"I guess we did our jobs": Artistic distinction and authorial control in filmmakers' defensive comments

Neal King

Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

Lane Hall 0227

Virginia Tech

Blacksburg, VA 24061-0227

tel: 540 231 8174

fax: 540 231 7013

nmking@vt.edu

I Public commentary on popular film

People have directed accusations of decadence and profit-oriented cynicism toward Hollywood for a century; but, since the fall of the local censors of the mid-twentieth century, seldom must movie producers assume public forums to defend their wares. Most ignore complaints of vice in their films, though the industry maintains a rating system that limits it for marketing purposes. However, a number of filmmakers have addressed charges that their movies are misogynist or too violent. This essay discusses these defenses as ways of framing authorship. Artists present themselves as capable of controlling audience response; and producers portray themselves as stewards of "edgy" and compelling, but finally responsible products.

Filmmaker responses to accusations vary. Most urge that their films be lauded as exposés of the very deviance of which they stand accused. Some, when accused of misogyny, claim that their critics ought not judge patterns in filmmaking but should instead treat each film as a unique work of art. Those few who agree that they have produced unkind portrayals of women assess these as failings and then point out compensating virtues. Most of those accused of rendering bloodshed in too vivid a fashion become more assertive, suggesting that they wished to disturb their audiences, in order to teach them moral lessons. In any case, all agree that their films are ethically sound, that authors are expert witnesses in the search for the true meaning of their works, and that directors control the emotional responses of their audiences.

Marketing cinema's deviance

Filmmakers have had to defend their wares for decades. Bernstein shows that early Hollywood fare about *femmes fatale* often drew charges of celebrating vice and demeaning women.[1] Studios fought to distribute their films to theaters over the resistance of local censors by

subculture in which they must compete for status. Two marketing needs thus frame claims to authorship. First, the oversupply of talented labor requires that artists attract the respectful attention of potential employers at every opportunity (Brookey and Faulkner 2002; McQuivey; Scott 2002).

Second, the blockbuster period has seen "the increasing correlation between auteurist inscription and box-office achievement" at the end of the 20th century (Flanagan 2004, p. 20). In light of this link between auteur reputations and film rentals and sales, studios are as keen to "brand" the talent working for them during any marketing blitz as the artists are to sell themselves as authors capable of controlling the collective process of filmmaking (Brookey and Faulkner 2002; Flanagan 2004). Brookey and Faulkner (2002) show that the blockbuster approach of contemporary Hollywood, in which "filmmaking is plagued by the intrinsic dilemma of commercial versus artistic interests" (p. 286), favors (with increased box-office success) production teams that separate directors and writers from producers, or business from art. This allows producers to focus on administration and deal making, and it allows artists to develop reputations for authorial mastery — for instance by becoming writer-directors, the better to guard the "individual autonomy and artistic properties" upon which their reputations within the industry depend (p. 287). Even when unable to attain that hyphenate status, artists tend to pursue reputations for authorial control.

For such personnel, with their dependency upon authorial reputation, the opportunity to narrate their movies on laser disc and DVD alternate audio tracks might seem like a gift. Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2002) note that the ancillary materials on "special edition" DVDs cross the line between secondary and primary texts, bundled as they are with the movies on which they comment. In this way, filmmakers flex new muscles in the attempt to control

made to locate filmmaker responses to published complaints. Then, I reviewed ancillary materials for any additional films that seemed likely to have evoked complaints, published or not. Some of the defenses appear in newspaper interviews, others appear in online archives and on the video releases of the movies themselves. For this research, printed rebuttals to accusations have been turned into text files, and relevant passages of vocal commentary tracks on video releases have been transcribed to the syllable. Unless otherwise cited, the following quotes come from those video-commentary transcripts.

This second phase of sample collection is necessarily less systematic, however extensive my exposure to the relevant material. The list of films obtained through the media search does not correspond to the list of films for which filmmaker responses are available, because the advent of home-video commentaries — first on laser discs during the late 1980s and then on DVD in the late 1990s — offers filmmakers an opportunity to respond to charges that may not be widely publicized. Though critical accusations toward movies probably outnumber published responses by filmmakers by a wide margin, no reliable estimate of the relative proportion exists. The haphazard process by which filmmaker opinions enter public discourse seems to assure that none ever could. This sample of defenses is therefore unsystematic. The potential consequences include a bias toward more mainstream fare and away from obscure films. Filmmakers who gain little public attention leave few statements behind. However, because I intend to comment on public debate rather than relatively private discourse, this bias should not alter my analysis.

This paper does not judge whether any movie is misogynist or overly violent. Depending on one's definitions, one might conclude that most filmmakers who might have something to explain never addressed the issues in public. Such a central auteur in feminist film critique as Alfred Hitchcock, for instance, left no record of concern with either issue, though he was making

this typology into a system of apologia by which rhetors address issues of responsibility and offensiveness. He notes that people accused of deviance may, among other strategies, 1) *deny* the act, 2) *evade responsibility* for it, and 3) try to *reduce the offensiveness* of it. Benoit's elaboration of that older deviance framework in his typology of image restoration distinguishes between different versions of the denials of injury, responsibility, and the victim; and adds to the framework notions of *bolstering* (noting one's good points so as to reduce the offensiveness of the bad) and *compensation* (noting what good might have come from the bad behavior). People engage in image repair when their public reputations are attacked, and they do so in ways designed to keep them out of further trouble. I show next that the appeal to a higher loyalty best suits the twin marketing needs of authors, though producers tend to minimize deviance instead.

B Appeal to higher loyalty: Artistic distinction

Filmmakers accused of misogyny often defend their work as entertainment beyond the realm of moral critique, thus affirming their status as authors of unique works of art. Says Spike Lee of a rape scene in *She's Gotta Have It*, which a prominent feminist writer criticized as misogynist:

> I don't think this is a feminist film. I don't think bell hooks would say it was feminist. She had an article about *She's Gotta Have It* entitled 'Whose Pussy Is This?' If you have fifty women in a room, I think that fifty women will say it's a feminist film; fifty women will say it was anti-woman, so that's what happens with labels. Anyway-

Authorship here involves a claim to the uniqueness of each expression. Feminist analyses of Hollywood misogyny address film at the aggregate level, noting the ubiquity of such

Actresses accused of demeaning portrayals of women also reject moral judgment as inappropriate to entertainment per se, on account of the unique nature of the people whom they portray. Actresses intended no generalizations, they argue, just depictions of unique characters. Such performers can also *minimize* the import of film: e.g., "We're telling a tall tale" (*Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom*), "Oh, it's only a movie" (*Re-Animator*). Stories reflect nothing but the desire to entertain, and even movies intended to promote thought portray unique characters rather than large social groups. To judge such art by the standards of political speech is to misapply judgment altogether. (Feminists might recognize in this the familiar notion that a man accused of sexism is innocent if he had no such intent. Women are left to take responsibility for their reactions.)

This is nearly as close to a *mea culpa* as filmmakers tend. Marketing strategies involve branding filmmakers as individual authors, with unique points of view poorly understood by those with "political" biases and agendas. Filmmakers quickly turn away from aggregate frameworks that discern trends across films and back toward the focus on their individual stories and sensibilities.[2]

The producers of the *Basic Instinct* "special edition" laser disc provided implicit defense against the charge of misogyny by including on-set interviews with lead actress Sharon Stone, who explains that her character was just a nutty women in love with a man rather than a lesbian and cold-blooded murderer. Producers of the subsequent DVD hired anti-feminist academic Camille Paglia for a full-length defense. The director even quotes a fan note written by two lesbians, who praise the *femme-fatale* lead as a fine hero ("they said, 'We are so happy with this movie, especially because the heroine, Catherine Trammel, is a) rich, b) smart, c) a good driver'"). In her defense of *Basic Instinct* (which drew large audiences along with complaints of

C *Appeal to higher loyalty: Disturbing the oblivious audience*

As opposed to denying the relevance of a moral critique, as described above, filmmakers can also claim engagement with the troubled world and its social problems. Those accused of misogyny are most likely to do so when they have portrayed women as victims rather than women as deviants or abusers. In these cases, filmmakers almost always defend their own films as not deviant at all. They do this by claiming to have revealed social or dramatic truths about the hardships that women face, rather than having demeaned women for entertainment. They appeal the importance of truth and thus *differentiate* their art from genuinely misogynist exploitation.

Actress Isabella Rosselini says of *Blue Velvet*, in which she plays a woman powerless to stop her own victimization,

> Sometimes they do say that David [Lynch]'s films are misogynist. I thought of [the story of] Dorothy Vallens to be opposite of misogyny. I thought it was- uh- the film that portrayed an extreme portrait of oppression of a woman. ... All of us feel endangered-um- because in any woman's experience- uh- there is a certain amount of abuse, whether it's light or very heavy.

Rosellini's testimony links her film to the violence inflicted on women by the men in their lives.

In his commentary for *School Daze,* Spike Lee reacts to a scene repeatedly accused of trading in misogyny (Fraiman 1994) by noting its basis in fact. A young woman is exchanged between men as a sex object and is clearly wounded by the experience. Lee says, "[Actor] Giancarlo, I thought he was great in this film. He's the personification of evil. He's just a bad, ignorant motherfucker. I went to school with a lot of motherfuckers like that too. Just ignorant."

In what amounts to the virtual '*Citizen Kane*' of defensive commentary, writer/director

career, Prince (1998) contrasts the director's work to the mundane violence of Hollywood cinema:

> Most films do not hold viewers accountable for, or implicate them in, the violent spectacles they witness. Peckinpah's films do. … Peckinpah said that people want to walk out on his film, "but they can't. They can't turn their faces away. They watch, and that makes them mad" (p. 48).

Whether because Peckinpah's analysis has occurred to many filmmakers independently, or because young artists have learned his appeal to a higher loyalty from his statements, this argument about awakening an anaesthetized audience with shocking violence appears to have become popular. Certainly filmmakers acknowledge their debt to Peckinpah's work, if not necessarily his philosophy. For instance, Paul Schrader observes of the notorious bloodbath of *Taxi Driver*, which he wrote:

> … you're in a world of glorified bloodshed, including [Bickle's] own, almost past realism, and probably inspired by *The Wild Bunch*, which had an ending of pathological, suicidal glory . . . these four men entering into psychopath's heaven. So it was just 'the bloodier the better.'

Likewise, Oliver Stone defends *Natural Born Killers*: "I keep thinking that's always the case, with *Clockwork Orange*, and it was the case with *Wild Bunch* at that time. … They have to push the edges of every envelope. They must ask- force you to ask the questions of behavior." Stone suggests that Peckinpah provided a model of film as consciousness-raising for a society, and the director as *provocateur*.

Director David Fincher recalls the importance of a later Peckinpah work as he comments on the brutality of his *Panic Room*: "*Straw Dogs* is a movie I've always admired because it's so-

> Macy walks out, and he shot himself in the face, and they shut the fuck up, real quick. And they weren't laughing, and they weren't cheering, and it was dead silence. And I thought, "Good, ok. I've done my job ok. It's them that's fucked up." [laughing]

For this author, doing the job is controlling the audience; and disturbing the audience is a valid use of screen violence.

Says David Fincher, of a prolonged beating in *Fight Club*, "This is a scene that we definitely got into trouble with the censors in Britain … it made audiences very uncomfortable; but it's supposed to. … The censors came back and said, 'It made us uncomfortable. We thought the fighting went on too long.' And we were like, 'Well, I guess we did our jobs.'" The author's job here is to disturb his audience, as Peckinpah had intended to; and these defensive comments affirm the ability of these filmmakers to do just that. Fincher even specifies the totality of his control by noting the effect of minor edits on audience response: "when we put in the reactions of the crowd [of characters], all of the sudden [audiences] got way more disturbed than they had before. It's almost like- by giving them this little signpost that said, 'This is wrong,' it got their- sort of- moral ire up."

The writer director of *I Spit On Your Grave* celebrates not only the impact of his film on audiences, but the inability of hostile critics to defeat him:

> Many critics commend the movie for having the guts to be uncompromising in its depiction of rape, for daring to go way beyond what mainstream cinema would consider the proper limits. Yet, other critics detest this movie for these exact same reasons. They denounce and condemn it, 'cause it makes them sick to their stomachs. What did they expect a film about rape to be, enjoyable to watch?

somewhat. You're culpable- alright- for what's happening.

And says writer Edward Neumeier of the set-piece slaughter in *Robocop*, "When I saw audiences watching it, that there's a sort of a one-two punch that this movie - it starts you out laughing, and then this scene comes along and it's not funny any more. And the gang is saying 'laugh at this, laugh at this,' and then making bad jokes, 'Hey, give the man a hand!' after his hand is blown off, and you can't laugh anymore. And I think it really gets you by the throat." The appeal here is to value of raising the consciousness of an unsuspecting audience by disturbing them with carefully calibrated screen violence. The argument is that of artists, who celebrate their authorial control, often in defiance of the ratings boards (to which they typically refer as "censors").[4]

In keeping with the division of labor — artistic from administrative — producers of deviant films adopt a different rhetorical strategy. They neither tout the impact of their films nor assume avant-garde stances toward their audiences, but rather emphasize their sense of responsibility, denying the injury rather than appealing to a higher loyalty. Dean Devlin, producer of *The Patriot*, says, "I think it would have been irresponsible if we'd turned this into a fun scene, where the kids are high-fiving each other and being all excited about the death that they are causing.… This is the scene … is not so much about the violence but about the consequences of that violence."

Monte Hellman, executive producer of *Reservoir Dogs*, take a very different tone than writer/director Tarantino, suggesting the restraint rather than the offensiveness of the presentation of bloodshed: "If it becomes too graphic, then it becomes silly, and the audience will find some way not to believe it … And I think that's frequently the case, where- you know- less is more."

women, was to put them on a pedestal." A filmmaker (Terry Gilliam) notes with approval the same about another (Federico Fellini), in his testimonial to *8 1/2*:

> I think at the time- if I do remember, there was sense of- you know- that he was very anti-women. Women were objects. But he admits that, right in the film. … He doesn't lie about his weaknesses. He puts them right out there. … The rest of us, in our more- uh- conscribed, safe worlds, uh- pretend we're not like that.

Thus can filmmakers defend misogyny in terms of authorial self-awareness. They are all the more in artistic control for that personal quality.

The most common form of tacit admission that the film is truly deviant, however, comes in the form of compensation. Filmmakers congratulate the actresses for their courage and note the positive effects that the notorious movies had on their careers. Of the leading actress in *I Spit of Your Grave*, for instance, the filmmaker notes: "She never complained, and was hell bent to go to any extreme, whether physical or emotional, to convey the agony and humiliation of [the character]." He also notes that he married this actress and that the two have discussed filming a sequel. This strategy affirms the commercial viability of the filmmaker's approach, obviously of relevance to his career. Says the director (Stuart Gordon) say of the lead in his film *Re-Animator*: "Barbara is a great actress- um- and a very, very brave one, obviously, as this movie shows." Not only that, "but I think Barbara-you know- knows this is the movie that really got her known- put her on the map." In sum, commentators tend to accept strictures against misogyny and argue that they are innocent of it, or admit some guilt with caveats about good that they also do. A few confess to out-and-out misogyny, but this response is rare. Filmmakers are far more likely to resist moral judgment with the claim of artistic distinction, just as those accused of graphic violence claim the higher loyalty of disturbing the audience.

other women, remain common practice). The implicit message is that witnesses to the dialogue — the consumers of these Hollywood products — should run out and see more movies, the better to judge these questions for themselves. This commentary can thus serve marketing functions as well as affirm one's value to a high-status industry. Filmmakers wishing to attain a fashionable "edginess" may embrace hot-button themes and court the very controversies by which they can later claim to be victimized, all in service of claims about their skills.

What better publicity could one generate, after all? Filmmakers wishing to attain a fashionable "edginess" may embrace hot-button themes and court the very controversies by which they can later claim to be victimized. Such publicity may enhance the fortunes of all who participate, from the producers and activists who go to culture war, to the journalists and academics who make their livings by analyzing the controversies. The debates offer minor forums for various groups, who benefit by attention to their claims and the high-emotion rituals (pickets, interviews, rallies, or animated conversations) that such events inspire among their constituents. In all of these ways, the art of spinning misogyny appears to have become important to the business of selling and understanding film. By framing their deviance in ways that affirm their authorship, these filmmakers are doing their jobs.

Notes

[1] Mainstream cinema has more often regarded women as objects, nurturers, and scamps than as heroes (Clover 1991; Creed 1993; Haskell 1987; Mulvey 1990; Projansky 2001; Staiger 1995). Taken together, these studies demonstrate the ubiquity of nonfeminist values underlying the

Verhoeven, of the hero's agonizing gunfire death in *Robocop*, "Murphy's killing is crucifixion. And the horrors of crucifixion are- I think- expressed there because I wanted to have a crucifixion before I went up to Resurrection. And that's why that's so pushed, really. But this is a real crucifixion, and crucifixion for me is like descending into Hell." Seventeen years later, director Mel Gibson would take this to its logical conclusion with his *The Passion of the Christ*, telling Diane Sawyer: "I wanted it to be shocking, and I also wanted it to be extreme. I wanted it to push the viewer over the edge … so that they see the enormity — the enormity of that sacrifice — to see that someone could endure that and still come back with love and forgiveness, even through extreme pain and suffering and ridicule." One could appeal to no higher loyalty.

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"I guess we did our jobs": Artistic distinction and authorial control in filmmakers' defensive comments

Abstract

Filmmaker commentaries on their controversial works allow them to valorize their authorship. When accused of misogyny or presenting excessively graphic violence, filmmakers employ strategies of image repair, concentrating on reductions of offensiveness and appeals to higher loyalties rather than evasions of responsibility. These comments affirm their sense of control over what their films mean, building reputations for artistic distinction and authorial mastery that benefit directors in the industrial subculture of Hollywood. Producers are more likely to try to reduce offensiveness. Most of these strategies fit larger patterns in the history of Hollywood marketing of vice-ridden films; but the claim of intent to disturb audiences with displays of graphic violence belongs to the post-production code era. In this discourse, authorial mastery expresses itself in the morally critical manipulation of audiences into states of shock.

arguing, first, that ideals of free speech should hold sway and, second, that movies express ideas to be pondered rather than pose dangers to be suppressed (Bernstein 1999, P. 174). The notion that critics had simply misinterpreted movies rather than uncovered vice in them was invented during the early decades of cinema, and proved an effective means to gather public support for the distribution of product. Studios hoped that readers of such debate would buy tickets to see what the fuss was about.

The early decades of Hollywood also saw public outcry over film violence, to which studios responded with the Production Code Administration, which edited scripts before films were shipped to regional censor boards (Prince 2003; Shipley and Cavender 2001; Springhall 1998). But the film industry took advantage of the nation's experience combating fascism in World War II to argue that filmmakers were authors and that their expressions ought to be as free as those of the press. Several years later, the Supreme Court agreed and largely freed Hollywood of supervision by regional censors (Jowett 1996). By the mid 1950s, economic pressures on Hollywood (declines in audience size due to television, suburbanization, and the baby boom) inspired filmmakers to claim greater freedom of mature expression, the better to differentiate their product from broadcast television (Jowett 1996 272). By the 1960s, members of a better-educated audience demanded movies "more sensitive to intellectual and social questions" (Mast 1981, p. 278) thus inspiring studios to be more liberal (Baumann 2001, p. 411; Prince 2003, p. 271).

Changes in filmmaking strategies, including the dismantling of the production code and the invention of the age-graded rating system, did little to quite the protest of those worried that depictions of crime could inspire it as well, or that demeaning depictions of women could harm our society. Today, forums for defending their controversial films offer artists the means publicly to affirm both the virtues of their works and the richness of their talents, within an industrial

consumption of their wares, adding authorial voices to guide interpretation and celebrate authorial control. They were once restricted, in their attempts to frame reception, to secondary texts. And those media outlets were largely under the control of journalists employed by other, often rival, companies. But technical advances in home-video media allow producers to include guides to interpretation within the products themselves. Where filmmakers previously relied upon the indirect means of road-show press junkets and consequent newsprint interviews and television spots to spread their words, they can now include statements directly in the home video packages. Studios advertise these ancillary materials with such video cover tag lines as "special edition," "collector's edition," or such portentous logos as "Infinifilm" (Elliot 2001). The boom in DVD sales has provided a massive audience for those products, whatever the proportion who attend to the ancillary comments (Snider 2002). The wealth of such material available allows us to assess patterns in filmmaker discourse. By examining filmmaker's defensive comments, I will show how their responses to accusations of deviance allow them to frame their authorship in ways that market both their movies as intriguingly controversial and themselves as authors in control of their work and their audiences.

II Method

This study demonstrates patterns in filmmaker response to charges against them, in order to draw conclusions about interactions between industrial subculture, marketing, and authorship. I began my search for filmmaker comments with a series of internet periodical-database searches (on Infotrac, Proquest, and FirstSearch). These provided cases of public use of the terms "violen(t/ce)," "misogyny," "sexi(st/m)," and "anti-femini(st/m)," in discussions of contemporary (1980 to present) movies ("film," "cinema," and "movie"). All attempts were

public statements as late as the 1970s. I have no basis for estimating the percentage of potentially defensive filmmakers who have avoided or never even considered these debates. I simply characterize the defenses that have been made public and their implications for film authorship as responsible, skillful control of narrative meaning and audience response. That is, a few clear patterns in the commentaries emerged, including a striking difference between defenses against accusations of misogyny and defenses of graphic violence.

III Filmmaker defenses

A *Techniques and Apologia*

Analysts of deviance have shown that people employ "techniques of neutralization" to repel accusations that they have sinned or broken the law (Sykes and Matza 1957). This perspective on deviance does not judge whether the action of which one might be accused is either wrong or uncommon. It simply notes that the strength of the outraged response that an action draws indicates the serious of its deviance. If a movie inspires protests against misogyny, as did the cheap horror movie *Snuff* (1976) (Brottman 1997), then one may conclude that the film was deviant in that respect. One may also infer some degree of deviance from the fact of denials, apologia, and other techniques of neutralization. In any case, filmmakers with wares to sell may steer public debate toward a marketing pitch, especially when a loyal base of fans stands ready to lend support to a beleaguered artist whose work they love.

When accused of deviance, people typically *deny injury* or *deny responsibility*; *condemn those who condemn them* (as hypocrites or as driven by ulterior motives), *condemn the complaining victims* (as unworthy of sympathy), or *appeal to higher loyalties* by which they were justified in committing their deviant acts. Communication scholar Benoit (1995) elaborates

misogyny and homophobia from gay/lesbian groups), academic Camille Paglia faults critics for a fashionably politicized stance verging on elitism.

> [On opening day] one saw the disconnect between the political agenda about this film, and the actual audience response. … This is a good case, I think, of the really grotesque elitism, of a certain kind of intelligentsia — that pretends to speak for the people but is in fact wildly divorced from actual popular tastes.

The movies did no harm, these spokespeople variously argue, but were labeled deviant by people with misplaced priorities and political agendas.

Sherry Lansing, producer of *Fatal Attraction* says, "I was surprised at the reactions of feminists. And since I consider myself a feminist, I was concerned by it." The provision of women's testimonies could easily depend upon the self-interest of employees and stars in lauding either their own work or the famous talents for whom they might like to work again. A retrospective interview with actresses who worked with Alfred Hitchcock, for instance, tried but failed to evoke accusations of misogyny (Garrett, 1999). The paucity of denunciations in published Hollywood discourse suggests that the testimony of actresses will nearly always be laudatory.

Marketable film authorship also involves the ability to control the production process and thus provide the promised stimulation. Directors are especially motivated to emphasize their ability to govern the flow of filmmaking energy in such a complex and collective process. As a result, the classical model of auteurism has proved popular among these artists. And for that reason, filmmakers usually avoid the technique of neutralization known as "denial of responsibility." To deny responsibility for what a movie means or what affect it has on an audience would be to deny the most basic claims of saleable authorship.[3]

Mier Zarchi relates at length the story of his heroism in caring for a woman who had been brutally gang raped, beaten, and threatened with death. He tells how this experience led him to make the most reviled instance of the rape-revenge cycle, *I Spit On Your Grave*. In such accounts, filmmakers must depict women as both victims and assailants, and use graphic violence, to make important points about murder and rape.

This appeal to higher loyalty combines the concern with realism with an authorial claim to be able to alter the consciousness of an audience. Filmmakers present themselves as authors in control of their work and what they mean to those who watch them. And though such artists might complain of unreasonable people misinterpreting their work (especially ratings boards), they proudly take responsibility for what they have done with graphic violence. In contrast to the appeals to the values of entertainment and artistic distinction in response to accusations of misogyny, filmmakers accused of using graphic violence celebrate the emotional injury that they have done to their audiences. This defense includes appeals to realism and its educative potential.

First, artisans paint a picture of a cruel world that they confront with their potent works. Says Thelma Schoonmaker, editor of a remake of *Cape Fear*,

> I think anyone who thinks that violence doesn't exist in this world, or thinks it should be avoided at all costs is … It's a dangerous state of mind: One has to be aware of the terrible things that are out there, to prepare oneself for them, and to try and counter them. So, I think if you're going to try to show violence, and it's done with conviction the way [director] Marty does, it is correct.

Such celebration of the shocking depiction of cruelty dates to Sam Peckinpah's aspirations for his ultraviolent film *The Wild Bunch,* with which he hoped to shock Vietnam-war era audiences into reflecting upon the atrocities of their world. In his study of Peckinpah's

uh- visceral … I wanted to make a movie that had- where the brutality meant something, where it didn't just- and that's a pretty good model for that, because that movie was truly brutal." These filmmakers celebrate the power that Peckinpah had to upset his audiences, and couple their claims of authorial potency with an appeal to the educative potential of vivid violence.

For instance, in his account of a gunfight in *Open Range*, director Kevin Costner notes with authorial pride,

> all through this sequence people have commented to me about the [very loud] gunshots.… I feel the compliment, but I'm also sad that people haven't heard guns or understood guns to be the way they really are, which is frightening. You know, sometimes showing violence is the best example of why not to have violence …And when you see true violence, when you see somebody good at killing, if you're a normal person, it will make you sick.

This is the twin claim of the director's appeal to higher loyalties. Graphic violence on screen can teach audiences to respect real violence in their world; and these filmmakers are just the ones to provide this instruction, because the clarity of their authorial voices give them near total control over viewers.

Paul Thomas Anderson presents his own claim of mastery in the form of a cliffhanger. Screening *Boogie Nights*, he at first feared losing control of his audience:

> … this crowd of college kids cheers when [a homicidal/suicidal character] gets the gun. Now, I sank in my seat, you know?… And then he shoots them, and [the viewers] cheer, even louder, and I sank even further in my seat and I thought, "Well, I have fucked up, big-time. I have ruined this. How did this happen? And how do I- and- and- I can't possibly fix it. This is one big, long shot." Well, then

> Maybe entertaining? … Some of these critics even made it their mission in life to kick this movie into the black hole … But to their horror and dismay, they discovered that the … more they attack it, the more powerful, controversial, and in demand it becomes.

This sort of criticism of the audience turns up repeatedly, as though filmmakers were at odds with their publics and happy to celebrate their power to disturb. Of *The Last House on the Left*, writer/director Wes Craven recalls that, "the audience was kind of suckered in. They came in thinking that they were going to see a scary movie that was an entertainment, and ended up being, in a way, implicated by being there. And I think that is some of the rage that came out of it. People said, 'Oh, it's so ugly.' Well, you know, you can answer, 'Well, what were you doing in the theater, then? Were you there to be amused by violence?'"

Director Kevin Costner offers, about *Open Range*: "Most audiences, when they first see this image [of a character being chased down and shot] — there's a keystone-cop quality to this — but as they watch- the longer they watch, people quit laughing. And they realize that this man has just been slaughtered. And it's not so funny anymore after that."

A number of directors tell such stories of audiences who stop laughing as violence becomes more intense, as if to follow up Prince's comments about audiences being implicated in Peckinpah's screen violence (Prince 48). Says Tarantino, of *Reservoir Dogs*:

> One of the things- the reason why the torture scene works so well is like- you know- I kind of defy anybody to watch Michael Madsen do that dance, and not kind of enjoy it. …And then, Uugh! He cuts the guy's face, and you're 'Huh!' But, you know? Fuck you. You were enjoying it. Up until that moment, you were enjoying it. So, thus, you were certainly- you know, you're a co-conspirator,

Mimi Polk, producer of *Thelma and Louise*, argues of its shootings that, "This movie is not telling people to go out and do that. It's symbolic of finding your freedom and exploring a friendship and the camaraderie." And Stephen Pevner, producer of *In the Company of Men* (notorious for its depiction of the abuse of a white woman and black man by a white man) "We ended up hiring a really fantastic woman by the name of Diane Collins, who was an African-American publicist, who was Martin Scorcese's publicist. And- you know- never once did she ever have a problem with any of the movie, especially in particular this scene." These producers simply play down the deviance of their wares, leaving the arguments about edgy art and radical expression to the actors, writers and directors.

C *Admissions of misogyny: Bolstering and Compensation*

I have yet found only one outright expression of (mild) disapproval of one's own work. Wes Craven, in his comments on *The Last House On the Left* (which he made decades ago), notes that, "obviously it goes way beyond what any film had ever done before. And any idiot could do that, I suppose, in a way." He defends not the cruelty onscreen but the drama that follows, and notes that he probably would not film the violence in the same way today. With a successful career underway, Craven takes issue only with decisions made decades ago, with little cost to his reputation for maturity or control.

Admissions and attempts to reduce offensiveness otherwise take the forms of *bolstering* (claims of mitigating positive qualities) and *compensation* (claims that good came of the films). In an unusual move, the director of a remake of *Cat People* provides a bit of self deprecation, in explanation of a film's scene of bondage: "I have to admit I love this. It's is a little sick, but it's really cool. … That was a sort of- the way I, in my background, kind of dealt with my fear of

IV Discussion

Filmmakers generally stick to denials of injury and appeals to higher loyalties. Evasions of responsibility would imply lack of control over the filmmaking process, which high-status industry types would find anathema to their professional reputations. Producers minimize the deviance their movies, in keeping with their focus on business and the required reputations of responsibility. However, artistic authors take nearly the opposite tack, emphasizing instead their desire to manipulate audiences and their abilities to do so. Implicitly agreeing with producers and anti-violence crusaders that real-world violence is bad, these authors pose their manipulative skills as a viable response, thus selling themselves as reasonable, but most of all as artistically potent. They are marketing themselves both to audiences who like the idea of auteurs, and to others in the industry who might like to employ powerful artists. This marketing of authorship and products is the first and principle function of defensive filmmaker commentary.

The argument to reduce offensiveness, when advanced voluntarily, serves the ironic function of reinforcing that sense of mild deviance. Filmmakers appear to be doing this deliberately, as though a sense of naughtiness could sell their wares. Horror movies, erotic thrillers, and the like depend upon a sense of the forbidden for their marketing; and the charges of misogyny and excessive violence, however refuted, seem to help in this regard. This public commentary, offered by producers alongside the movies themselves, seeks to counter negative criticism while it rides the waves of the free publicity that the controversy generates. It also affirms values that presumably fit within a professional-class, libertarian attitude among Hollywood personnel. There, both distaste for real-world violence and a liberal feminism appear to be popular (even though condescension toward attractive young women, and neglect of all

stories told by Hollywood.

[2]Defenses against allegations of racism follow similar patterns, including condemnation of condemners as manufacturing controversy (in the case of *The Phantom Menace* with its maligned character Jar-Jar Binks; *BBC News* 1999), demands to take characters as unique rather than as representative of social groups (in the case of the same movie; *Film News*), and expression of responsible views on matters of public import (in the case of *The Siege*; Wilkins and Downing 2002). In no case have I discovered any admission of racism or defensive imputation of courage to an actor of color for doing a difficult (implicitly, racist) movie. Filmmakers seem less indulgent of charges of racism and more eager to dispel them. This may explain why DVD commentaries tend to avoid the (perhaps painfully) hot topic.

[3] Only two such evasions of responsibility arise. First, Meir Zarchi notes that the grind-house distribution company retitled his movie *Day of the Woman* as *I Spit On Your Grave*: "In addition to giving the movie a new, sleazy title, the distributor also packaged it as an exploitation flick and consequently failed to present a true image in the tone of the picture." Zarchi thus disclaims responsibility for the effect that this movie has had on its audiences. Second, on the newest *Basic Instinct* DVD, director Paul Verhoeven makes the implausible claim that he was out of the room when the film crew conned actress Sharon Stone into revealing her genitalia to the camera (they apparently told her that her underwear was reflecting light back to the low-angle camera). Stone has complained publicly of being misled, and Verhoeven appears to be embarrassed about the incident. (His cinematographer quickly reminds him that he surely was on the set and thus involved in the manipulation.)

[4] Two directors take a different tack in defense of two graphic killings. Says director Paul

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