
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. 4th Estate, 2019.
- Broomfield, Andrea, and Sally Mitchell. *Prose by Victorian Women: an Anthology*. Routledge, 2012.
- "The Constitution of the United States," Amendment 2.
- “10 Famous Directors on Movie Violence.” *Flavorwire*, 12 Jan. 2013, flavorwire.com/362898/10-famous-directors-on-movie-violence/2.
- Smith, Tiffany Watt. “The Secret Joys of Schadenfreude.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 14 Oct. 2018, www.theguardian.com/global/2018/oct/14/the-secret-joys-of-schadenfreude-why-it-shouldnt-be-a-guilty-pleasure.
- Gabbatiss, Josh. “Is Violence Embedded in Our DNA?” *SAPIENS*, David Williams/SAPIENS, 18 June 2018, www.sapiens.org/evolution/human-violence-evolution/.
- Lloyd, Sharon A., and Susanne Sreedhar. “Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 30 Apr. 2018, plato.stanford.edu/entries/hobbes-moral/.

Howard, Jeffrey. "Death Penalty: Is Capital Punishment Morally Justified?" *The Conversation*, 2 Jan. 2019, theconversation.com/death-penalty-is-capital-punishment-morally-justified-42970.

Al Jazeera. "Malcolm X and Martin Luther King." *USA | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 19 July 2017, www.aljazeera.com/programmes/face-to-face/2017/07/malcolm-martin-luther-king-170709072506322.html.