

The Virtue of Violence: Dimensions of Development in Walter Hill's *The Warriors*

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In the unconscious fantasy, growing up is inherently an aggressive act.

D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*

Every probing of the source of violence, whatever we may think, must pass through Freud.

J.Roy, *Hobbes and Freud*

Violence in some movies clearly increases their appeal. Why? The sort of violence I consider here involves neither great psychological subtlety nor, at the other extreme, grotesquery. It includes, rather, the sort of physical and psychological threats normally associated with "street crime" and related acts and threats against individuals and their property. It involves, characteristically, adolescents. Moreover, the movies that interest me are not ones where retribution is sought and wrought, but rather those where the violence serves no apparent moral purpose. Such movies present an aesthetic puzzle: how is it that what in normal circumstances is repulsive and abhorrent nonetheless, in the context of certain movies, has appeal? This paper is an essay towards an appreciation of this paradox.

My general thesis is this. An understanding of how violence appeals requires an appreciation of the source and the force of fears that life in the state of nature is "nasty, brutish, and short." As a result, great importance attaches to those values which promote group solidarity. The virtue of violence, my thesis is, consists in its contribution to fomenting social cohesion.

Yet cohesion has its own price, viz., the restraints placed on the individual. Fear of violence must override various forms of selfishness and related anti-social tendencies in order for people to unite. In this respect, the *political* compromises which social life generally demands recapitulate the *psychological* processes of maturation which individuals need to undergo. Indeed, concerns about and preoccupation with violence is seen by thinkers from Hobbes to Freud as the engine driving these maturational processes.¹ Yet the very utility and psychological power

of such fears and fantasies conflicts with the fact that these are fears, and so to be avoided for *that* reason. This is the tension which creates a cultural space for certain movies.

Does the line of analysis just sketched hold promise as an interpretive hypothesis? My test case is Walter Hill's cult classic, *The Warriors*. Shortly after its release (in 1978), the movie allegedly incited gang fights among young viewers. Lawsuits against the distributor grew out of these allegations. The movie also has received some critical acclaim. For example, Pauline Kael, in an eloquent and insightful review of this movie, urges an understanding of the movie's popularity with the young largely in terms of its putative appeal to a youthful urban *Lumpenproletariat*. Yet this cannot be nearly the whole story of the movie's appeal, for if it were primarily "a slum kid's vivid fantasy" (Kael's phrase), one would be hard pressed to account for the regular inclusion of this movie in the offerings of repertory cinemas and college film series.

Thus, this movie is an appropriate candidate for analysis in light of the initially noted paradox. It has demonstrated appeal and yet vividly depicts assorted beatings, stabbings and shootings. I account for this movie's appeal by situating the role of violence (actual and feared) within the maturational processes of individuals and of social units. The movie empathetically portrays conflicts which attend maturation in each case. By giving form to shared yet inchoate concerns, the film generates its appeal.

My analysis is deliberately "shallow," at least insofar its aim is not the most psychologically or cinematically nuanced account possible of *The Warriors*.² Following film theorist Noël Carroll, I maintain that "the power of movies resides in their easily graspable clarity for mass audiences."³ Carroll relates this to differences in the processing of pictorial representations as opposed to, e.g., linguistic comprehension (ibid. 86-87). Carroll insightfully relates the ease of "processing" movies to various technical devices, e.g., scaling, bracketing and framing. Most importantly, however, for my purposes, Carroll denies that "the untutored spectator recognizes what the film image represents without reference to a code; it is *not* claimed that the spectator takes the pictorial representation to be, in any sense, its referent" (ibid., 87). Such naive realism, surely, makes mysterious the cross-cultural power of movies.

Yet if generic capacities concerning how human beings process information is to explain the easy assimilation of a movie-induced point of view, the question of why a particular point of view appeals to certain "target audiences" remains to be answered. As Carroll concedes, "Social conditioning and affective psychology, *appropriately historicized*, must be introduced to explain the power of given movies for target groups. Sociology, anthropology, and certain forms of psychoanalysis are likely to be useful in such investigations" (ibid. 102). In other words, an apt

analysis ought to identify why certain psychological motifs are “transparent” for their target audiences. My account looks to uncover no deeper layer than required to find a psychological common denominator.⁴

The Games Gangs Play

The movie follows nine members of a gang—the Warriors—as they travel from Coney Island to the Bronx to attend a grand meeting of NYC youth gangs. The purpose of the meeting is to organize one super-gang which will seize the city from the ruling forces. However, during this meeting, the leader of the largest gang is assassinated by a member of another group, the Rogues. In the confusion which follows the assassination, the Warriors are identified as the assassins. As they attempt to make their way back to Brooklyn, dodging the police, they learn that every gang in New York has targeted them for destruction. In the course of their attempt to return home, they must defend themselves against those bent on avenging the murdered leader and those who want to eliminate the Warriors before they have a chance to clear themselves. The bulk of the movie tracks the gang members as they struggle down Manhattan seeking the refuge of their home turf.

The distant ancestor of the plot of *The Warriors* is Xenophon’s *Anabasis*. Xenophon recounts the heroic struggles of a Greek army to return to its homeland after being left stranded in Asia Minor upon the death (through both battle and treachery) of its leaders. The movie evokes just this classic and basic tale of being stranded amidst strange cultures and the difficult return journey as it chronicles the youth gang’s attempt to traverse the distance between the Bronx and Coney Island.

Early on in the movie, a camera focuses on a subway map, and slowly follows the route which the Warriors are taking. The overt journey which the Warriors undertake is a long and perilous one. The location of the meeting to which they travel might just as well be Asia Minor. For, like the Greeks in Xenophon’s account, they know that they shall be surrounded by hostile tribes in a foreign territory very distant from their own. Marked—they are unarmed and yet wearing their gang/tribal colors—and with only each other to rely upon, they are the quintessential primitive band.

Yet if the distances and the individuals involved seem, at the outset, strictly mock-heroic, the themes on which the movie plays most definitely are not. The problems which worry the movie’s characters—who to follow? how does one learn what is valuable? how does one choose between the demands of a peer group and the demands of a wider society?—are those which become of central importance at the juncture in life when one is teetering on the near edge of adulthood.

The Warriors engage, I show, in a symbolic journey, traversing the distance from adolescence to adulthood. In order to chart such travels, a psychological map is needed. For their journey—the world they actually traverse—is a dreamscape consisting of an adolescent's fears and concerns.

Oddities abound in this movie. Chief among them is the fact that although the movie is set in New York City—in fact, in some of its most populous sections—and although the gang is constantly on the street or in the subway, the “city” of the movie is effectively empty of adults. It is worth noting, following an observation of Christopher Lasch's, that the movie, like the ever-popular comic strip “Peanuts,” depicts a world in which adults have effectively disappeared both in fact and in terms of filling any obvious roles in the lives being portrayed.⁵

The movie self-consciously plays upon a tri-level analogy between gangs, tribes, and sports teams. The journey is invested throughout with implied parallels between personal and social evolution. The sports motif, for example, is playfully brought to the viewer's attention throughout the movie. Each gang brings nine members—the same number, as any American viewer knows, as is on a baseball team. The gang colors are, clearly, uniforms. Each is associated with a distinct territory and possesses traditional rivals. The meeting spot to which they all travel is an outdoor sports facility. The first gang confronted by the Warriors during their struggle to return home is the Turnbill A.C. (Athletic Club). There is also a confrontation with a group named the Baseball Furies. A fight occurs with a gang which, although unnamed, nonetheless is led by a person on roller skates (Roller Derby?). In the final confrontation of gangs, the Riffs, previously acknowledged to be the largest (and, by implication, the most feared) gang in the city, appear armed with, among other things, hockey sticks.⁶

But the sports motif is not the most interesting or important analogy on which the movie trades. The symbolic parallel basic to the movie is between the literal youth of those whom we see on the screen and the “youth” of a society, as suggested by a relatively immature and unsophisticated social form which gangs recall. The movie's psychological text is one which treats myths concerning individual development as recapitulating social development.

Any reading of this movie is complicated by the fact that the gang functions in different roles at different points in the movie. The Warriors may represent a primal state; alternatively, the Warriors may appear as a primal family, reluctant to surrender a member to the larger society which needs its members in order to perpetuate itself. In some cases, the problems faced by individual gang members are those faced by anyone caught between the demands of love and work. In short, the Warriors have no single, unambiguous symbolic valence. They are neither a complete family nor a complete state, but, rather, some hybrid creation.⁷

The Warriors are to be taken as a *family* unit in a literal sense. This interpretation is suggested by a number of facts. First, the only names which individual Warriors have, and the only group with which any of them are ever heard to identify, is that which the gang provides. Second, at least one member of the gang—Rembrandt—is clearly preadolescent and is treated as a younger child would be. Third, the only home ever identified by them is just the gang's territory—Coney Island. In short, their names (Cleon, Swan, Ajax, Cowboy, Snow, Vermin, Rembrandt, Fox) are gang-given, their “surname” is just the gang name, and their home is also the common place of residence.

Related to this is the reason for which all the gangs come together, *viz.*, to take over the city. Those from whom it is to be taken include the police and the “Mob”; in short, it is to be taken from the adults. This is adolescent rebellion writ large. It is portrayed as a contest of strength and of numbers in which the young fully expect to prevail. That the fantasy is rudely interrupted and disrupted by the arrival of *actual* adults, *i.e.*, the police, does not, so far as one can tell from the movie, impugn the fantasy. The vision which initially brought the gangs together is itself never questioned.

The charismatic leader of the Riff's is early on described as “magic.” The character of this magic is twofold: to realize the adolescent wish to replace the adult and the wish to be adults. The grandiose nature of the fantasy, and the murderous rage towards adults which it explicitly involves, echoes what psycho-analysts such as D.W. Winnicott have observed.

If, in the fantasy of early growth, there is contained *death*, then at adolescence there is contained *murder*. Even when growth at the period of puberty goes ahead without major crises, one may need to deal with acute problems of management because growing up means taking the parent's place. *It really does*. In the unconscious fantasy, growing up is inherently an aggressive act. And the child is now no longer childsize.⁶

Children eventually displace and replace adults. The transition is rarely an easy one. This theme, the eternal promise and threat of a rising, restless new generation, is one the movie explicitly evokes and subtly develops.

Freud suggests that primitives and children are taken with a belief in the omnipotence of thought, *i.e.*, “the unshaken confidence in the capacity to dominate the world and the inaccessibility to the obvious facts which could enlighten man as to his real place in the world.”⁹ The very fact that the gangs shun modern (scientific) weaponry and yet deign to imagine that they could seize the world from those who have such weapons underlines the fact that the wish of the gangs holds sway over their knowledge of reality.

Modern weapons, where they appear, do double duty as symbols, consistent with the two levels of adolescence—individual and social—on which the movie operates. On the individual level, the gun, in contrast with the baseball bat, is an instrument whose basic use is destructive. I would suggest that it represents, at least, a type of responsibility which is still unwanted. The fact that the Lizzies (an all-girl gang which the Warriors encounter) possess a gun underlines the special sort of threat which women pose to the gang; and it is also the case that women mature—both socially and physically—more quickly than men.¹⁰

The police, it should be noted, only *wear* their guns; the weapon is there, but it is kept under cover. The gun need not be seen because we know that such people possess them. The audience's knowledge of the social function of the police—everyone's favorite authority symbol—underlines the significance of the gun as a symbol both of individual and social adulthood. The gun, unlike all the other gang weapons, has no connotation or use as a plaything; it is the product of those who are both socially and individually advanced.

Freud, especially when speaking in his more Hobbesian voice, emphasizes the doubly critical role of violence in the formation of civilized existence. The fear of violence leads people to form communities, and this very threat is central to controlling individuals, and so promoting the work of civilization, once communities are established.¹¹ Whether viewed as a Hobbesian proto-society bound by an unarticulated yet understood pact to insure their mutual security, or as a Freudian family whose head serves to check and redirect desires, the Warriors incarnate the restraints upon individuals which are the *sine qua non* of the survival of the group in the type of Hobbesian state of nature depicted in the movie.¹² In their willingness to defer to the needs of the group, the individual Warriors manifest the sort of basic social values which are required if civilization is to endure (or if an individual is to mature).

Winicott's remarks coincide, interestingly enough, with Freud's remarks on the "adolescence of the human race." The dreamscape in which the action of the movie takes place is not only a land created by adolescent fantasies regarding the adult world, but also is located in an imagined social adolescence of the human race. It is a time not far removed from when there emerged from the chaos of the natural state the beginnings of the state as we now know it. The Warriors are boys poised on the threshold of adulthood and human beings edging towards civilization.¹³

Another adolescent aspect of the psychological terrain which is traversed in the course of the movie is also suggested by the way in which male-female relations are portrayed. In the context of the movie, they are invariably divisive. The first appearance of "the girl" precipitates the conflict between the Warriors and the Orphans. Her name—Mercy—

is mentioned only once; the Warriors never address her by it. They treat her as if she had no name. She is not a member of a gang. Surely it is of note that a person biologically capable of bearing an actual child should be denied all the signs of belonging to a family which gang membership bestows on the others. Fox becomes involved in a fight which proves fatal for him when attempting to help the girl flee in the subway station. Ajax, unbeatable as a warrior, is conquered when entrapped by a policewoman. Three gang members are lured away from the subway station and almost killed by a female gang (the only case, besides that of the leader of the Rogues, where there is the *use* of a gun).

Other scenes also reveal at just what level women are viewed by the boys in the bands. When the Warriors surprise the girl who (unlike the boys in the Orphans) has dared to follow them, Swan's threat to have the gang rape her is not one she appears to take seriously. One of the gang members remarks, "Yeah, I've got the big one," a remark which is clearly meant to be and is taken as a joke. Such jokes are typical of the sort of sexual bravado one hears among teenage boys. And while the Warriors, initially, alternately leer at and threaten the girl, nonetheless, they ultimately either attempt to protect her (as does Fox), or ignore her (as Swan regularly attempts to do). It is as if these young males can find no use to which her presence can be put other than that of providing a convenient target for sexual teasing.

Even when the Rogues confront a girl, they are more interested in candy bars than in her. And when she demands payment for the candy bars (notice that no gang seems to know how to react when challenged by a woman, not the Orphans, not the Warriors, not the outlaw gang), the sociopath reacts by staging a minor temper tantrum and yet does nothing more violent than throw the candy bar back at her.

The single sex nature of the gangs portrayed in the movie is significant in light of the individual and social developmental motifs explored in this movie. Ajax's repeated questioning of the sexual orientation of his fellow gang members underlines, as it surely is intended to, the homoerotic elements present in their relations. Rembrandt is not only androgynous, but is also, until late in the movie, the only individual character towards whom Swan shows concern and affection. Rembrandt's ambiguous sexual status in this group is suggested, in addition, by his jealous behavior towards the Lizzies; they are clearly competition for the attention and affection of the other gang members.

Sexual needs, by Freud's account, are fundamentally prone to promote social divisiveness.¹⁴ The dangers inherent in succumbing to female allures is shown time and again in this movie; the opposite sex is the greatest threat to the ties that bind.

Even in a person who has in other respects become absorbed in a group, the directly sexual impulses preserve a little of his individual activity. If they become too strong they disintegrate every group formation. . . [L]ove for women breaks through the group ties of race, of national divisions, and of the social class system, and it thus produces important effects as a factor in civilization. *It seems certain that homosexual love is far more compatible with group ties, even when it takes the shape of uninhibited sexual impulses*—a remarkable fact, the explanation of which might carry us far.¹⁵

Interestingly, not only does Freud suggest that homoerotic bonds make for more natural *group* ties, but he also speculates that as a *social* development, love relationships made their appearance fairly late. “There are abundant indications that being in love only made its appearance later on in the sexual relations between men and women; so that the opposition between sexual love and group ties is also a late development” (ibid., p. 72). Individual Warriors express an interest in women as sex objects; however, the emergence of a woman as a love object—a partner or a family member—is, in fact, a late development in the movie. But we have seen why this must be. The ties that bind the group are antithetical to the ties that bind a heterosexual couple; small wonder, then, that, in this particular dreamscape, the women appear as they do.

Swan's Way

Freud's view of heterosexual love and its role in fostering civilization is, as noted, equivocal. Such love both unites and divides. Women bind men, on Freud's view, to one social unit—the family—but, as he insists in a controversial passage from *Civilization and Its Discontents*, women's alleged preoccupation with family makes them hostile to the demands of larger social units.¹⁶ Love, Freud claims, engenders a conflict between the very institutions of family and of society which this love makes possible. Freud postulates as well parallels between stages of social development and of individual maturation.¹⁷ On his account, the relatively “late” appearance of a certain type of love relationship as a social phenomenon recapitulates the psychological development of the individual.

Freud's outline regarding the developmental parallels between societies and individuals neatly fits the character of Swan. That is, Swan's development reflects the developmental lines suggested by Freudian theory with regard to social relationships and personal relationships. If Swan, at the outset of the movie, is the emotional peer of his fellow Warriors, he has, by the movie's end, outgrown them. Still an explanation is needed as to why Swan, and not the others, develops, at least to the extent that he does. Why does he, in the end, become capable of leaving the Warriors and going away with the girl (implicitly, to have a *real* family)?

The engine of his development, following a suggestion of Winnicott's, may plausibly be taken to be just the responsibility which Swan assumes upon becoming the gang leader early on in the movie. It is noteworthy that Swan is not, until circumstances conspire to make him so, the leader of the gang. It is only *after* he assumes the responsibility of leadership, in crisis circumstances, that his growth takes place. And he assumes this role on the death of Cleon, the original gang leader. It is just this opportunity for triumph which such a death offers which provides the needed impetus for psychological growth in adolescence.¹⁸

With the proviso that the adult does not abdicate, we may surely think of the strivings of adolescents to find themselves and to determine their own destiny as the most exciting thing that we can see in life around us. . . . [B]ut the point about adolescence is its immaturity and the fact of not being responsible. This, its most sacred element, lasts only a few years, and it is a property that must be lost to each individual as maturity is reached.¹⁹

What grips and excites youthful audiences, and those whose memories of youthful turbulence remain vivid, is the maturational struggle embedded in the physical obstacles with which characters are confronted and which they struggle to overcome.

Starting from the moment when Swan, almost alone among those gathered at the stadium, remains unmoved by the exhortations of the Riffs' leader, to his helping to direct the flight of the Warriors in the riot that follows the assassination and the appearance of the police, to his facing down of Ajax's challenge, Swan shows himself ready for leadership and to have the requisite abilities. Indeed, when he is cautioning the Warriors not to provoke the Orphans, one gang member looks at him and remarks, somewhat incredulously, "Since when did you become a diplomat?" Since becoming a leader, of course.

Swan's "maturing" into a leadership role in the gang accompanies a maturing of his views of women and family. The evidence for this is found by tracing changes in his reaction to the character of the girl, Mercy. Initially, he tries just to ignore her. In following how his view of her changes, a key scene is the exchange between them in the subway tunnel. Here, although Swan verges on being seduced, his first "love" still remains the Warriors, and it is to the urgings of that voice—the voice of his siblings/children—that he responds. The scene reveals Sean's growing awareness of and attraction to this girl as someone he would even consider (however briefly at this point) placing ahead of the group.

Of greater significance is Swan's remark to her in this scene that she is "just part of what is happening tonight, and it's all bad." Why is *she* part of the near overwhelming troubles which have beset the Warriors? Remember that the city of the movie is a dreamscape. *Qua* dream, the fantasy celebrates the overthrow/death/disappearance of adults; it is the primal adolescent fantasy made real, the world made

fantastic by replacing the real restraints of biological parents and siblings with sympathetic peers.

Yet the fantastic also, and quite soon, takes on a nightmarish quality. The journey back, the beginning of their flight home, commences in a cemetery. (What more appropriate place for the nightmare to begin?) Swan, as his capsule summary of the evening's events reveals, experiences the situation as nightmarish. It is, as he says, all bad. And the reason it is so is that the adolescent fantasy is no longer one in which life appears pleasurable.

Part of what is bad, then, is that the dream must be given up; Swan has confronted the fact that such a world is one in which he does not want to live. However, renouncing this wish has its compensations, namely, love. As Swan comes to realize, this is what he stands to gain. But, at the moment (in the subway tunnel), the loss of the dream is what is on his mind. He tries to walk away, literally and figuratively, from this realization, but it catches up with him, as it must.

The transition in Swan's feelings with regard to the girl is completed in the course of the last segment of their subway ride home. At one of the subway stops, two young couples, returning from a high school prom, board the train. Beside the sociological contrast between the denim, leather, and bruise clad Warriors and the tuxedoed and gowned couples afforded by this scene, we are treated here as well to a contrast between the rites of passage as fantasized by the quintessential adolescents—the fight—and such rites as endorsed and smiled upon by the larger society—the prom. The confrontation on the train epitomizes the social and psychological motifs of the movie. The city, although shot on location, stands in as a dreamscape; most proms, at least as I recall such events, are very self-consciously theme and fantasy oriented. The dream is more like the reality, the real event (proms) is only a socially fashioned dream.

The gangs in the movie are prepared to handle any confrontation except that with a single woman. The single woman, in turn, is daunted when confronted with the trappings of a socially acceptable rite of passage. Swan, in a fine scene which may be read to many purposes, restrains her as she instinctively moves to straighten her hair. Swan's touch here acknowledges both the woman's feelings as an individual and her undeniable association with him. Swan restrains her, I would argue, so as not to defer to the social myth, and thus compromise the importance of what they have done, i.e., to have literally fought their way through to adulthood.

The suggestion that the relationship between Swan and Mercy has importantly changed after this last subway ride is supported by at least two scenes. When the Warriors are preparing for their final confrontation with the Rogues, she insists on joining them. "I can take care of myself; I've proved that." In allowing her to accompany them in "battle," Swan

accepts her as a family member, as someone who is now part of his family.

Swan, in fact, has already acknowledged that he is ready to surrender one family in order to have another. He remarks, as they disembark on the subway platform at Coney Island, that he (Swan) is going to go away. Mercy announces that she will join him. When asked why, her response is that she knows they will enjoy the *same things*. Swan lets *that* remark pass unchallenged.

Although apparently victorious on the beach, the scene is, upon reflection, merely a stunning confirmation of the defeat of the fantasy and of the overall nightmarish quality which the fantasy has assumed. For, as Swan says, he thought that when he saw the ocean, he was home. But the presence of the Rogues, and the dramatic appearance of the Riffs's horde, make it clear that a home is not a haven, at least not anymore. Adolescents may dream of "owning the streets," of defining a small spot forever safe for them and those special to them (as in *Peter Pan*); but the larger social realities soon force on them the illusory quality of this imagined safety and security. Even Swan's final declaration that the gang is the best is, if the pun be forgiven, his swan-song, his final affirmation that the dream will not be forgotten, even if reality requires that it ultimately be forsaken. The movie paints a profoundly pessimistic picture, for it reveals the emptiness and the desolation of the myths which have sustained the movie's protagonists.

Movies and the Location of Cultural Experience

Prom nights, in particular, and images of a carefree adolescence, in general, are just part of a larger social myth which suggests that adolescence is a happy time, a time in which one's existence is free of important worries and responsibilities. This sort of image has been celebrated on innumerable television shows (from "Dobie Gillis" to "Happy Days"). A psycho-analytic perspective suggests that this sugar coated view is a lie; surely it is a lie to many parents who must contend with their teen-aged children. As Winnicott bluntly states, "If the child is to become adult, then this move is achieved over the dead body of an adult. I must take it for granted that the reader knows that I am referring to unconscious fantasy, the material that underlies playing."²⁰ Movies that emphasize the stresses of this transition,²¹ and those that employ fantasy to explore its darker sexual side,²² have enjoyed immense popularity with adolescent audiences. The point, emphasized time and again in *The Warriors*, is that the transition surely is a struggle, myths to the contrary notwithstanding.

We can now return to the question of how the sports motif intersects with the developmental concerns examined so far. Organized sports, both with regard to participation and to viewing, are an important form of

play in our society. The sports motif, as noted earlier, pervades *The Warriors*. The progress of the Warriors towards their goal is broadcast over the radio; their progress is marked by their ability to defeat different teams. Victories and defeats are described using standard sports metaphors.

This use of sport—organized play—is further evidence for my interpretation. Following Winnicott's rich and insightful suggestions here, all of culture may be understood as arising from an ability to play. "I am assuming that cultural experiences are in direct continuity with play, the play of those who have not yet heard of games."²³ The suggestion is that the fantasies invested in play are, or at least can be, of first importance with regard to the concerns people have about their lives. The wishes and fears which characterize stages of individual and social development never go away, and so the need to play remains. The suggestion is that developmental crises are never fully resolved; they are ones with which we reach various compromises at various times.

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play.²⁴

The violence in the movie, like the violence in some sports, is evidence of the effort and the importance invested in this sort of play.

The question which remains is why movies have achieved such prominence as purveyors of a certain type of fantasy. One reason is suggested by Christopher Lasch, particularly his remarks on the "Degradation of Sport" in his *The Culture of Narcissism*.²⁵ On Lasch's account, the condemnation of play as unproductive, and the "professionalization" of play represented by the increasingly businesslike way in which sports teams are run, are both troubling consequences of culture as it has developed (ibid., 184-5).

The implications for play, at least in the traditional arenas just cited, are grim. "The degradation of sport, then, consists not in its being taken too seriously but in its trivialization. Games derive their power from the investment of seemingly trivial activity with serious intent."²⁶ These complaints, in the context of the analysis which Lasch develops, are themselves just symptomatic of an unhealthy preoccupation with the self which he sees also as a consequence of current economic and social forces. Certain movies, he suggests, reflect just this fact.

Social conditions today encourage a survival mentality, expressed in its crudest form in disaster movies or in fantasies of space travel, which allow vicarious escape from a doomed planet. People no longer dream of overcoming difficulties but merely of surviving them. (ibid., 100)

A basic problem, then, and one which *The Warriors* certainly reflects, is that “ ‘[g]rowth’ has become a euphemism for survival.” (ibid.)

If Lasch is right, at least in his remarks concerning the degradation of sports, then the ability of *The Warriors* to elicit strong responses from certain groups becomes all the easier to explain. I have emphasized from the outset that the movie explores universal and emotionally laden themes. However, this does not, by itself, explain the fighting and near rioting by teenagers which threatened the movie's distribution at one point. The additional point to be made is that it seems as if movies such as this one have, by a process of cultural elimination, become one of the last strongholds of the sort of play elsewhere prohibited or severely constrained.

If this is so, then the behavior of the viewers does make sense. The movie theatre, given a lack of censorship of material, given the obvious but significant fact that we view movies in the dark, alone with our fantasies in an environment which is (in most cases, certainly) quite safe and comfortable, becomes one of the last great arenas in which the fantastic can be imagined without real threat or restriction. Here too the forbidden (and perhaps unacknowledged) wishes achieve some semblance of acknowledgment and gratification. That movies are a type of play which forces us to be, in many important respects, both intellectually and physically passive (after all, it is, in the end, someone else's fantasy which we have to make our own) has other interesting and important consequences.²⁷

What is needed, in any case, is an appreciation of the crucial role which violence has in maturational fantasies (among others). The aesthetic paradox dissolves, at least on a psycho-analytic perspective, if movies are treated as types of playful fantasies which permit one to enjoy those thoughts which there is social and psychological pressure not to confront or acknowledge. The importance of depictions of violence in its relation to and role in the maturational processes, is what should allow us to appreciate the virtue of the violence in *The Warriors*.

[T]he essential *ars poetica* lies in the technique by which our feeling of repulsion is overcome, and this has certainly to do with those barriers erected between every individual being and all others. We can guess at two methods used in this technique. The writer softens the egoistical character of the day-dream by changes and disguises, and he bribes us by the offer of a purely formal, that is, aesthetic, pleasure in the presentation of his phantasies. The increment of pleasure which is offered us in order to release yet greater pleasure arising from deeper sources in the mind is called an “incitement premium” or technically, “fore-pleasure.” I am of opinion that all the aesthetic pleasure we gain from the works of imaginative writers is of the same type as this “fore-pleasure,” and that the true enjoyment of literature proceeds from the release of tension in our minds. *Perhaps much that brings about this result consists in the writer's putting us into a position in which we can enjoy our own day-dreams without reproach or shame.* ²⁸

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Notes

¹See the fine study by Jean Roy, *Hobbes and Freud*, trans. T.G. Osler (Canadian Philosophical Monographs: Toronto, 1984). The classic texts here are, of course, Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

²For a contrast to the type of account I here develop, see the deeply Freudian readings of Hitchcock films developed in essays by Stanley Palombo and William Rothman in *Images in Our Souls*, ed. J.H. Smith and W. Kerrigan (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

³Noel Carroll, "The Power of Movies," *Daedalus* 114 (Fall 1985) p. 82.

⁴For a more sustained excursion in "shallow" analysis, see James Twitchell's *Dreadful Pleasures* (Oxford 1985). There is an aversion to exploring movie violence in a way that brings out the positive attributes of such goings-on. Robert Warshaw insightfully analyzes this aversion in several essays, but the classic remains, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," in *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Atheneum, 1979). Besides Carroll's work, I have been helped as well by John Cawelti's essay, "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films," pp. 559-79, in *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1979) I explore issues related to those discussed here in "Virtue and Violence: The Meaning of Mayhem in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*," in *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* (Winter 1988), pp. 29-42.

⁵Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*, (New York: Basic Books, 1977) p. 176.

⁶In contrast, it is worth noting that a gang encountered early on—the much despised Orphans—are, literally and figuratively, colorless; they have no uniform to speak of. Also, as the dialogue here and later makes clear, the Orphans are described as not being in the same league with the other gangs.

⁷I owe the clarification of this point to Tom Pickrel. It has also been emphasized to me in discussion by Jerry Izenberg, Nadia Ramzy, and Stephen Post that while the Warriors are, on the one hand, a pathological case of adolescent develop, it is, on the other hand, the pathological aspects which bring into relief the general problems which I discuss. That is, just as no one is apt to deny that Dostoevsky's "Underground Man" exhibits any number of problems, still his problems serve to highlight difficulties with the individuals and the society which he confronts.

⁸D.W. Winnicott, *Playing & Reality*, (London: Tavistock, 1971), p. 144.

⁹S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, (New York: Vintage, 1946), p. 116.

¹⁰The psychotic leader of the Rogues possesses a gun precisely because his manhood is in question. He is small; his manhood is not obvious. Like a child, he has particular trouble restraining his impulses and controlling his temper. (He

shot the leader of the Riffs because he just “wanted to.”) In one scene, he is shown calling “home”; like a small child, he must account for his whereabouts.

¹¹See S. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), p. 91. See also his “Why War?”, in *Sigmund Freud: Character and Culture*, ed. P. Rieff (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 68.

¹²Jean Roy, *Hobbes and Freud*, op. cit., p. 68.

¹³Further suggestions concerning how these parallels are to be understood are indicated by Freud in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. J. Strachey, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1959) especially pp. 55-56.

¹⁴See, for example, *Totem and Taboo*, op. cit., p. 97 and *Group Psychology . . .*, op. cit., p. 72.

¹⁵*Group Psychology . . .*, op. cit., p. 73. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶*Civilization . . .*, op. cit., pp. 50-51.

¹⁷Freud explicitly discusses this parallelism, for example, at pp. 65, 69, and 86ff. in *Civilization . . .*, op. cit.

¹⁸Winnicott, op. cit., p. 145.

¹⁹*ibid.*, pp. 146-147. One theme which, no doubt, calls for more extensive treatment than I accord it in this paper is the “slaying” of the two father figures at the very outset of the film, i.e., the explicitly described “magical” figure of the person who organized the rally—the aspiring father of all the families—and the murder, by this person’s enraged “sons,” of the leader of the Warriors. Winnicott remarks that “the adolescent who wins too early is caught in his own trap, must turn dictator, and must stand up waiting to be killed—to be killed not by a new generation of his own children, but by siblings. Naturally, he seeks to control them.” (*ibid.*, p. 146) Given that the Warriors are, as I argued before, to be taken as a family, and since Swan was not the leader of the gang at the outset, he then bears both the relation of sibling and of father to his fellow gang members. The successive deaths and ascensions of leaders here hints at a parallel with Frazier’s classic analysis. However, I can do no more at this time than to acknowledge these points and their undoubted importance in any extended explication of this film’s dramatic appeal to adolescents and general appeal to many others.

²⁰Winnicott, op. cit., p. 145.

²¹The films encompass a spectrum from the relative light of, e.g., *American Graffiti* and *Sixteen Candles* to the dark of, e.g., *The River’s Edge*.

²²Here I would include a wide range of films, such as *Carrie* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*.

²³D.W. Winnicott, “The Location of Cultural Experience,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 48 (1966), p. 370.

²⁴D.W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 34 (1953), p. 96.

²⁵Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, (New York: Warner Books, 1979).

²⁶*ibid.*, p. 195. For some interesting related reflections on the importance of sport, see Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), especially pp. 280-282.

²⁷The classic analysis of this aspect of film culture is Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” This essay can be found in his *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968).

²⁸S. Freud, “The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming,” in Rieff, op. cit., p. 43. Emphasis mine.

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