

# Reviews

***The Scene of Violence: Cinema, Crime, Affect*, Alison Young, Routledge-Cavendish, GlassHouse, Abingdon and New York, 2010, 200 pages (ISBN 978-0-415-58508-8)**

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Alison Young's scholarship has long been interested in the intersections between crime and the image. In *Femininity in Dissent* (1990) she explored the media images (and, thus, the stories made available) about the women's political protest at Greenham Common in the 1980s. Her interest in representation and questions of language and spectacle were extended in *Imagining Crime* (1996), as she excavated the criminological archive, highlighting the crimino-legal complex and its proliferate imagination and, thus, production of crime through the enterprises of theory, law, the media and culture. There she interrogated crime's easy appearance and problematised its common manifestations. *Judging the Image* (2005) revealed further engagement with images, this time contentious artworks and their socio-legal regulation. In so doing, Young uncovered key, troubling images buried in legal texts to counterpose the obvious contentions of those images displayed (and attacked) in art galleries or denounced in the street. As such, her interest in images extends beyond gallery walls to other manifestations of the illicit, including street art and graffiti, represented by her involvement with artists for the publication *Street/Studio: the Place of Street Art in Melbourne* (2010). As might be thought from such collaboration, Young's approach to images is nuanced and underwritten by a keen awareness of the place of the image in the social order and the fantasies about that order, where disorder can be seemingly controlled by sufficient regulation of troubling pictures. Through a steady, ongoing dismantling of facile binaries ('good' or 'bad' images), Young's continuing scholarship, thus, emphasises the *work* of images, including the illegitimate, illicit or unruly image, and the work they do *on* us.

In *The Scene of Violence*, Young skilfully extends her attention to the cinematic image, with its attendant, unfurling issues concerning spectatorship. For while we look at still images, such as photographs, graffiti and artworks, we *watch* and *engage* with cinema in unique ways. To signal this new approach to crime's images, Young launches from the body of the spectator, which acknowledges that images both have a social force and individual impact that extends beyond 'just looking'. This brings us to a fuller appreciation of the viewing subject, as one who not only sees, but also hears, feels, thinks about and remembers the work of cinema. When this cinema involves a crime-image, the stakes of spectatorship are heightened and viewing erupts with questions of complicity, witnessing and, in their wake, the question of the spectator assuming 'responsibility for what and how she sees' (Young 2010:171). Taking this approach signifies Young's distinction from much recent criminological work on images, which has been slow to ignite despite the foundational place of images in criminalistics, at an absolute minimum. For example, despite the centrality of photography to police practice (the 'mug shot' and crime scene documentation standardised by Paris Police clerk Alphonse Bertillon in the 1880s that remains today) images have not received much criminological attention until quite recently. This neglect is shifting with broader attention to the image in all its forms: media representations, popular culture, crime fiction, artworks and graffiti, which all announce crime as something that is produced and consumed. What Young does here in this critical contribution is privilege the body of the spectator in front of the *moving* image of violence, where seeing constitutes one aspect of

spectatorship. Other sensations, then, become equally important in her analysis, including the presence or absence of sound, in league with cinematographic dimensions (how the image is written on the screen). Interested in how crime-images register in the body of the spectator, Young thereby pushes on from routine questions about the effects of screen violence to a deeper ethical terrain, where spectators are implicated in scenes of violence and, thus, face the thorny matter of judgement.

After setting these parameters in Chapter 1, Young begins her perceptive analysis in Chapter 2 by dismantling violence as a homogenous category in cinema (a position which challenges the automatic charge that screen violence causes real violence), instead offering an intricate analysis of scenes in four films and their individual depictions of violence. From the outset, this chapter marks the understated, but thorough interdisciplinarity of Young's approach throughout the book, as she traverses a theoretical landscape drawing on a subtle and effective blend of legal, cultural and criminological theory with insights from film studies. This technique enables her to tackle diverse scenes of violence as affective encounters from which she wrings substantial reflections on crime, justice and law. For example, she explores the immense pleasures of violence in *The Matrix* (1999) foyer scene that exonerate the spectator from feeling disturbed (by using humour and glamour in the context of a plot about freedom fighting), whilst also accounting for the difficulties experienced by the spectator faced with the 'cool' dancing torturer, Mr Blonde, in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). The differences in identification, how this is achieved and, thus, the spectator's experience of these scenes of violence, is revealed through an appreciation of the dynamic of violent images rendered through cinematographic technique (continuous shots or editing, sound or respite from it) and their affective implications, an approach which highlights the deft intricacies of these crime-images and illustrates precisely why we cannot take images for granted. By carefully and methodically examining such scenes, Young demonstrates that visions of violence *play* with sight and other senses, and herald an array of aesthetic tactics that work to acquit, challenge, compromise or implicate spectators. Young takes her examples further in this chapter by exploring the dislocation of the spectator in *Natural Born Killers* (1994) — a film that has been central to the media violence debate — and the destabilisation of a linear cinematic narrative and, thus, explanatory frame for the Columbine shootings in 1999 in Portland, Oregon in the film *Elephant* (2003). Ultimately, Young skilfully illustrates how scenes of violence are anything *but* homogenous, thereby upsetting the polarised media violence debate that would have us accept the audience as automatons who see, and then enact, violence.

In Chapter 3, Young shifts her focus to how we look at scenes of sexual violence, specifically through the category of the rape-revenge film. Central to such films and the call for vengeance in the face of rape has been the depiction of the scene of sexual assault, so as to allegedly communicate the seriousness of rape, a charge which Young challenges. She also reveals that scenes of sexual violence nevertheless operate differently upon spectators via cinematographic techniques, which raise questions as to whether audiences watch as spectators or as witnesses in addition to questions such as 'with whom do we identify?'. Moreover, with the representation of the rape scene as a flashback in *The Accused* (1988), shown during the testimony of a male witness, such cinema displays its allegiance with law, which has repeatedly demonstrated an assumption that a woman's account of violence cannot be trusted. Again, this is an intelligent and unique chapter, and one that, through meticulous analysis, charts a line of flight between the discursive frames of law and cinema. Young asserts that we need to consider these scenes of sexual violence more carefully, their inclusion, structure and address, to ask what we are being invited to see.

Chapter 4 deepens the analysis of crimes *in extremis* and the role of law by examining key images in serial killer films. This chapter conveys a sense of the spectator as an accomplice, inviting identification through explicit cinematic techniques such as point-of-view shots. Tracing scenes in *Psycho* (1960), *Seven* (1995) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Young interrogates the spectator's look and the look of law in these films, a look that enables us to evaluate criminal justice amidst changing paradigms of policing, or the role of psychiatry. Ultimately, these films present the most heinous crime — that of serial murder — as a limit or horizon the spectator repeatedly confronts.

Chapter 5 encounters another horizon brought about by disaster, where the unimaginable happens and is rendered visually in the 'cinema of disaster' — in this case, post-'9/11' (11 September 2001 attacks in America). As ever, Young distils the work of such cinema to its differing effects, avoiding easy readings of difficult cinematic moments, and so offers a poignant tracing of painful images responding to the catastrophe of 9/11. She tracks films that locate themselves within the event, thereby reliving it (*The Hamburg Cell* (2004), *9/11* (2002), *United 93* (2006)), then those that deal in the aftermath, thereby potentially mourning it (*25<sup>th</sup> Hour* (2002), and Alejandro González Iñárritu's short film as part of *11'09''01* (2002)). Young suggests that each offer distinct ways to negotiate and discuss the boundaries around representing the unimaginable, and the deeply uncomfortable questions that arise when working through the impact of disaster, which include looking at its images. Echoing reflections of her penultimate chapter, in the concluding chapter Young reiterates the importance of living on in the face of supposed futility depicted in films such as *Zodiac* (2007) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007), where violence cannot be held back by law. Here, finally and eloquently, she distinguishes futility from failure, and reorients the spectator, and the reader, with the significant project of 'looking on'.

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## References

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