

# The pleasures of visual culture



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The Pleasures Of Visual Culture. In this essay I will be analysing the pleasures of visual culture, focusing on a paragraph concerning 'Horror and suffering in art' and using the 1994 Alex Proyas film 'The Crow' (see Appendix 1) to give examples of my points. Before I begin analysing the film I will first be looking at explanations of the terms 'visual culture', 'aesthetic pleasure' and 'catharsis'. (Walker & Chaplin, 1997) Visual culture refers to all forms of visual art.

The word culture is difficult to define but on one level it refers to the beliefs and practices of groups and individuals within society. The medium of film has become heavily involved in many cultures. Pleasure can be taken both in the production and consumption of movies (along with other forms of art). Visual culture has grown, in part, around this premise.

(Simpson & Pearson, 2001) Aesthetic pleasure can be taken from visual culture and this is one of the paramount reasons why such a vast amount of art (in many forms) is produced. Aesthetics is a term that has been used to describe the critical evaluation of the attempt at understanding beauty. To derive aesthetic pleasure from art one assumes that the viewer has become involved in the beauty of that which they are viewing. This pleasure can take many forms. The pleasure taken from viewing a painting or sculpture is likely to be very different from the pleasure an audience will take from viewing a film.

Whilst films please the senses of sight and sound they also engage the mind and the emotions of the audience. If a film does its job well it can be an intensely pleasurable experience, regardless of its subject matter. For

example, whilst aesthetics is a term generally applied to beauty, ugliness can also produce a perverse aesthetic pleasure. (Walker & Chaplin, 1997) Horror and violence are ugly subject matters. However, an audience can take pleasure from depictions of acts of violence and scenes of horror. This can be through the medium of painting, where a well executed picture can provoke pleasure due to its beauty as well as to make the viewer think about the content of the scene depicted. The process of analysing feelings produced by art can be pleasurable in itself even when the feelings produced are perhaps dark and disturbing.

The audience is aware that the scenes of horror they are witnessing are representations of reality and therefore do not react in the same way as if they were experiencing these events for real. (Walker & Chaplin, 1997) There have been many theories about negative themed art and the pleasure taken from it. Aristotle used the term catharsis, a Greek word meaning purification, to describe the effect an individual gets from watching a tragic play.

He believed that people were purged of their own pains by involving themselves in the tragedy of others. Because they were viewing a representation and not a real tragedy, they also had to feel no guilt about this ??? purging??™ effect. The idea of catharsis can be directly applied to violence in movies today. Violent scenes can depict horror and suffering and violence of many varying degrees can be seen in a lot of films of all genres. In our polite and civilised society films containing violence can purge the anger and aggression in our own natures to some extent. However, the opposite of this argument is more often favoured at the present, with much <https://assignbuster.com/the-pleasures-of-visual-culture/>

being made in the media about violent films spawning violence themselves. (Simpson & Pearson, 2001) Scenes of pain and cruelty can arouse the latent masochist in all of us.

If played correctly scenes depicting acts that would shock and appal us in real life can excite and please us in the voyeuristic world of the cinema. (Walker & Chaplin, 1997) The theories of Sigmund Freud have been greatly utilised within film theory. Genre analysis suggests that the subtext of all horror films is sex and sexuality and this is directly taken from Freud's theories, specifically those involving voyeurism. (Simpson & Pearson, 2001) Freud also expanded on Aristotle's theory of catharsis. Freud believed the need to purge our darker emotions came from the fact that we repress them in the first place and need a socially acceptable way to release pent up frustrations. (Walker & Chaplin, 1997) In order to explain these points more graphically I will be using the 1994 Alex Proyas film *The Crow*.

*The Crow* is a dark gothic fantasy tale taken from the graphic novella by James O'Barr. The story centres around Eric Draven (Brandon Lee) who is brought back to life one year after his death to avenge his murder, and the rape and murder of his fiancée, by an underworld gang. Draven systematically seeks out and dispatches each member of the gang finishing with the murder of the gang's leader, Top Dollar (Michael Wincott).

(Berardinelli, 1994, See Appendix 2) Although *The Crow* is a visually stunning and an extremely stylised film it is still nothing more than a high concept reworking of the classic revenge genre. *The Crow* is however, an excellent example of a film utilising the theory of catharsis through aesthetic pleasure to hook the audience and therefore ensuring its

success.?????; makers of crime movies often set out to arouse righteous anger in the audience by commencing with a vicious rape or murder scene.

Viewers then long for violent retribution/punishment and when it finally occurs their cruel impulses are given full rein. Violent feelings are thus aroused, legitimated and then discharged.???(Walker J & Chaplin S, 1997)Although ??? The Crow??™ does not open with the rape/murder scene it begins by showing the direct after effects of the act. It is not until the beginning of the mid-section of the film that we see the actual murder and rape through a series of flashbacks as the newly risen Draven begins to understand why he has returned. The majority of the film uses blue light to lend a bleak, dark quality to the visuals, but the flashbacks are shown in a red light, directly contrasting with what has gone before. In the human psyche blue is thought to symbolise melancholy, where as red is the colour of passion and anger, therefore fuelling the audience??™s anger and rage and instilling a need for retribution. The majority of the movie was shot at night and is filtered in such a way that even when it is day it still looks like dusk.

??? If cinemas light seduces, then there is also that other order of seduction ??“ the darkness that surrounds us. And if there is a seduction towards the knowledge that light promises, there is an equally seductive quality to the dark recesses of the unknown and unknowable.???(Fuery P, 2000)The mise ??“ en ??“ scene in the movie tends towards the dark and mysterious.

The visual style, by cinematographer Dariusz Wolski, obviously owes a great deal to the study of graphic novella (the source material from which the film came from). The camera soars high above the city, or comes down low for extreme-angle shots, creating comic book angles and points of view that add to the fantasy, further removing the film from reality. The buildings are exaggerated in their architectural details, and are overly ornamental.

The appearance of the actors is adapted to this graphic noir vision; their appearances are as exaggerated as the shots they appear in. For example: Brandon Lee as ??? The Crow??™ in some shots almost looks drawn, like he has leapt straight out of the comic from whence his character came. ??? The Crow??™, with its pacey rhythm and its numerous extreme camera set-ups, evokes a kind of comic/fantasy style that is hard to take to seriously.

(Berardinelli, 1994) This neatly brings us to ??? The Crow??™'s achievement of catharsis through aesthetic pleasure. The audience is led to strongly desire the revenge Eric Draven seeks.

The horror and suffering Draven has experienced is presented to the audience time and again in flashback sequences, neatly reminding us of the need for revenge. The horrors we witness are so bad that revenge seems the most natural course of action and the audience is left expecting nothing less. Although rape and murder are very real and appalling crimes, the comic book exaggerated nature of this movie reminds the audience that what they are watching is fantasy, therefore removing any guilt about the need for revenge they are experiencing and the catharsis they receive. (Walker & Chaplin, 1997) Preceding almost every scene depicting Draven's revenge attacks is an overture of heavy rock. The songs used, bands such as Rage

Against the Machine, Nine Inch Nails and Henry Rollins Band, are also used to whip up the crowds at various violent sports, such as Ice Hockey and Wrestling.

The songs precede the main event, so as to excite the crowds thus giving them satisfaction towards the violence they are witnessing and further involving them emotionally in what they are about to see. (Howe D, 1994, See Appendix 3) In conclusion I feel that ??? The Crow??™ is a film which has the ability to turn its viewers into sadists on a temporary basis. It provides catharsis as discussed by Aristotle and Freud by giving its audience the ability to purge their own anger secure in the knowledge that what they are watching is a representation of the impossible, a fantasy to realise their anger and frustrations into. Although there is a strong argument that violent media can cause violence, or desensitise viewers towards it, I personally feel that ??? The Crow??™ is so good at providing the catharsis of a ??? revenge picture??™ that the audience leaves feeling more content and settled than when they went in. Bibliography Berardinelli J (1994) ??? The Crow??™: A Film Review, [www. movie-reviews. colossus. net](http://www.movie-reviews.colossus.net) Fuery P (2000) New Developments in Film Theory, Macmillan Press Ltd, London Howe D (1994) ??? The Crow??™, [www. washingtonpost. com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) Simpson P & Pearson R E (2001) Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory, Routledge, London Walker J & Chaplin S (1997) Visual Culture: An Introduction, MUP Appendices Proyas Alex (1994) ??? The Crow??™, Pressman Edward R & Most Jeff, Miramax Films Berardinelli J (1994) ??? The Crow??™: A Film Review, [www. movie-reviews. colossus. net](http://www.movie-reviews.colossus.net) Howe D (1994) ??? The Crow??™, [www. washingtonpost. com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)