

# The changing face of sex and violence



Jodie Foster, Anthony Hopkins and Scott Glenn star in the thriller 'Silence of the Lambs'

## New genre of heroines rebel against stereotypes

Editor's note: It's not often that we at Omni have the opportunity to explore a serious issue and still remain within the boundaries of the art and entertainment genre. In this case, the compelling topic of new trends in sex and violence in the media deserved attention. Today's entertainment market is often the best reflection of the current social conditions and attitudes which affect us all.

NEW YORK — A new generation of women authors is unveiling a bold new creation: a literary landscape crowded with loathsome men: abusive husbands and deranged fathers, brutal boyfriends and sadistic strangers.

These and other contemptible characters are giving rise to a new breed of heroine. Down but not out, she takes charge of her life, summoning inner resources and overcoming her oppressor, with ingenuity, courage, and the occasional well-placed bullet.

Their creators are young women — Anita Shreve, Kathryn Harrison, Callie Khouri, Mary Gaitskill, Jane Hamilton and others — whose themes reflect both up-to-the-minute crime reports and timeless patterns of human behavior.

The fine line between passion and

violence, the terrible power of strong over weak, the legacies of betrayal and exploitation lie at the heart of these stories. So do female fortitude, resilience and redemption.

But where is the line between man-bashing and art? The answer depends on the politics of the beholder.

Architects of these fictional worlds say their tales of rape, incest and battering bring the vulnerability of women in a male-dominated society into focus in ways that statistics cannot.

"Some truths are better expressed through fiction than non-fiction. That's what storytelling is all about," said Kathryn Harrison, whose first novel, *Thicker Than Water*, was published this spring. "A story bypasses the whole rational machine of the brain — which so easily turns things around backward — and goes straight to the heart."

*Thelma & Louise*, a road-buddy film that recently opened to rave reviews and heated debate, is Callie Khouri's story of working-class girlfriends who set off on a fishing trip, a respite from a cheating husband and a neglectful boyfriend. As portrayed by Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon, the women encounter and kill a would-be rapist, then flee. Along the road to self-discovery, they cross paths

with one unsavory man after another, and strike retaliatory blows for beleaguered women everywhere.

In one scene, along a deserted stretch of New Mexico highway, a macho state trooper blubbers as Thelma forces him at gunpoint into the trunk of his cruiser.

"I have a wife and kids," he pleads. "You be sweet to her," Thelma admonishes. "My husband wasn't sweet to me and look how I turned out."

A battered wife conceals her identity to escape the abusive husband who ultimately dies at her hands in *Sleeping With the Enemy*, a recent movie based on the novel by Nancy Price.

Demi Moore and Glenn Headly play New Jersey beauticians implicated in the murder of one of their husbands, a physically abusive lout with a drug habit, in *Mortal Thoughts*, another recent box-office attraction.

As one might expect, such characterizations have sparked accusations of man-bashing — and worse. "Are Men Really So Bad?" read the headline above a recent Time magazine essay that asked, "What is the term for misogyny in reverse?"

Acclaimed by film critics, *Thelma & Louise* has been under assault by columnists, talk show hosts and oth-

ers.

The criticism has confounded Khouri. "I believe ... that the only reason that these arguments are even being raised is because this is a movie with women in it," she said. "If this was a film with men in it, nobody would be saying these things."

Sarandon, Louise in the movie, agreed. "I didn't hear anyone talking about female-bashing when Arnold Schwarzenegger put a bullet through a woman's head in his film," she said in a recent Boston Globe interview.

The rape and torture of frightened women on the big screen is, of course, nothing new. Modern slasher films have been Hollywood staples for decades, ever since Alfred Hitchcock launched the genre with *Psycho* in 1960. More recent examples include *Dressed to Kill*, *Body Double* and *He Knows You're Alone*.

The erotic overtones and frequent references to conventional sex that accompany the violence in slasher movies create an ambivalence missing in *Mortal Thoughts* or *Sleeping With the Enemy*.

Slasher films strongly imply that women crave sexual violence, making them — not their attackers — responsible for their fate.

The women who are raped and murdered in slasher films are guilty in a variety of ways, starting with the directly sexual," British essayist Joan Smith wrote in "Misogyny: Reflections on Myths and Malice." She considers such movies "a crude response to male fears aroused by the new model of sexuality claimed for women by feminism."

Clearly, women's stories of victimization coincide with an increase in reporting of rape and sexual as-

sault, as well as a heightened awareness of incest and child sexual abuse.

But do they reflect reality? In a society in which one in four women can expect to be raped, many say yes. "It's clear that violence against women is accepted and acceptable in the culture," said Dr. Steve Bergman, a Boston psychiatrist and writer who specializes in gender issues.

Writer and critic Francine Prose agreed. "Every six minutes in this country someone is raped. If you're writing a story about what's going on in this society, there's a chance it might have a rape in it."

But sexual philosopher Camille Paglia scoffed at the notion that violence against women is on the rise. Her recent cultural history, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence From Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, infuriated feminists and academics alike.

"There's a very bad movement in America I call victimology. This view of oppressors and victims is a childish view of the world and has to stop," she said.

Given the "barbaric, amoral" nature of sex, women will always be in danger and must learn to take reasonable precautions, said Paglia, who maintains that with sexual freedom comes risk. "Let's be realistic. Do you sleep with your doors open? Do you park your car in New York City and leave the keys on the hood?"

Critics accused her of blaming the victim; Paglia maintained that "blaming the victim is justified if the victim is stupid."

Today's macho politics are partly to blame for a cultural climate in which Alan Alda is out, and misogynist comic Andrew Dice Clay is in, she added. "The last eight years of the

American presidency have projected the notion that we aren't responsible for the weaker, the poorer, the less fortunate. Often, women are the ones who are weaker and poorer and have less power."

"I'm frightened at what it means to be a man now," Sarandon told the Globe. "All the language that comes up as we congratulate ourselves for (the Gulf War victory) is all sexual terms about manhood and sexual power."

Not all of today's literary leading men are wife-beaters or rapists. Some are merely self-centered, demanding and infantile.

"We're seeing a generation of women who have grown up with feminism, who have extraordinary levels of awareness of women's issues," said Wendy Martin, who chairs the graduate program in English at Claremont Graduate School in California.

"This also coincides with a period in which incest, child abuse and violence toward women have come out of the closet, and are being talked about openly for the first time."

In their explorations of these themes, women are finding "a metaphorical as well as literal way of talking about men's assumptions that women are there to gratify their needs, and that even when women aren't buying into this script, men will act it out through force if necessary," Martin said.

"We're really talking about a phase of a power struggle. It is a power struggle, literally, when you're talking about male force against women. It also implies resistance — if not at the time, then in the consciousness that will protest ultimately."

— Associated Press



Camille Paglia's recent book disgusted many feminists

## A different look at an alternative brand of sexism

Male bashing. Misogynistic practices. Ultra-violent films. Anti-violence watchdog groups. Where does this? Is it a "misogynistic piece of trash" as I was once told? Is it an accurate portrayal of the mind of a serial killer? Or is it just a piece of violent crap with really good performances?

Actually, it's not really any of these. I'm very aware that many women were offended by the way that violence towards women was portrayed in the film. At first glance it may seem that the He-Man Woman-Haters Club of America financed *Lambs*, but you need to give it a second look.

First of all, the film had Jodie Foster as the heroine. She wasn't as take charge as Ripley (of *ALIEN* and *ALIENS*), but she knew what she had to do and she went after it with gusto. To separate herself from Ripley, Agent Starling doesn't use any false machismo tactics. She was basically a '90s, in-control type of woman. Starling knew that she had to save the last potential victim so that she could finally silence the lambs.

Secondly, didn't Buffalo Bill kill women simply because they were women? If you've read the book, you probably had no trouble figuring out why Buffalo Bill killed only women. Unfortunately, in the film it is only hinted at. If you were watching Jodie Foster during one of the climactic scenes in the base-

ment, you missed the explanation entirely.

You see, Buffalo Bill (real name: Jame Gumb) wanted to be a transsexual. But, because of his psychological profile (he was a few sandwiches short of a picnic), he was rejected by the three major clinics in America that perform the surgery. So he had to kill women because he couldn't become one? Wrong. Sigmund Freud, take a seat in the back and play with something shiny. He was going to become a woman one way or the other. He killed the women so that he could skin them. He was building a suit out of his victims' skins. If he couldn't become a woman, he was going to look like one. That's why his victims had to be a certain size. He wasn't just into big-boned women, the skin had to be able to fit him. That's why he had to starve his victims for three days, so that their skin would get loose and therefore the skin would be easier to remove. (Don't sound like a third-grade Sherlock Holmes?)

For those of you who left the theater in a fog (I'm sure some of you entered it in the same state), I hope this cleared things up for you. I hope that I've dissuaded you from thinking that *The Silence of the Lambs* was a woman-bashing film. If not, I'm sorry that you feel that way, but I hope that you at least appreciated the cinematic quality of the film.

— Mike Long

## Dead calm: the death of the hate generation

MIKE LONG  
Assistant Editor

I never thought I'd live to see the day, but it is finally upon us. Yes, folks, it's sad but true. Violent movies are going out of style.

Over the past year, violent movies have been getting slaughtered at the box office, while romances and comedies are more popular than ever. Could George Bush's dream of a kinder, gentler nation be coming to pass?

The summer of 1990 saw the peak of the "ultra-violence" film wave with the release of *Die Hard 2*, *Predator 2*, and *RoboCop 2*. *Die Hard 2* was a critical and box office success, but many "watchdog" groups were worried about the violent content and the film's "kill 'em all" attitude. *Predator 2* and *RoboCop 2* both failed miserably at the box office and both were attacked for their violence, especially *RoboCop 2*, which featured a foul-mouthed, gun-toting, drug-dealing 12-year-old.

Meanwhile, *Pretty Woman* and *Ghost* were shattering moviegoing records and creating a new trend in Hollywood. The financial backers began moving away from violent films and towards lighter fare.

This trend became very evident in the summer of 1991. Since 1975, the summer has been the time to bring out big budget action blockbusters.

(*Jaws* was the first.) This summer was obviously lacking. Disney's *The Rocketeer* was exciting enough in its own right, but its "kiddie fare" style wasn't enough to keep audiences enthralled. *Robin Hood*, *Prince of Thieves* turned out to be a little darker than people expected, but the producers knew that women would be coming to see Kevin Costner, so they tried to keep the violence to a minimum.

What about the biggest movie of the summer? *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* was nowhere near as violent as had been anticipated. Yes, people came out to protest the violence, but there will always be a group to protest something. *T2* was a movie about peace, for crying out loud. A kinder, gentler *Terminator!* Cameron and Co. were obviously more interested in dazzling special effects and the relationship between the Terminator and John Conner than violence.

Three key questions concerning this issue must be asked:

What started this trend? Honestly, I don't know. There is still an audience out there for violent films. New action movies appear on the video market every week. This anti-violence mentality most likely came about because in Hollywood, the money goes with what's hot. When comedy and romance became the big thing, the producers quit financing action films.

What damage has this anti-violence trend done? Although all of the

lot of independent studios have died over the past few years. (DeLaurentis Studios in Wilmington is a good example.) These smaller studios had to die because they could not compete with the majors. The few remaining independents are becoming more and more thrifty with their money for fear that they will end up by the wayside like those before them. New Line, Full Moon, and Troma Inc. are three independent studios that specialize in horror and action pictures, but most of their products go straight to video.

Another reason may be the escalating violence that is spreading across America. Murders and gang violence are now taking place in towns where at one time the only gunshots heard were the ones used to start the local track meet. Action films were once an escape from reality for a lot of people. With violence hitting closer to home every day, cinematic atrocities may not be such a welcome change.

Another reason, albeit one that some may find farfetched, is that in these kinder, gentler times, more men have gotten in touch with their sexuality. Hence, men no longer have to own the biggest gun on the block to prove their sexual prowess. Some filmmakers may not agree with the *Full Metal Jacket* "gun-rifle" mentality.

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major studios have felt the impact of this course, the most irrefutable damage has been done in the horror film market.

The horror market has been drier than my sense of humor for at least a year. (*Jacob's Ladder* and *Misery* are two exceptions.) Jason is dead. Michael Myers is dead. They died from the same affliction; lack of sufficient financial backing. *Child's Play 3* opened last week and *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* is due later this month, but instead of solving the problem, this further accentuates Hollywood's reluctance to finance original projects. If these two films fail to do any business, then the future looks bleak. It is a sad day indeed when the future of my favorite genre rests on Chucky's plastic shoulders.

The only way for the horror industry to bounce back is for the producers to get the balls to finance new ideas and for the creative personnel to concentrate more on characterization and suspense than on violence and gore. Speaking of suspense, this brings us to one of the biggest paradoxes of this whole debate. A lot of suspense thrillers have been disguising themselves as horror movies. *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Sleeping With the Enemy*, *Dead Again*, *Narrow Margin*, and *Pacific Heights* all had ad campaigns similar to those of horror films. None of these movies are horror films (*The Silence of the Lambs* comes closest,

see sidebar.), but someone in Hollywood wanted us to think they were. Obviously, the major studios realize that there is an audience for horror films, so why don't they make some more? If they think that they can dictate the public's feeling and satiate us with these pseudo-horror films, they are wrong.

What does the future hold for the violent cinema? Let's face it, folks, the ultra-violent, self-indulgent '80s are over. The "just say no" mentality has gone farther than anyone could have predicted. Violent films where the innocent are punished are no longer politically correct. Our current environmentally conscious, save-the-humans generation will not tolerate a blatantly violent film.

Not only are today's filmmakers more morally aware, they are better consumers. Steven Seagal's and Jean-Claude Van Damme's movies are still popular, but even the fans of the simplistic action films are beginning to realize how auto-cannibalistic the stories are. The big guns of Hollywood need to rethink the violent movie. They need to create a well-written action movie with believable characters that still fulfills the male adolescent car chase/huge explosion fantasy. Granted, it's a lot to ask, but I'm an optimist. Meanwhile, I'm going to the video store to wallow in nostalgia with *Rambo* and an Italian horror film.



In the movie 'Mortal Thoughts' two friends, played by Glenn Headly and Demi Moore, are on the line when they are wanted for the murder of Headly's abusive husband