

## **“Crime in Cinema and Literature” The Art of Evil**

*\*Rohit Chander  
Jindal Global Law School*

*\*\*Shaswat Mimani  
National Law University, Jodhpur*

Humanity and Crime are two inseparable terms, one which ceases to exist without other. Emile Durkheim argued that crime is a natural social activity and ‘an integral part of all healthy societies.’<sup>1</sup> Therefore, crime becomes an inevitable part of a civilization. One which cannot be ignored. That is why, since time immemorial, crime has been playing a pivotal part in shaping society to its status quo, carving its presence on our history textbooks to the news bulletins. With such a drastic presence in the society, crime incorporates itself in the routine lives of the individuals, be it through the whispers of hearsay or due to the mala fide actions of an individual. With this, we can come to the conclusion that one cannot escape and remain oblivious to the grotesque realities of crime which are prevalent in the darkest corners of this society. When such an impactful element exist in abundance which could instill strong emotions of thrill and fear amongst a crowd, it is evident that such an element would find its place as a genre in the realms of literature and cinema. Because crime in literature and cinema, would work as a necessary artistic tool which could elevate the story telling process for a more gripping experience. Unlike the contrary belief about crime in art being responsible for crimes committed in real life, artistic expression of crime does nothing more than to be an essential element for the story telling process. The elements of crime are confined within the realms of art as a literary device and should not be blamed for crimes committed outside it.

The deep rooted existence of crime can not only be witnessed in the current scenario, but it has its roots in the very foundations of our holy texts as well. These scriptures not only advocate humanity and guide the society to a righteous path, it also enlightens them with a set of pre-requisite morals and ethics which are required to be humane. For example, the entire premise of Bhagvada Gita is set around the premise of a battlefield. Even here, the element of crime has been used as an artistic tool to advocate a greater spiritual message to humanity. It may seem to call for violence because of its battlefield setting, but it uses that setting to demonstrate that its call for transcendence is practical, responsible and dynamic.<sup>2</sup> The battlefield setting, in addition to its historicity, represents our internal consciousness that features the battle between godly desires and ungodly desires. The element of crime doesn’t only serve a greater purpose in spreading a more vital message, it also works as a tool to hold the plotline for a more meaningful narrative. Despite such messages of peace and co-

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<sup>1</sup> Durkheim, Emile. 1982. "The Rules Of Sociological Method". *Monoskop.Org*. [https://monoskop.org/images/1/1e/Durkheim\\_Emile\\_The\\_Rules\\_of\\_Sociological\\_Method\\_1982.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/1/1e/Durkheim_Emile_The_Rules_of_Sociological_Method_1982.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> "Why Does The Bhagavad-Gita Call For Violence? - The Spiritual Scientist". 2020. *The Spiritual Scientist*. <https://www.thespiritualscientist.com/2011/12/why-does-the-bhagavad-gita-call-for-violence/>.

existence instilled in our religious texts, one can misinterpret the context of the element of crime, to give birth to a form of extremist ideology which promotes the spread of violent behavior in a community or a group of people. This could be easily understood by the prevalence of such a misinterpreted concept of Jihad discussed in Quran. CHAPTER 2, VERSE 190 of Quran states “Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loves not transgressors.”<sup>3</sup> Here, the prophet doesn’t preach to wage a war. Instead he talks about the limitations one has to adhere to despite in the cases of self-defense. It gives guidelines that one has to follow even in the state of chaos and turmoil and asks not to kill those who are not involved in the fight. Such ethical guidelines on warfare can often be seen similar to that of The Mahabharata. Yet many people confuse such scriptures with the license to kill and such misinterpretations result in the origin of terrorism, cultural violence and religious differences. When you mix the artistic expression of crime with contextual blankness, you get certain individuals, consumed with hatred and flawed notions. When you look at those criminals who commit such atrocities, one can’t really blame the literature they take the inspiration from. Instead, the accountability lies solely on the perpetrators of the crimes committed.

Similarly, in the world of cinema, crime has been used as an artistic tool to provide visual realism to the audience it caters to. It’s not just blatantly put for appeal, rather it serves a purpose of providing a more meaningful narrative fabric to the plot. Either providing the build-up to the narrative or familiarizing the audience to the natural routine of a character, crime works as an engaging and effective tool to do so. Directors like Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino have used the artistic expression of crime to make their films visually appealing and providing in-depth, aesthetically crafted violent scenes which enhances the context of the plot. Be it the brutal revenge scenes from Django Unchained and Kill Bill, or the murdering gangsters from Goodfellas, every scene is crafted to give a impactful context to the gravity of the desire of vengeance or the nonchalance those gangsters had even while performing such gruesome activities, hence establishing a meaningful reasoning to their actions and routine. Such artistic expressions give a visual aid to the narrative and exposes the grim realities amidst the most fictitious of plots. This draws out the emotions of fear, thrill and anticipation in the audience and adds to a more enriching cinematic experience. The element of crime in artistic expression in films become more relevant and necessary when we talk about war biopics such as Schindler’s List or any other film related to a social cause such as Slavery in 12 Years’ a Slave. The violence and haunting imagery encapsulates the horrific reality in a compelling manner which the cinema wanted to portray. Here, the artistic expression of crime exposes the audience to the evils which historically prevailed in the world at a point of time. The violence in such films is not the highlight but it becomes a catalyst for, a more immersive and engaging experience. If such an artistic tool is influencing the perpetrators of crime, then it is not the cinema but the individuals themselves who have failed to distinguish between fantasy and facts.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://quran.com/2/190-193>.

As an audience, one owes a duty of care to the society to be deemed responsible enough to witness such violent artistic expression, portrayed through the medium of cinema and literature. Watching violent movies really might make people more aggressive - but only if they have an abrasive personality to start with, a study shows.<sup>4</sup> This study proves that such individuals who have shown hostility after being exposed to the crime in cinema and literature are already exposed to the violent thoughts to begin with. Hence, making such individuals an exception to the rule. Another reason for such individuals desire to get exposed to the genre of crime in the first place could be because they are already inclined towards such violent thoughts. The lack of evidence in such a scenario de-establishes the entire causal relationship of cinema and literature being blamed for the causation of crime. Even If people could say that such portrayal of violence is a cause which gives effect to such gruesome crimes which happen in the real world, then this co-relation should hold true for other genres of cinema as well. Perhaps that peaceful movies promote peace in the society. One can draw to conclusions regarding this matter, yet they will lack evidence for such claims too. The ambiguity of the research weakens the premise of the contrary belief. Moreover, despite the criticism and scrutiny the crime genre has faced, certain individuals show a positive effect of crime in cinema and literature on the children. Instead of getting influenced by the gore and evil expression of art, adherents of Aristotle's theory of Catharsis believe that such mimetic play can help a child or youth to get the disapproved impulses "out of his system".<sup>5</sup>

The crime in cinema and literature, provided with a context, is anything but criminal. It is a necessary literary device and an artistic tool which is solely used for a more enriching and gripping experience of the plot. Shakespeare, Agatha Christie, Alfred Hitchcock or Quentin Tarantino, all of them have used the artistic expression of crime to provide the society with lauded works in cinema and literature. To put such a tool to scrutiny would be disrespectful for the artists that have found solace in producing such defining masterpieces of art. If even still we were to believe that religious texts, critically acclaimed literature and cinema were to be at fault for such atrocities, then today, the criminals would have constituted the majority of the masses instead of being the exceptions to the rule. People need to understand that cinema and literature are meant to be witnessed and experienced to escape the reality, not become the reality itself. From the accidental death of an anarchist to Tom and Jerry, crime has given us a reason to laugh, a reason to question, a reason to be calm and provided us with a moral compass with its own notion of consequences which one suffers throughout the plot. But what it hasn't blessed us with, is a reason to kill.

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<sup>4</sup> Perry, K., 2020. *Watching Violent Films Does Make People More Aggressive, Study Shows*. [online] Telegraph.co.uk. Available at: <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/11087683/Watching-violent-films-does-make-people-more-aggressive-study-shows.html>>

<sup>5</sup> Munro, Thomas. "Art and Violence." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27, no. 3 (1969): 317-22. Accessed May 16, 2020. doi:10.2307/428677.