

Racism and the Aesthetic of Hyper-real Violence: Pulp Fiction and Other Visual Tragedies

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Social Identities 1:2 (1995), pp. 333-354.

Cinema and the Culture of Violence

American cinema has increasingly provided a site of convergence for depicting both the inner city "reality" of black-on-black youth violence and for promoting a renewed "acceptability and/or tolerance of straightforward racist doctrine." Recent films focusing on black urban violence such as **Boys N the Hood** (1991), **Juice** (1992), **Menace II Society** (1993), **Sugar Hill** (1994), and **Fresh** (1994) have attracted national media coverage because they do not simply represent contemporary urban realities but also reinforce the popular perception that everyday black urban life and violent crime mutually define each other. Cinema appears to be providing a new language and aesthetic in which the city becomes the central site for social disorder and violence, and black youth in particular, become agents of crime, pathology, and moral decay.

Real life and celluloid images blur as the representations of race and violence proliferate more broadly through the news media's extensive coverage of youth violence, not infrequently highlighting the gore, guts, hysteria, and other tawdry Hollywood effects to punctuate its sensationalist often racist commentary. The relationship between the everyday and cinematic representations is often taken up as causal, as when the national media recently focused on Hispanic youth in Los Angeles, New York, and New Jersey who rioted or fought each other outside of the movie theaters in which black youth gangsta films were being shown. In examining these real and symbolic representations of black on black violence, the popular press used the incident to link exposure to media violence with aggressive, anti social behavior in real life. The press did not use these events to call public attention to the "violence to the mind, body, and spirit of crumbling schools, low teacher expectations, unemployment and housing discrimination, racist dragnets and everyday looks of hate by people who find [black youth] guilty by suspicion." Instead of focusing on how larger social injustices and failed policies, especially those at the root of America's system of inequality, contribute to a culture of violence that is a tragedy for all youth, the dominant media transformed the growing incidence of youth violence into a focus on black on black fratricide. In this particular instance, the representation of black youth was used as a vehicle to thematize the causal relationship between violence and the discourse of pathology. Such racially coded discourse serves to mobilize white fears and legitimate "drastic measures" in social policy in the name of crime reform. Moreover the discourse of race and violence provides a sense of social distance and moral privilege that places dominant white society outside of the web of violence and social responsibility.

Another example of how cinematic representations and "objective" reporting mutually reinforce a narrow, racial coding of violence can be seen in an incident that happened at a local movie theater in Oakland California. A group of Castlemont High School students were taken to see **Schindler's List** (1993) on Martin Luther King Day as part of the school's effort to deepen their sense of history, oppression, and to broaden their understanding of the struggle for human rights. The students, most of them black and Hispanic, laughed at some of the most violent scenes in the film. The manager of the theater reacted in shock and asked them to leave. The story received national attention in the popular press, and echoed the stereotypical assumption that these students mirrored in their own personalities the nihilism and pathology that inevitably led to increased disorder and criminality characteristic of the racially marginal space of the urban city, a space of gruesome violence that threatens to spread outward to the "safe" confines of middle class America.

Hardly a paragon of objectivity, the media's portrayal of this episode betrays a certain tragic irony in representing black youth as the source rather than the victims of violence. In fact recent statistics reveal that "young black males constituted 17.7 percent of all homicide victims, even though they made up only 1.3 percent of the US population. [Moreover] black men over age 24 were victims of homicide at a rate of 65.7 per 100,00, compared with 7.8 per 100,00 for white men." The media portrait nonetheless reflects the conservative mood of the country: treating violent youth as dangerous urban aliens is a guaranteed crowd

pleaser; focusing on the devastating effects of (white) racism, rising poverty and unemployment for a generation of black youth is less popular.

What is so crucial about the above examples is that the largely dominant white media, while critical of the particular response of black and Hispanic children to the inhumane consequences of Nazi violence, refused to analyze in any significant way the larger culture of violence that permeates the United States. Such an investigation might explain both the insensitive response of the school children to the violence portrayed in **Schindler's List** but it would also demand that white society examine its own responsibility and complicity in producing an ever spreading culture of violence and hip nihilism that makes it difficult for anyone to draw a meaningful line between the normal and the pathological. Moreover, as the context and the conditions for the production of violent representations are justified in the name of entertainment and high box office profits, youth increasingly experience themselves as both the subject and the objects of everyday violence and brutality. The cheap editorializing by the popular press and dominant media offer skewed portrayals of youth that cover over the fact that "young people ages 12 to 17 are the most common victims of crime in America, with a 1 in 13 chance of being raped, robbed, or assaulted." While the relationship between representational violence and its impact on children and youth is not clear, the culture of violence spurned by television, videos, and film is too pervasive to be ignored or dismissed.

As violence becomes increasingly a source of pleasure either as a site of voyeuristic titillation and gory spectacle, or as an aesthetic principle in all the major mediums of information and entertainment, it becomes all the more imperative for educators and cultural workers find ways of scrutinizing its mechanisms and the implications it has politically and pedagogically for producing and legitimizing particular ideologies and representations of youth. How do educators prepare youth and others to think through representations of violence in order to understand them critically as "vehicles through which society's racial, contradictions, injustices, and failed policies are mediated?"

The moment of violence in films is never arbitrary or innocent. Yet, there is no singular reading or simple yardstick that can be used to either condone or condemn how violence is represented, taken up by diverse audiences, or used to maximize pleasure so as to give it a liberatory or fascist edge. Cinematic violence can be used to probe the depths of everyday life in ways that expand one's understanding of tyranny and domination; it can also be used to maximize the sleazy side of pleasure, reinforce demeaning stereotypes, or provoke cheap voyeurism. Cinematic violence operates on many registers and any theoretical and pedagogical attempt to deal with complex representations of violence must be discriminatory in taking up such distinctions. As widespread as the culture of violence might be, it is especially imperative that educators, parents, citizens, and cultural workers challenge the representations of violence that have become a defining principle of the visual media. Such a challenge needs to be enunciated critically as part of a broader public policy to both protect youth and to enable them to discern between the violence of the spectacle and a representational violence that allows them to identify with the suffering of others, display empathy, and bring their own ethical commitments to bear.

In what follows, first, I want to offer a schematic definition of different representations of violence so as to lay out the theoretical groundwork for making important discriminations about how violence is constructed in films, how it mobilizes specific forms of identification, and how it might be addressed pedagogically. Second, I will examine how the ultra violence emerging in popular films heralded as part of a new avant garde constructs forms of cultural racism along with an aestheticized violence that appeals to a generation of youth raised on the fast-paced programming of MTV and the ethical indifference of the 1980s. In addition, I will take up how racially coded violence works to exclude dominant white society from any responsibility or complicity with the larger culture of violence while simultaneously shifting the burden for crime and social decay to people of color, working class whites, and other subordinate groups. In developing this perspective, I will focus on the widely acclaimed films by Quentin Tarantino, **Reservoir Dogs** (1992) and **Pulp Fiction** (1994). Finally, I will conclude by suggesting how educators and other cultural workers can think through pedagogical and political strategies to deal with the rising culture of representational violence in the United States.

Ritualistic, Symbolic, and Hyperreal Violence

Statistics regarding the representation of violence in media culture border on the sensational. George

Gerbner, a professor and dean emeritus at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, has been monitoring violence on television for the last twenty years. According to Gerbner's studies, the major broadcast networks average about five acts of violence an hour in their prime-time programming. This is an alarming figure given that the visual media has become an overwhelming fact of cultural life. "The [television] set is on an average of 7 hours a day in the average American home....Most viewers watch by the clock and not by the program." For example, it has been reported that for the last fifteen years on Saturday morning, when children do most of their viewing, the networks averaged about 25 acts of violence an hour. Moreover, "researchers estimate that the average child will watch 100,000 acts of simulated violence before graduating from elementary school. And studies have shown that poor children see even more." In addition, "by the age of 18, the average American child has witnessed 18,000 simulated murders on television." Increasingly, motion picture violence has followed the path of television, especially since much of the profits generated from theater movies will be made through videocassette sales. Serious films have given way to the blockbuster, and the trade off has been an increase in the number of violent films shown in movie theaters across the United States.

At issue here is more than simply quantifying violence in the visual media. If educators are going to move beyond simply condemning representational violence in a wholesale fashion, it becomes necessary to draw distinctions, however crudely, between violence that is unnecessary and violence that can illuminate important messages about basis of humanity and inhumanity. For example, the violence portrayed in films as different as **Schindler's List** (1993) and **Lethal Weapon 2** (1989) register disparate interests and assumptions. In the former, violence attempts to inscribe in public memory the tragic event of the Holocaust, an historical event that should be neither forgotten nor repeated. Whereas the violence in spectacle films such as **Lethal Weapon 2** is kitsch serving as cheap entertainment. This particular form of violence celebrates the sensational and the gruesome. It has no redeeming value except to parade its endless stream of blood and gore at the expense of dramatic structure, emotional depth, and social relevance.

In analyzing visual violence, I want to make a distinction that is fairly obvious to any critic of violence in the media. First, there is what I will call ritualistic violence, ritualistic in the sense that violence is at the center of the genres that produce it—horror, action-adventure, Hollywood drama—utterly banal, predictable, and often deeply masculine. This type of violence is pure spectacle in form and superficial in content. Audiences connect with such depictions viscerally, yet it is not edifying in the best pedagogical sense, offering few insights into the complex range of human behavior and struggles. This type of violence is campy, self-indulgent, and masturbatory. It does not recast ordinary events or attempt critically to shift sensibilities. On the contrary, it glows in the heat of the spectacle, shock, and contrivance, yet it is entirely formulaic. This is the Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis school of violence fueling blockbusters such as **Die Hard 2** (1990) and **Terminator 2** (1991). Other examples can be found in films such as **Speed** (1994), **Blown Away** (1994), and **The Fugitive** (1994). Within these films there is an "echo of the pornographic in maximizing the pleasure of violence." Representations of ritualistic violence derive their force through countless repetitions of graphic cruelty serving to numb the senses with an endless stream of infantilized, histrionic flair. For example, the hero of **Robocop II** (1990) massacres 81 people, while Bruce Willis yields a body count of 264 killings in **Die Hard 2**. Excessive violence, in this case, is valorized to the degree that it reproduces the genre with new psychological and visual twists, yet never asking more from the audience than the programmed response. Referencing only itself as heightened spectacle, violence in the Hollywood blockbuster film offers viewers voyeuristic identification rather than providing an opportunity for the audience to think through and scrutinize the mechanisms and implications of violence.

The second type of violence, symbolic violence, has a long cinematic tradition and can be recognized in more recent films such as Oliver Stone's **Platoon** (1987), Clint Eastwood's **Unforgiven** (1992), Neil Jordan's **The Crying Game** (1992), and Steven Spielberg's **Schindler's List** (1993). Symbolic violence attempts to connect the visceral and the reflective. It couples the mobilization of emotion and the haunting images of the unwelcome with an attempt to "give meaning and import to our mortal twitchings....it shakes everything up, reforming the fictive environment around itself." Symbolic violence does not become an end in itself. It serves to reference a broader logic and set of insights. Instead of providing the viewer with stylistic gore that offers the immediacy of visual pleasure and escape, symbolic violence probes the complex contradictions that shape human agency, the limits of rationality, and the existential issues that tie us to other human beings and a broader social world. Symbolic violence refuses the mechanism of fast

paced rhythmic frames, or a dizzying pattern of repetitious images. Instead, it attempts to "find ways of scrutinizing the mechanisms and implications of violence through different processes of framing, juxtaposing, repeating and quoting images" within a context that invites critical and meaningful commentary. For example, in **Platoon** Oliver Stone uses violence as a vehicle for rewriting the Hollywood war movie and in doing so attempts to demystify national chauvinism as a legitimation for waging war in Vietnam. **Platoon** also foregrounds violence as an explosive index of class and racial tensions that give rise to contradictory loyalties, acts of aggression, and the painful psychological experiences many troops endured in the jungles of Vietnam. In this case, violence has a determining role, that is, it has consequences portrayed in the film that connect morality and human agency.

A similar example of symbolic violence can be seen in Clint Eastwood's film, **Unforgiven**, which virtually rewrites the traditional John Wayne version of the Hollywood western. Against the romantic narratives of helpless heroines, shootouts at sundown, and cowboy heroism, Eastwood creates a film in which violence serves as both a spectacle and an ethical referent for exploding the myth of a West in which women are only ornaments, justice is pristine and unadulterated, and white male heroes bask in the splendor of the fast draw. **Unforgiven** rewrites the traditional and revisionist Western and in doing so raises ethical questions concerning how violence has been mythologized and decontextualized so as to reinvent a nostalgic and utterly false version of the American past, a past that once again seemed to shape public memory and national identity with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

The third type of cinematic violence I want to address is hyperreal violence. This form of violence has emerged relatively recently and can be seen in a number of contemporary films that include: **Reservoir Dogs**, a nicely textured film that boldly chronicles the gang violence and torture of a policeman after a botched jewelry heist; **Natural Born Killers** (1994), which tells the story of Mickey and Mallory, two young serial killers who become media sensations, and **Pulp Fiction**, the most recent and celebrated of films depicting the new violence. **Pulp Fiction** is constructed loosely around a series of three stories that pays homage to the pulp crime genre of the 1930s in the United States. On the international scene, hyperreal violence can be seen in the films such as Johnny Woo's Hong Kong production, **The Killer** (1989), and in the 1992 Belgian movie **Man Bites Dog** by Remy Belvaux and Andre Bonzel. What is new in these films is the emergence of a form of ultra violence marked by technological overstimulation, gritty dialogue, dramatic storytelling, parody, and an appeal to gutsy naturalism. Whereas ritualist violence is shorn of any critical social engagement, hyperreal violence exploits the seamy side of controversial issues. This is a violence that appeals to primal affectations and has a generational quality that captures the bona fide violence that youth encounter in the streets and neighborhoods of an increasingly racially divided America. This new, hyperreal violence with its technological wizardry and its formalist appeals, irony, guilt free humor, wise guy dialogue, genuflection to the cultural pap of the 70s represents a marker of the age. In some ways it both demonstrates and redefines Hannah Arendt's insightful comment about the banality of violence. For Arendt, violence is banal because its ubiquity makes it more difficult for human beings in the twentieth century not to be implicated or addressed by it. It was precisely the ubiquity and the mundane nature of violence that Arendt believed made it a serious danger to civil society. The hyperreal violence of the new gangsta genre parading as film noir appears to mock Arendt's insight by isolating terrifying events from wider social context coupled with an endless stream of characters who thrive in a moral limbo and define themselves by embracing senseless acts of violence as a defining principle of life legitimated by a hard dose of cruelty and cynicism. For the mostly young directors of the new hyperreal violent films, it is precisely the familiarity and commonality of everyday violence that renders it a prime target to commodify, sensationalize, and subordinate to the aesthetic of realism. Audiences can gaze at celluloid blood and gore and comfortably refuse any complicity or involvement for engaging the relationship between symbolic and real violence.

But there is more at stake here than moral indifference coupled with cultural slumming. The form and content of the new hyperreal films go beyond emptying representations of violence of any ethical content, they also legitimate rather than contest the spreading acts of symbolic and real violence rooted in and shaped by a larger racist culture. Representations of violence can no longer be separated from representations of race; they mutually inform each other in terms of what is both included and left out of such representations. Nowhere is this more evident than in the wave of new avant garde films informed by hyperreal violence. But before I discuss **Reservoir Dogs** and **Pulp Fiction** as an exemplary films in this

regard, I want to map out briefly some representative signposts indicating the extent to which race, white panic, and dominant media images of violence circulate in the wider culture of representations so as to lend credibility to the racism being produced in the new wave of hyperreal violent films.

White Panic and the Racial Coding of Violence

Incidents of violence in the United States have become so commonplace that they seem to constitute the defining principle of everyday life. Acts of violence ranging from the banal to the sensational increasingly dominate the contents of newspaper accounts, television news programs, and popular magazines. More importantly, the never ending images of violence seem to cancel out the actual experience and suffering caused by violence as the American public is bombarded with daily images of violence ranging from coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial to reports of serial killers who maim and murder victims with bombs sent in packages through the mail. Whether in the popular media or other fact reporting spheres the reality of everyday violence is supplemented by a culture of violence produced as entertainment for broadcast and cable television programs, movie theater films, and video games. Within this expanding culture of violence, the relationship between fact and fiction becomes more difficult to comprehend as real life crimes become the basis for television and movie entertainment and newscasting becomes increasingly formulaic, sensational, and less neutral and objective. While violence appears to cross over designated borders of class, race, and social space, the representation of violence in the popular media is largely depicted in racial terms. That is, representations of violence are largely portrayed through forms of racial coding that suggests that violence is a black problem, a problem outside of white suburban America. In fact, white Americas fancy themselves the new besieged group of the '90s--voiceless and powerless in the age of political correctness. No longer safe from the threat of urban violence they increasingly view themselves as prisoners in their own homes.

Beneath the growing culture of violence, both real and simulated, there lies a deep-seated racism that has produced what I want to call a white moral panic. The elements of this panic are rooted, in part, in a growing fear among the white middle class over the declining quality of social, political, and economic life that has resulted from an increase in poverty, drugs, hate, guns, unemployment, social disfranchisement, and hopelessness. Expressions of the white panic can be seen in the passing of Proposition 187, which assigns increasing crime, welfare abuse, moral decay, and social disorder to the flood of Mexican immigrants streaming across the borders of the United States. White panic can also be read in the depictions of crime that appears in national newspapers and magazines. For example, Time Magazine, following the arrest of O.J. Simpson presented his jail mug shot on its cover with a much darkened face, feeding into the national obsession of the black male as a dreaded criminal--a racist gesture for which the magazine had to later issue an apology. Even more aggressively, The New York Times Magazine ran a cover story on June 27, 1993 titled "A Predator's Struggle to Tame Himself" accompanied with picture of a tall, black male prisoner on the cover. In August of 1994, The Times Magazine ran another cover story on youth gangs, and put a picture of an Afro-American woman on the cover. Again in December of 1994, it ran yet another story titled, "The Black Man Is in Terrible Trouble. Whose Problem is That?" The story was accompanied by a cover picture of the back of a black man's shaved head, displayed with a gold ring prominently hanging from his ear. The following week The New York Times Magazine ran a lead story on welfare and referenced it with the image of a black woman on the cover. What is reprehensible about the endless repetition of these images is that they not only reproduce racist stereotypes about blacks by portraying them as criminals and welfare cheats, but they remove whites from any responsibility or complicity for the violence and poverty that has become so endemic to American life. Racist representations feed and valorize the assumption that unemployment, poverty, disenfranchisement, and violence are a black problem. One of the most recent expressions of resurgent racism in the media can be seen in the massive popular news, television, and magazine coverage given to The Bell Curve by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, a book that legitimates the position that racism "is a respectable intellectual position, and has a legitimate place in the national debate on race." Furthermore, a silent white majority righteously situates itself in the role of moral witness and judge of the fate of black people in this country.

The racial coding of violence is especially powerful and persuasive in its association of crime with black youth. As Holly Sklar points out, "In shorthand stereotype, black and latino boys mean dangerous, girls mean welfare, they all mean drugs. They are all suspect." The racial coding of crime is also evident in widespread popular media coverage associating black rap music with gang violence, drugs and urban

terror. Motion pictures depicting "realistic" portrayals of black ghetto life add fuel to the fire by becoming a register in the popular mind for legitimating race and violence as mutually informing categories. The consequences of such racist stereotyping produce more than prejudice and fear in the white collective sensibility. Racist representations of violence also feed the increasing public outcry for tougher crime bills designed to build more prisons and legislate get-tough policies with minorities of color and class. All of this is accompanied by the proliferation of pseudo scientific studies advocating what the creation of a custodial state to contain "some substantial minority of the nation's population, while the rest of America tries to go about its business."

Social and political causes of violence are elided. The media highlights the simplistic calls of conservative politicians for more prisons, orphanages for the children of poor black and white mothers, and censorship of the arts and media in the interests of managing social inequalities rather than challenging and transforming them. Whether in the portrayal of popular black music or in Hollywood movies, violence becomes the defining attribute for indicting an entire racial group. Of course, violence is not absent from representations of white youth and adults, but it is rarely depicted so as to suggest an indictment of whites as an ethnic group.

On the contrary, violence in films about white youth is often framed almost exclusively through the language of pathology, political extremism, or class specific nihilism. For example, the white youth portrayed in **Natural Born Killers** become acceptable to white audiences because the possibility for identification never emerges. They are pathological killers, children of grossly, dysfunctional families, clearly outside of the parameters of normalcy that prevail white society in general. Another highly touted avant garde youth film, **True Romance** (1993) couples postmodern pastiche, violence, and pop cultural icons. In this film, 1970s retro trash and references inform contemporary white youth culture, including an Elvis character with a gold jacket who dispenses advice in bathrooms, a heroine who enjoys kung fu movies, and a leading character who works in a comic book store.

Youth are isolated and estranged in these films and offer no indictment of American society not only because they embrace a disturbing nihilism, but also because they appear marginal, shiftless, and far removed from Dan Quayle's notion of American family values. They are on the margins and the hip violence in which they engage has the comfortable aura of low life craziness about it. You won't find these kids in a Disney film. The portrayal of white youth violence emerges through an endless series of repugnant characters whose saving grace resides in their being on the extreme psychological and economic edges of society. When white youth commit violent acts, anguished questions of agency, moral accountability, and social responsibility do not apply. Agency for white youth is contaminated by a personal pathology that never questions the social and historical conditions of its construction. But in the racially coded representations of violence in black films, questions of agency are untroubled by freak individual pathologies and serve instead to indict blacks as an entire social group while legitimating the popular stereotype that their communities are the central sites of crime, lawlessness, and immorality.

In films about violent white youth such as **Laws of Gravity** (1992), **Kalifornia** (1993), and **Natural Born Killers** (1994), the language of hopelessness and desperation cancels out any investigation into how agency is constructed as opposed to simply guaranteed in the larger political and social sense. But in black youth films such as **Sugar Hill** (1993), **Boys N the Hood** (1991), and **Menace II Society** (1993) there is haunting sense that blacks are responsible for reducing their sense of individual and social agency to the degree that they will live out lives of little hope amidst a culture of nihilism and deprivation. In the end, black powerlessness becomes synonymous with criminality. By totalizing the limiting constraints blacks have to face in everyday life, these films avoid altogether how agency functions as a historical and social construction pointing in turn to larger determinants outside of the language of racism, biology, psychology and cynicism. Dominant representations of black and white youth violence feed right wing conservative values of the Newt Gingrich variety but offer no insights into the culture and densely populated landscape of violence at the heart of white, dominant society.

It is against this crisis of vision, meaning, and community that the new hyperreal films take on a significance that exceeds their formalistic inventiveness, biting sense of irony, and scornful cynicism. Functioning as teaching machines, the new hyperreal avant garde films become both an expression of the

erosion of civil society and a challenge for educators and others to rethink how such representations of violence "can be wrested away from a reality in which madness reigns." In what follows, I want to address the work of writer and film director, Quentin Tarantino, focusing in particular on **Reservoir Dogs**(1992) and his most recent and controversial film, **Pulp Fiction** (1994). Both of these films are exemplary for analyzing the new genre of hyperreal violent films characteristic of the 1990s.

Violence as Art in Reservoir Dogs

A large number of well-meaning whites fear that they are closet racists, and this book [[The Bell Curve](#)] tells them they are not. It's going to make them feel better about things they already think but do not know how to say.

In 1992, Quentin Tarantino wrote and directed **Reservoir Dogs**, a low budget gangster film made in the cinematic tradition of earlier films directed by Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, and Stanley Kubrick. But unlike his famous predecessors, Tarantino redefines the staple elements of the pulp genre--murder, drugs, sex, violence and betrayal--by mixing hard boiled dialogue, formal inventiveness, and casual violence so as to elevate what had been judged traditionally as a B movie genre into an avant garde art form.

Organized around a botched jewelry story robbery by a group of young white men, the film follows the group to a warehouse where they hideout after the blood bath that followed the heist. The warehouse becomes the set piece for the film as it unfolds around the fate of a wounded undercover cop posing as one of the robbers, a policeman kidnapped after the robbery, and the disputes that emerge among the surviving gangsters. Focusing less on the anatomy of the crime, **Reservoir Dogs** explores in decelerated time how white male identities under siege construct their lives through an endless stream of dialogue played out amidst smutty jokes, racist and sexist language, hard edged sentiment, and gratuitous, casual violence. Tarantino rewrites the aesthetic of violence in this film in postmodern terms. Rather than relying on fast paced images of brutality, Tarantino decelerates the violence and gives it a heightened aesthetic twist as it unfolds between a homage to realism and rupturing scenes of numbing of sadism. Graphically, this is developed first through a scene in which Mr. Orange (Tim Roth), who has been wounded in the robbery, lies on the barren warehouse floor slowly bleeding to death. As the film develops, the pool of blood that surrounds his body gets progressively wider until Mr. Orange appears like a small boat set adrift in a river of his own blood. In the most riveting scene in the film, one that has become a hallmark of Tarantino's style, the captive police officer is tortured by Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen). Cranking up the volume on the radio, Mr. Blonde dances across the floor to the tune of "Stuck in the Middle With You," he then flicks open a straight razor and cuts off the police officer's right ear. He then pours gasoline over his victim's body but before he can set the cop on fire Mr. Orange (Tim Roth) becomes conscious long enough to kill Mr. Blonde. Combining elements of stylized violence, brutal sadism, cruel irony, and pop cultural retro-kitsch, Tarantino revels in stylistic excess in order to push the aesthetic of violence to its visual and emotional limits.

The graphic violence in **Reservoir Dogs** refuses to stand alone as the center piece of the film. It is mediated and authenticated by a tough guy vernacular that rivals the film's bankrupt sensationalism, offering the audience the scandal of horror and the seduction of realism without any understanding of the link between violence and larger social forces. The violence embedded in language, a central structural principal of the film, becomes clear in its opening scene. A group of working class men, all dressed in black suits, sit around a restaurant table and begin discussing in great detail the meaning of Madonna's song, "Like A Virgin." One of the characters, Mr. Brown, played by Tarantino, provides the following tough guy monologue:

Let me tell you what "Like a Virgin"'s about. It's about this cooz who's a regular fuckin' machine. I'm talkin' mornin' day night afternoon dick dick dick dick dick dick. Then one day she meets this John Holmes motherfucker and it's like, Whoa baby. I mean this cat is like Charles Bronson in **The Great Escape**: he's diggin' tunnels. All right, she's gettin some serious dick action and she's feelin somethin' she hasn't felt since forever. Pain Pain. it hurts, it hurts her...just like it did the first time. You see the pain is remindin' the fuck machine what it was once like to be a virgin. Hence, "Like a Virgin." (**Reservoir Dogs**, 1992)

Working class machismo emerges in **Reservoir Dogs** as Tarantino's assembly of characters talk and trade insults as if they are off the streets of Bensonhurst splintering their language with terms like "cooz", "niggers" and "jungle bunnies". Sexist and racist language adds to the realistic temper of their personalities but carries with it a naturalism that makes it complicit with the very relations it so casually portrays. This is a white boys' film, unapologetic in its use of racism and sexism as rhetorical strategies for privileging an overabundance of male testosterone. Their language and protracted conversations revolve around small talk, bravado laced with profanities, and street-wise insults. Abusive language parading as a gutsy realism appears hermetic and self-contained, removed from any self-conscious consideration of how it objectifies and belittles blacks and women. This is in your face language, guilt-free, and humorously presented so as to mock even the slightest ethical and political sensibility.

I have spent some time on analyzing **Reservoir Dogs** because it provided a model for a number of films that attempted to cash in on its novel treatment of language, aesthetics, humor, and violence. Moreover, it seemed to be a film perfectly suited for the racial, ethnic, and sexual backlash that conservatives have been mobilizing in full force throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The attack on politically correct behavior offered Tarantino and other youthful directors such as Roger Avery the opportunity to exploit the cultural mean spiritedness of the times by taking visual and linguistic liberties that might not have been tolerated by the decade ago. All of a sudden it has become fashionable to blame the poor for their plight, to criticize blacks for swelling the welfare rolls, to blame unemployed youth for their inability to find jobs, and to point a cynical finger at those whimpy liberals and others who attempted to resurrect the language of compassion and social justice.

Quentin Tarantino, capitalizing on his growing reputation following the critical success of **Reservoir Dogs** (1992), wrote and produced **Pulp Fiction** (1994), a film that made him an instant success in the pantheon of Hollywood auteur directors. **Pulp Fiction** garnered a number of prestigious awards, including the Palme d'Or at last spring's Cannes Film Festival. Highly praised by liberal and conservative film critics alike, **Pulp Fiction** received an extraordinary amount of media attention and public recognition. Given the prominence of media and public enthusiasm for this film and the cultural politics it suggests, I want to explore not only the themes at work in this text, but who this film addresses, and how it takes up the relationship between representations of cinematic violence and what it means to construct white and black identities in America.

Cinema as Pulp Fiction

Pulp Fiction takes its name from the popular crime stories of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and others that were published in the first half of the twentieth century. Pulp signifies an indebtedness to both the pulpwood paper on which these novels were printed and to its more expressive reference as a slang term for beating somebody 'to a pulp'. **Pulp Fiction** appropriates a number of elements from the pulp tradition. All of the characters are from the seamy side of society, and as a collection of society's sorriest outcasts they have no dreams, hopes, or possibilities other than to cash in big on the crimes they commit. Justice and morality are outside of their sensibilities and violence without remorse appears as one of the few legitimate options for shaping their lives.

Cynicism reigns supreme in Tarantino's characters, but this is not the dead pan naturalism and cynicism that leaves audiences either bored or in the throes of despair. On the contrary, blurring the line between hard-boiled realism and playful if brutal irony, Tarantino seizes upon the postmodern practice of scrambling chronicles as stories leak into each other lacking any clear cut beginning or end. What is unique about Tarantino's masterful development of his characters and the cynicism they embody along with the scalding ultra violence in which they engage is how skillfully Tarantino combines all of these elements through a combination of realism, humor, and crisp storytelling. For example, in one particular scene, Vincent (John Travolta) and Mia (Uma Thurman) visit a glowing retro restaurant/club called Jackrabbit Slims'. The head-waiter imitates Ed Sullivan while the help dresses up like dead fifties idols such as Marilyn Monroe, Mammie Van Doren, Jerry Lewis, and Dean Martin. The menu substitutes film history for a range of culinary choices, offering junk food such as Douglas Sirk steaks and Martin & Lewis shakes. Every move in the restaurant appears stylized for dramatic, postmodern effect, and the dialogue is brisk but empty, appearing hard to be hip and cool. **Pulp Fiction** appropriates retro-culture and cultural trash and redeems both through irony that functions as an in-side joke for those film viewers in the know.

Spectacle and action never become self referential in Tarantino's films. They always work hand in hand with swiftly executed dialogue and monologues. The violence and crimes that pump the adrenalin up to race car speed are always preceded by endless streams of talk. Talk gives Tarantino's characters a connection with the geographies of violence that they endlessly travel through. Experimenting with formalist devices, Tarantino mixes aesthetics and language and succeeds in elevating the crime genre to a species of avant garde film making. He delights in mixing what he calls "horrible tension and creepy feelings with really funny stuff." At his best, Tarantino mediates gratuitous violence, wise-guy dialogue, slapstick humor, and hard boiled realism in order to create a novel aesthetic radicalism, one that pushes "to an extreme the pleasures of pulp...sensation and cheapness, and moods of shallow, voluptuous despair." Tough guy sincerity and a working class code of honor are replaced in Tarantino's films with the rhetoric of insult, hyperbole, and a Manichean universe that consciously shuns political or social engagement or the possibility of social transformation. What appears to be suspiciously at the heart of Tarantino's success is his ability to take highly charged issues such as drug dealing murder, corruption, rape, sex, and sadism and situate them within an aesthetic that mixes styles and combines realism and artifice so as to make the victims of such crimes appear either scornful or foolish.

Part of my purpose in these pages is to explore how Tarantino mirrors through his films an amorality that legitimates the neo-conservative ideology of the '90s, one that is consistent with what Ruth Conniff has called a culture of cruelty; that is, a growing contempt in American society for those who are impoverished, disenfranchised, or powerless. **Pulp Fiction** appropriates crime and violence as an everyday presence and turns it into popular cinema; but in doing so Tarantino produces a racially coded cultural politics and pedagogy that transforms neo conservative callousness and contempt for the underclass into a hip representation of avant garde, high art.

Pulp Fiction consists of three interconnected stories.

The film begins with a pair of petty crooks, Pumpkin and Honey Bunny, played by Tim Roth and Amanda Plummer who decide without much thought to change their luck by robbing the very diner in which they are eating. Just as they jump up on the table and announce their intent to the patrons of the diner the scene shifts to the first main story which concerns two hit men, Vincent (John Travolta) and his black partner, Jules (Samuel Jackson), who are on their way to do a hit for their boss the local drug czar (Ving Rhames). On their way to do the job, Travolta and Jackson talk about topics such as whether their boss overacted when he had a man tossed out of a window because he massaged the feet of his wife. With perfect seriousness, the dialogue explores the moral limits of foot massaging and whether it deserves an act of revenge worthy of adultery. The conversation then shifts to Travolta's concern about being asked by his boss, Marsellus (Ving Rhames), to entertain his wife, Mia (Uma Thurman), for the evening while he goes out of town.

What Jules and Vincent don't talk about is the task at hand which is to fetch a briefcase stolen from their boss by some young, preppie crooks. The hit men succeed in getting the briefcase, and in doing so casually kill all but one of the young boys in the room. The violence is quick and unexpected, totally out of character with the conversations that preceded it. But the accelerated shock of the killing doesn't end there. As Vincent and Jules leave the apartment they take a young, frightened Afro-American male with them as a hostage. While driving in the car, Vincent accidentally shoots the kid, blowing his head off and splattering bone and blood all over the car with requisite pieces of bone fragments and brain lodged in Jules' jerrycurl.

That evening Vincent escorts his boss's wife out for dinner and dancing. Mia appears to have an endless appetite for coke and we find her snorting the stuff as Vincent appears at the door to begin the evening. After dinner, Vincent escorts her back to her apartment and while he runs off to the bathroom, Mia finds some heroin in his jacket pocket and believing it is coke tunnels it up her nose. Vincent comes back and finds she has overdosed, and is lying unconscious on the floor with blood and saliva streaming out of her nose and mouth. He panics, puts Mia in his car and rushes over to his drug dealer's apartment. The scene climaxes in a moment so appalling that the viewer will either be riveted to the screen or diving under his or her seat. Gruesome weirdness joins with black comedy as Vincent attempts to revive Mia with a jolt of adrenalin administered through a foot long needles that is plunged directly into her heart, and Mia appears to come back from the dead.

The third story concerns Butch (Bruce Willis), a boxer, who has been ordered by Ving Rhames, the drug czar, to throw a fight. Butch double-crosses him and quickly leaves the boxing arena in order to avoid being knocked off by Jules and Vincent. The following day, Butch finds out that his lover has left his father's watch in his old apartment and Butch is forced to drive back to retrieve it. On the way, he accidentally hits Rhames who spots him as he is walking across the street. Openly brawling, both men stumble into a pawn shop and are taken captive by the owner and his hayseed partner. They end up as prisoners in an S&M dungeon. While Rhames is being raped, Butch manages to set himself free. Hearing Rhames's screams as he is about to make his escape, Willis plucks a Samurai sword from the pawn shops' wares and goes back to both save Rhames and to square his debt to him. Rhames is rescued and one of the assailants is killed by Willis. The remaining rapist is then turned into a eunuch with a shotgun blast carefully executed by Rhames. Rhames gives Willis a reprieve and tells him to get out of town while making it clear that he is never to mention the rape to anyone or the deal will be off and he will be a dead man. (One wonders what would have happened to Willis's acting career if he had been raped in this particular scene.)

Picking up the second story line, Tarantino circles back to Vincent and Jules who have to find a way to get rid of a car filled with blood and a decapitated body. Jules drives to his friend Jimmie's house, played by Tarantino, and parks the car in his garage. Jules then calls his boss who enlists the services of a gentleman hood named the Wolf (Harvey Keitel). Mr. Wolf appears in a tux at Jimmie's house and the clean up operation gets underway. In the meantime, Jimmie is enraged that Jules has shown up at his house. Fearing that his wife, an Afro-American woman, will return home to find the body in the garage, Jimmie asks Jules in wise-guy tones if he saw a sign for "Dead Nigger Storage" on his front lawn. To say the least, Tarantino paints himself into an interesting scene playing a yuppie creep turned gangsta spewing racist epitaphs and complaining that his favorite linens will be ruined in the clean up process. In the face of life and death issues, Tarantino's character is concerned about cleaning up the garage, replacing his linens, and warding off his wife's anger. Comic irony displaces and undercuts the racist nature of Tarantino's character, which is doubly dispensed through racist language and through the assumption that since Jimmie's wife is black he can assume a familiarity with black culture that makes him an insider, a white man comfortably situating himself outside of the legacy and pitfalls of racist behavior.

Violence, Race, and the Politics of Realism

I have no more of a problem with violence that I do with people who like bedroom comedy versus slapstick comedy. It's an aesthetic thing.

Extreme violence in Tarantino's films represents a central element in his cinematic style. Tarantino first generated a great deal of controversy through the comic-book style of torture in **Reservoir Dogs**, gruesomely played out by Michael Madsen who cuts off a hostage policeman's ear and then holds it in his hand while talking to it. **Pulp Fiction** continues the tradition of hyperreal violence, for example, when Jules just for effect shoots a defenseless college kid. This act of sudden violence is not aimed at some wooden, Hollywood gangsta. On the contrary, the victim is a scared kid and his random murder is senseless and disturbing. Of course, the effects are no less shocking when Vincent accidentally blows off the head of a black kid who appears to be barely 17 or 18 years old. These are disturbing representations of violence, endorsed by a director who appears to have "turned murder into performance art."

Tarantino makes no attempts cinematically to rupture or contest the patterns of violence that his films produce or claim to represent. On the contrary, he empties violence of any critical social consequences, offering viewers only the immediacy of shock, humor, and irony as elements of mediation. And none of these elements get beyond the seduction of voyeuristic gazing so as to demand critical involvement. In this sense, the facile consumption of shocking images and hallucinatory delight that is provoked undercut the possibility of educating audiences to "comment on the image instead of allowing it to pass," there is virtually no space in which the audience can unsettle the "'moment of violence' [to allow it to] resonate meaningfully and demand our critical involvement."

Tarantino employs cruelty, humor, and postmodern parody to parade visually his extensive knowledge of film history and to rewrite the dynamic of repetition and difference. For example, the male rape scene in

Pulp Fiction does homage to the classic film, **Deliverance** (1972), but in the end Tarantino's use of parody is about repetition, transgression, and a softening the face of violence by reducing it to the property of film history. In this case, aesthetics is about reordering the audience's sense of trauma through a formalism that denies any vestige of politics. This is violence with an escape hatch, one that suggests that violence is a "force over which we have no control" based on a aesthetics that promotes the false assumption that "violence can be distanced from reality through its apparent autonomy of signs." This is what Tarantino suggests when he claims that

Violence in real life is one of the worst aspects of America. But in movies-It's fucking fun! One of the funniest, coolest things for me to watch. I get a kick out of it-all right?
Tarantino's comments reveal more than a hip aesthetics that infantilizes violence by reducing it to an arid formalism and slapstick humor, it is also about a cinematic amorality which separates the representation of violence from real life. His films offer no language for rendering ruthless violence dangerous in its ability to numb us to the senseless brutality that has become a part of everyday life, especially for children and youth. Tarantino justifies his graphic representations of violence through an appeal to realism. He argues that his violent depiction and deceleration of pain is about "stopping movie time and playing the violence out in real time. Letting nothing get in the way of it and letting it happen the way real violence does." But "real" violence comes from somewhere; it is neither innocent, nor does it emerge outside of existing historical contexts and social relationships. More fundamentally, representations of violence, regardless of how realistically they are portrayed, do not rupture or challenge automatically the dominant ideologies that often justify or celebrate violence in real life. An uncritical appeal to realism does not allow audiences to think imaginatively about ways to disrupt conventional patterns of violence. Tarantino's celebration of realism does not offer any normative grounds on which to challenge violence or to resist power that is oppressive and brutal; on the contrary, the aesthetic of realism serves pedagogically to justify abstracting the representation of violence from the ethical responsibility of both filmmakers and the audience to challenge it as an established social practice.

Tarantino's view of violence represents more than bad politics, it also breeds a dead-end cynicism. His films are filled with characters who have flimsy histories, are going nowhere, and live out their lives without any sense of morality or justice. In Tarantino's celluloid world, the pursuit of happiness is a bad dream and violence is one of the few options for exercising any sense of human agency. Tarantino acknowledges that his own twenty-something sense of the world was informed less by the social and political events of the '60's and '70s than by French thrillers and Hollywood gangster movies: "The attitude I grew up with was that everything you've heard is lies." In the end, violence for Tarantino submits to the demands of a publicly celebrated, stylized formalism, but the price that is exacted exceeds instant notoriety. What Tarantino ends up with are films in which ultra violence serves as a gateway to sadistic humor at everyone's expense, a chance to depict brutality while assuring the audience that its own complicity and involvement, whether in symbolic terms or in real life, can be avoided.

Tarantino's fame, in part, is due to his willingness to substitute an aesthetic radicalism for a political and moral one. For all of his technical, cinematic virtuosity, he cannot escape the surfacing of his own politics and values conveyed through his storytelling and the dialogue he gives to his characters. What betrays Tarantino's attempts to render the underbelly of society on its own terms is the overt racism that informs his films, evident on a number of registers. First, there is the racist language that streams forth from his characters in **Reservoir Dogs** and **Pulp Fiction**. Racist slurs and verbal assaults abound in these films, especially in **Pulp Fiction**. There is a disturbing quality to this language, especially in a film that represents a cinematic tradition that Amy Taubin calls a "new acceptable white male art form." The use of supposedly naturalist, racist language aimed largely at white audiences appears to have a jokey quality about it, a kind of porno subtext that suggest that as whites "we're saying something really nasty and really evil, and let's share this secret thrill." This form of verbal racist violence did not escape Allen and Albert Hughes, the black film directors behind **Menace II Society**, who challenge Tarantino's repeated use of the word "nigger" in **Pulp Fiction**. Tarantino has defended himself against the use of racist language in his films. His response is worth quoting at length:

My feeling is the word nigger is probably the most volatile word in the English language. The minute any word has that much power, as far as I'm concerned, everyone on the planet should

scream it. No word deserves that much power. I'm not afraid of it. That's the only way I know how to explain it.

What Tarantino fails to acknowledge is the history that informs the term and how the power of the word "nigger" is tied to the power of white dominant groups who traditionally control how meanings are produced, circulated, and rewarded. The point being that the term is powerful for a set of complex reasons that cannot be left unexplained. Moreover, the use of the terms by different groups of whites and blacks has different connotations. The rapper, Ice Cube, makes this clear in his comment "Look, when we call each other nigger it means no harm, in fact in Compton [CA] it is a friendly word. But if a white person uses it, it's something different, it's a racist word." Similarly, as Robin Kelly points out in Race Rebels the word "nigger" has multiple meanings in black history and in the current context of black popular culture. Unaware of the complex nuances associated with the different contextual uses of the word "nigger," Tarantino parades the term unself-consciously before audiences for whom the signifying power of the term is far from open-ended. For many whites, the word "nigger" is deeply inscribed in their memories and minds less as a term of cultural resistance than as an expression of their support for racist discourse and values. Bell hooks captures the racist implications of the use of the word nigger by white men in films such as **Pulp Fiction**. She writes:

Yet the film (via these...white men) can also legitimate racist folks by providing a public space where suppressed racist slurs and verbal assaults can be voiced and heard. No one seemed to worry that the film would offer white folks license to verbalize racist aggression.

Tarantino's mixture of gay bashing, misogyny, and crude racist language in films that are largely white and male does little to boost his alleged moral sensitivity to the everyday implications of racist and sexist language. It is worth noting that Tarantino's racism does not merely reveal itself in the use of racist slurs, it is also evident in the one-dimensional representation of blacks in **Reservoir Dogs** and **Pulp Fiction**. Celebrating a comment he heard at the Sundance Film Festival in which a fellow filmmaker noted that "you've given white boys the kind of movies black kids get." Taking this as a compliment, Tarantino nonetheless betrays a profoundly white and suburban sensibility by depicting the two black characters in **Pulp Fiction** as a drug dealer and an gangster hit man. Tarantino also provides a number of subtle provocations in developing these characters. Marsellus, the drug dealer, is married to a white woman. Refusing to rupture the racist obsession with black male sexuality and gangsta drug dealing behavior, Tarantino seems to play into the need to punish his outlaw black character by submitting him to a humiliating and scandalous rape by two hayseed white trash crazies. This horrendous rape scene was largely ignored in the popular press, except to reference Tarantino's gay bashing rather than racism. Further, Jules, the main black character in **Pulp Fiction** is largely defined as an urban sociopath whose greatest pleasure appears to be inflicting harm on other people. In a rather scandalous political move, Tarantino appropriates the prophetic language of the black church by having Jules cite passages from the Bible before killing his victims. In the end, when Jules barely misses a rendezvous with death, he has been saved and consequently decides to give up crime for the pleasures of a longer and more righteous life. Of course, this sudden turn of events has nothing to do with feeling remorse for his victims. The tradition of prophetic language, which has served as a language of resistance and hope in black culture, is reduced in **Pulp Fiction** into a discourse of degeneracy and a signifier for moral bankruptcy.

It is worth noting that given the various film awards that Pulp Fiction has won, including a possible Oscar Award, prompts the issue as to why such a racist and violent film has received such extensive coverage in the popular press and other media. In many ways, Tarantino is a exemplary the Reagan era with its appeal to nostalgia, aestheticism, greed, and an excessive individualism. Tarantino has produced a film which is well-timed to take advantage of the resurgence of racism which has emerged out of the Reagan-Bush years, a racism that appears as a defining principle of economic and social policy in the 1990s.

Toward a Cultural Policy of Violence in Films

What I have tried to do with Tarantino's recent work is suggest that films occupy an important public space in the culture of America. As commonplace as this might sound, it should not detract from the importance of recognizing that cinema is a teaching machine. That is, it's representations of violence do not merely reflect reality, as many Hollywood producers claim. On the contrary, cinema carries with it a language of ethics and a pedagogy. Producers and directors constantly make normative distinctions about issues

regarding how to develop characters and narratives, whether to use glossy, color saturated aesthetics, include complex representations of generally marginalized groups, or make violence subordinate to the integrity of the plot. This is a far from inclusive list; but it illustrates that films perform a pedagogical function in providing "a certain kind of language for conveying and understanding violence." At the same time, cinema functions in a broader pedagogical sense in that it is consistently making a claim to particular memories, histories, ways of life, identities, and values that always presupposes some notion of difference, community, and the future. Given that films both reflect and shape public culture, they cannot be defined exclusively through a notion of artistic freedom and autonomy that removes them from any form of critical accountability given the important role they play in shaping public life. This is not to suggest that public sphere of cinema should be subject to ruthless censorship, but at the same time it cannot be regarded as a simple form of entertainment. Cinematic violence, whether it be ritualistic or hyperreal, offers viewers brutal and grotesque images that serve to pollute and undermine how children and adults care, relate, and respond to others. At stake here is not whether cinematic violence directly causes crime. In a world demeaned by pointless violence, the question that must be raised concerns what responsibilities filmmakers, other cultural workers, and their respective publics have in developing a cultural policy that addresses the limits and responsibilities of the use of violence in cinema. Such a policy must address how the mass media and cinematic public sphere can be held responsible for educating children and others about how to discriminate among different forms of violence, how to prevent it in real life when necessary, and how to engage its root social causes in the larger social and cultural landscape. Violence is not merely a function of power, it is also deeply related to how forms of self and social agency are produced within a variety of public spheres. Cinema as a critical public culture must be understood through its connections to other public spheres such as schools, religious institutions, popular culture, local communities, and the home. Linking cultural policy to the ethical responsibilities of a cinematic public sphere also raises fundamental questions about the democratization of culture. This is a question regarding ownership, power, and control and points to the issue of who has access to the means of cultural representation and who does not, and what the possibilities for democracy are when an enormous amount of inequality structures media culture.

In the coming new information age, it is imperative that various cultural workers and educators raise important questions about the what kind of teacher we want cinema to be, with special concern for how the representation of violence works to pose a threat "not only to our national health but to our potential for ever becoming a true participatory democracy." To simply blame filmmakers and television executives for causing violence in the United States shifts critical attention away from the poisonous roots of violence at the heart of social and economic life in America. Blaming the media also absolves educators, community activists, politicians, and other cultural workers from assuming roles as critical citizens who need to address the complex relationships between the violence we absorb through the media and the reality of violence we experience in everyday life. Violence is not simply emanating from the movie theaters of America. Rooted in everyday institutional structures and social relations, violence has become a toxic glue that bonds Americans together while simultaneously preventing them from expanding and building a multiracial and multicultural democracy. Once the brutality of representational violence is understood as a threat to democracy itself, it might become possible to address it politically and pedagogically as we would other issues concerning our national identity, public health, and social consciousness.