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Contextualising screen violence: An integrative approach toward explaining of the functions of violent narrative events in audiovisual media

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Abstract:

This article aims to examine the narrative impacts and social influences of screen violence in audiovisual media. It suggests an integrative approach to synthesising the recent research findings in different disciplines such as cognitive science, media studies, neuroscience, and social semiotic theories. Based on the theoretical synthesis of narrative effects and persuasive functions, this paper establishes a method for analysing the contextualisation of violent events. In particular, the analytical method focuses on the two main narrative mechanisms for contextualising violent events, *justifications of characters' motivations for using violence* and *depictions of consequences*. This article will apply the method to elucidate how different kinds of contextualisation yield different types of narrative impacts, persuasive potentials, and the ways in which social, political, and ideological issues can be learnt. Furthermore, a typology of characters' motivations is also provided, which are often used for justifying the characters' violent actions in audiovisual narratives. This paper also unravels how genre expectations are closely related to narrative functions of screen violence, particularly how genre shapes the viewers' prediction and interpretation of violent events. Finally, the methods for motivation analysis of violent narrative events are extended to examine a particular genre of interactive audiovisual texts — empathy games.

Keywords: screen violence, empathy games, motivations and values, moral conflict, moral justification, persuasion, narrative re-contextualisation, narrative impact, video games

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1 Introduction

This article analyses narrative functions of violent actions on the screen, in particular, how different ways for contextualising screen violence possibly lead to different narrative impacts on viewers' event interpretation process as well as different ways in which social and political issues can be learnt. Historically, discussions over media violence have been a central focus of psychology, media, sociological, and educational research. It has been often discussed that media violence is not a monolithic construct and is based on more complex factors drawing on viewer perceptions of specific types of images and framing in media content. Drawing on the inherent complexity of the issue on media violence, this article aims to integrate the recent research results on effects of screen violence and narrative persuasion. The integration and its further combination with linguistics-informed multimodal analysis motivates the proposal of a broader theoretical framework for investigating just how multimodal textual construction leads to different effects and persuasive functions of audiovisual narratives. Following the theoretical synthesis, a particular analytical system will be modelled for unravelling the contextualisation and potential impacts of violent events.

This paper holds that there are at least the two main textual mechanisms, *characters' motivations for using violence* and *depictions of consequences of violent actions*, that configure the basic narrative impacts of screen violence. Furthermore, a typology of characters' motivations often used for justifying the characters' violent actions is also integrated into the analytical framework. Investigating how the narrative mechanisms and motivation systems are mobilised may be crucial to understand to what degree screen violence persuades people to change their behaviours and attitudes.

In sum, this paper treats audiovisual narratives as multimodally structured texts and analytically interconnects multimodal textual analysis of violent events with recent empirical research on narrative impact and persuasion. Finally, the analytical methods proposed in this article will also be extended to examine different functions of violent actions in video games and see if the principles and mechanisms for narrative re-contextualisation are mobilised across media boundaries.

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2 Integrating research findings on effects of screen violence and narrative impact/persuasion

This section reviews and integrates the relevant research findings on impacts of screen violence, narrative persuasion, and multimodal linguistics. This includes the discussions and debates about direct impact versus multiple factors of media violence, affect-driven evaluation, and the processes of people's engagement of knowledge and change of beliefs and behaviours.

2.1 Direct impact or multiple factors of people's interpretation of media violence

In recent decades, some studies in psychology or education have frequently proposed that exposure to violent media contents increases the media perceivers' aggressive tendencies (cf. Bushman, 1998; Anderson, 2004; Fischer, Kastenmüller & Greitemeyer, 2010) and vice versa: exposure to prosocial media leads to prosocial thoughts and behaviour (cf. Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2009; Buckley & Anderson, 2006). In other words, most of these proposals indicate that whether screen violence in films or video games can harm or benefit social relations depends on the presence of the aggressive or prosocial contents. This rather direct, straightforward link between the presence of violent actions on screen and the ensuing psychological effects often underlies the wider debates about censorship of screen violence, its principles, and its policy.

On the other hand, a considerable body of research in media and cognitive studies (cf. Gunter & Furnham, 1984; Gunter 1985; 2008; Potter, 2003; Prince 2003; 2009; Tamborini et al. 2013) has unravelled the more complex factors of people's perceptions and preferences of violence in audiovisual media. For instance, Potter (2003) proposes that audiences' perceptions of media violence draw on graphicness, realism, and justification for witnessed, onscreen violent actions. In other words, how authentic and how real the audiovisual narratives are presented to the viewers influences the narrative and persuasive effects of violent events. The recent empirical studies by Tamborini et al. (2013) broaden these factors and show just how screen violence is justified has impact on the viewers' enjoyment.

In sum, apart from possible harmful side-effects of exposure to media violence, scholars have also suggested that several social, aesthetic, and individual factors — such as features of media contents, degrees of message authenticity, different dimensions of audience responses, and different predispositions of the public interpretation of experiences — are all decisive elements of different types of impact.

2.2 Engaging and changing audience's knowledge, beliefs and behaviours

How screen violence changes and influences the viewers' attitudes and behaviours is also related to how information processing and narrative persuasion are achieved. Different cognitive and media models of persuasion have been proposed and empirically investigated. Two relevant models in relation to the persuasive, educational, or negative impacts of screen violence are the following: (1) heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken 1980); and (2) the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (Petty and Cacciopo 1986). The heuristic-systematic model encompasses two modes by which people process information and are persuaded. The systematic mode is based on an analytical orientation in which audiences assess and integrate useful information to reach their judgement. Systematic processing takes place when the audience encounters information of major personal importance or relevance. On the other hand, the heuristic mode does not involve careful reasoning. Rather, it uses simple decision rules to reach quick judgements and evaluation, particularly when their motivation to process information and think of potential consequences is low. This type of processing is more likely to occur with low issue involvement. Also, limited cognitive capacity, low willpower or low self-interest explain why audiences prefer the use of heuristics for active reasoning and extended problem solving.

The second model of persuasion is the elaboration likelihood model (ELM). Similar to the dual process in heuristic-systematic model, ELM holds that people process persuasive messages in one of two ways: the central route or the peripheral route. The central route is careful reasoning or high elaboration and involves in-depth reasoning of arguments. The peripheral route relates to low involvement and utilises external cues surrounding the information (e.g. the trustworthiness of the information source) to permit simple inferences about the merits of the message content without recourse to complex cognitive processing. In sum, ELM has many parallels with the heuristic-systematic model — systematic processing is similar to the central route and the use of heuristics corroborating to peripheral processing.

To sum up, the dual process models bears out a significant distinction between knowledge engagements: active reasoning or passive acceptance of message value and authenticity. Nevertheless, it has been explicitly

pointed out that there is a missing element in the dual process models — namely, the emotional engagements (Morris, Woo & Singh, 2005).

As the review in the next subsection shows, the affect-driven narrative engagement is precisely one main trigger for moral evaluation, overall enjoyment, contemplation, and persuasion of audiovisual narratives of any genres.

2.3 Screen violence and affect-driven evaluation

Apart from investigating the general perceptions and information processing of violent actions, some empirical studies also take the affect-driven analytical stance and suggest that violent actions on screen, particularly dramatized in film and video narratives, could trigger the viewers' moral rumination. For instance, experiments show that violent contents in film narrative were found to be central to participants' quest for the meaning of violence in general and in the context of real life (Shaw 2004). In addition, showing violent contents in film involving characters' moral conflicts often motivates the viewers to contemplate about moral issues (Eden et al. 2017). In other words, the immediate effects of screen violence might be disturbing during film viewing; nevertheless, the negative affects could actually lead to the in-depth learning of social ideological issues.

The distinction of the immediate and contemplative narrative interpretation has also been explicitly proposed by Oliver and Bartsch (2011) to differentiate the two kinds of media enjoyments: the affective impact during the film viewing and the viewers' rumination of the thematic depicted in the film after the film viewing. This distinction is significant because it highlights the potentials of film narratives for motivating the viewers to reflect on the meaningfulness and wisdom of real life.

2.4 An integrative framework: Combining multimodal text construction, narrative impact and persuasive functions

This subsection synthesises the above reviewed factors of message interpretation and effect of audiovisual narratives in general and violent events in particular. The theoretical synthesis will be combined with the recent research of the linguistics-informed multimodal theories of textual construction in audiovisual media (cf. Tseng 2013, 2017). Figure 1 presents the framework for the present paper. The upper part of the figure synthesises two streams of research with relevance to effects and persuasion of audiovisual narratives — namely, multimodal textual constructions and audiences' narrative impacts.

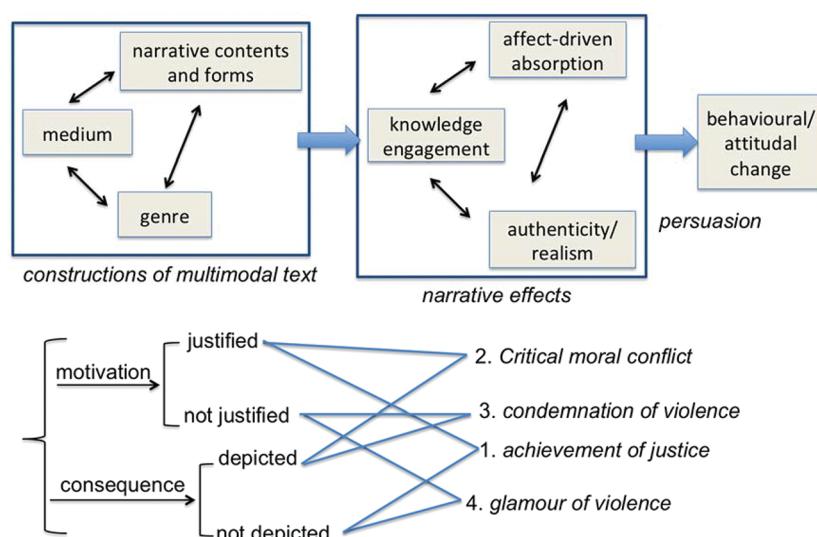


Figure 1: Frameworks of the present paper. Upper part: a theoretical model integrating factors of multimodal textual construction and empirical findings of factors of message impact, interpretation, and persuasion. Lower part: a system of narrative mechanisms in audiovisual narratives. The system is part of the multimodal textual construction in the theoretical model. The features within the system configure the functions and trigger the impact of people's interpretation and learning of screen violence.

The left part of this diagram encompasses the three basic elements that configure constructions of multimodal texts: *medium*, *message form*, and *content and genre*. The interaction of the three elements and how it leads

to narrative impact have often been discussed in studies of media and communication (cf. McQuail 2000). Nevertheless, this paper particularly draws on multimodal linguistic theories. As the following sections will show, this linguistic theoretical basis allows for a more systematic formulation of an analytical method for comparing how textual mechanisms operate in different audiovisual texts. This potential of systematic comparisons has been shown in the research work of multimodal linguistics, particularly on how medium affordances and genre conventions lead to specific types of structures of contents and forms of narratives (cf. Tseng 2017; 2018a; Tseng & Bateman, 2018 2018).

The interaction of the three basic elements then leads to the complex narrative impact on the audience (see the middle part of the Figure 1). As reviewed in the previous section, this includes multiple factors such as different forms of *knowledge engagement* and degrees of the audience's narrative immersion based on *message authenticity* and *affect-driven absorption*. Finally, the degree of narrative impact triggered by the overall multimodal textual construction is one decisive factor of people's behavioural changes.

The lower part of Figure 1 focuses specifically on a system of textual mechanisms for constructing types of violent events in audiovisual narratives — namely, justification of characters' motivation for using violence and depiction of the consequences of violence. These mechanisms configure the form and content of how violent events are contextualised. As we will see in the following sections, the functions of these mechanisms are also interdependent with mediums and genres of the audiovisual texts being analysed.

The system is modelled as a *system network*, commonly used for linguistic description in the theory of social semiotics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). System networks show the abstract 'choices' available for language users drawn from the meaning potential of their language. The system network in Figure 1 correspondingly shows the potential for constructing different narrative functions and creating the impact of violent events. Constructing system networks is similar to many approaches to classification, that is, the main task is to characterise inter-relationships and dependencies among choices and to describe the structural consequences of any choices made. In system networks of this kind, right-facing square brackets connect contrasting and mutually exclusive options together into 'systems of choice,' while right-facing curly brackets group systems of choice into 'parallel' options that must all be considered as the network is used. In Figure 1, the curly bracket offers an example of simultaneously available systems [justified/not-justified] (of characters' motivation) and [depicted/not-depicted] (of consequences). This means that one of the following four feature combinations must be selected: (1) [justified] + [not-depicted]; (2) [justified] + [depicted]; (3) [not-justified] + [not-depicted]; (4) [not-justified] + [depicted]. As Figure 1 shows, the option combinations in the current case realise four types of textual structures, leading to four distinctive directions of narrative effects: (1) achievement of justice; (2) critical moral conflict; (3) condemnation of justice; (4) glamourizing violence. Section 3 will elucidate and exemplify each of the four feature combinations and narrative functions. Integrating this in the theoretical model in the upper part of the diagram, these four directions can be seen as the potential narrative effects triggered by the textual constructions drawing on feature combinations.

2.5 Typology of characters' motivations

The article's second focus, presented in Section 4, is to provide a basic typology of characters' motivations, which are often used for justifying the characters' violent actions and which are often related to genre expectations.

Cawelti (cf. Cawelti 2004) has written about the tight link between genre and violence. This part of the paper draws on the previous work in this link, unravelling how genre convention is closely related to media violence and how genre knowledge shapes the viewer's prediction and digestion of screen violence. The discussion draws on the methodology recently taken by Tseng (2017 and 2018b) to use the notion of genre as one bridging method between empirical and analytical approaches to representation and interpretation of human motivations along the unfolding narratives in the comic or audiovisual media. This part of the article will precisely extend Tseng's framework and examine how different types of the motivations of characters' violent actions are cued to the viewers and how these types substantially draw on the viewers' well-equipped genre knowledge.

3 Two narrative mechanisms and four basic functions of screen violence

This section elucidates and exemplifies the combinations of the features in the system networks modelled in Figure 1. Screen violence has always been an element in the history of film and television. It is the main genre feature of action, horror, Western, war films, etc. Many of these genres have been notoriously subject to censorship due to the possible direct psychological and social impact of screen violence, particularly on adolescents. This section will problematize this general link between screen violence and social influences by showing how some

of the narrative functions and impacts actually have positive potentials for creating educational and prosocial impacts.

3.1 Representing the positive discourse of justice achievement

Recent empirical studies on the first-person shooter (cf. Hartmann and Vorderer 2010) have suggested that players would not have much moral concern when sufficient reasons for their shooting/killing actions are described in the beginning of or during the game. For justifying violent actions, verbal justification is the usual strategy in video games for resolving the possible moral conflicts of the players. 'Justifying motivations for using violence' is precisely one narrative mechanism in entertaining media.

Many Hollywood action films, particularly superhero genres, involve substantially violent actions initiated by the main characters. Nevertheless, the structures of story-telling in these films, whether the classic three-act-structure (setup, confrontation, and resolution) or Thompson (1999)'s four-act-structure (setup, complicating action, development, and climax), the beginning acts often function as constant justification for the main characters' motivation for using violence throughout the film or in the final 'resolution' or 'climax' parts of the films.

The strategy of justifying characters' motivations for using violence is not constrained in Western storytelling. A considerable part of the well-established Japanese Samurai genre is sword fighting, which is similar to the violence in the Western genre, involving the main characters brutally killing bandits or their enemies. Take for example the longest-running TV series of this genre, *Abareno Shogun*, shown in the Japanese television for 30 years (1978 to 2008).

The final act in each episode of this TV series always consists of the sword fight between the shogun, the general samurai, and the bandits. The sword fights always end with the shogun executing each of the bandits, who are often led by one official committing political crimes and murder. Before this mass killing starts, a recurring narrative pattern is always shown to the viewer to explicitly justify the later violent actions performed by the shogun, depicted in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Selected screen shots of the final scene in one episode of the Japanese TV series *Abareno Shogun*. This scene recurs in the ending of each episode and functions to justify the motivation of the main character's motivation for killing each bandit.

In this final scene recurring in each episode, the shogun shows up and confronts the corrupt official in their nest (image 1). The official first calls his men, but he then looks at the shogun's face, which he recognises. The official and his men kneel down in obedience (image 2). At this moment, a visual and verbal justification of the later violence is given: the shogun, often framed in a close shot, explicitly rebukes the official for his crime (image 3). However, on hearing the shogun's demand, the official defies him and orders their men to kill him (image 4). Always outnumbered, the shogun ends up easily eliminating his attackers (images 5 and 6). The final fighting scene often lasts around three minutes and shows how the shogun slays each attacker with his samurai sword. In other words, this scene is actually rather long and encompasses intense, violent killing. Nevertheless, the sufficient verbal and visual justifications presented right before the killing, such as the shogun's verbal rebukes of the bandits' crimes, the authority of the shogun shown by the bandits' kneeling down upon recognising him, and the official's defiance all function to contextualise the shogun's violent actions as the practice of justices.

Apart from the justification of the main character's motivation, another strategy mobilised in this scene to achieve the justice discourse is the minimal depiction of the consequence of the violence. More specifically, in the three-minute sword-fighting scene, no detailed depiction of the suffering of the bandits killed by the shogun

is visually presented to the viewers. This is formally realised by the fast camera movements and editing, which marginalises the falling and dead attackers within the frame before the camera re-focuses on the killing action of the shogun.

The similar formal and narrative configurations are often seen in the superhero genres in Hollywood cinema. As shown in the three selected screenshots in Figure 3, camera focus in those fighting scenes is solely on the main characters. The enemies with whom they are fighting are never framed in any frontal shot and the consequences of those fighting actions, that is, what happens to the enemies after they are attacked by the main characters, are never shown either. This kind of narrative construction is precisely how screen violence in most entertaining media often does not morally disturb the viewers.



Figure 3: Example screen shots of fighting scenes of the Hollywood superhero genre film, *The Avengers* (2012).

This typical event configuration is mapped out in Figure 1 as the first narrative function for leading the viewers to the interpretive direction of *achievement of justice*. This function is realised by the combination of the two features: [justification of motivation] and [no consequence depiction] — first, the motivation of main characters' using violent needs to be justified and, second, the consequences of characters' violent actions need to be minimally depicted. The different manipulation of the second narrative mechanism, namely, the depiction of consequences, will turn the narrative function to a more critical perspective, elucidated in the next section.

3.2 Representing moral conflicts

When the consequence of characters' violence, namely, the suffering of the attackers/bandits, is depicted in more detail, the function of screen violence often constructs a critical discourse. This function activates an interpretation process of moral contemplation, i.e. the affect-driven interpretation in the framework shown in Figure 1.

This section exemplifies this function with another samurai sword fighting scene by the director Akira Kurosawa, famous for creating the beauty of violence. The main difference of Kurosawa's work and the previous examples of samurai or superhero fighting scenes rests on Kurosawa's rather detailed visualisation of the suffering of bandits after being slain by the main characters.

Figure 4 exemplifies a bandit chase scene from *Seven Samurai* (1954), showing the samurai holding a sword (image 1) and chasing the bandit. While the bandit tries to escape (image 2), the samurai thrusts his sword into the bandit's back, sending him sprawling to the ground (image 3). The bandit struggles and groans before he dies. Instead of celebrating the achievement of justice, the samurai kneels down, looking distressed (image 4).



Figure 4: Selected Screen shots of a sword-fighting scene in *Seven Samurai* (1954).

The event construction as such is mapped out as the second narrative function of screen violence shown in Figure 1, realised by the combination of [justification of motivation] and [consequence depiction] — the motivation of the main character's violent actions, namely, killing the bandits who threaten the villagers' lives, are justified. Nevertheless, depicting in close shots the bandit's suffering before dying and the distress of the main character after he executes the bandit possibly triggers a different kind of narrative function besides the achievement of justice, that is, the reflection of moral conflicts — the conflict between justified punishments/defending oneself and violent killing which causes human suffering.

Depicting human suffering in media or artwork has been used for centuries to trigger empathy-related emotions in viewers. For instance, it is the underlying artistic motivation of Renaissance humanism and still functions in today's media and artwork to effectively lead viewers down the specific path of empathetic emotional interpretation (cf. Kesner and Horacek 2017). Recently, this narrative strategy is taken to extremes in several war films to condemn the violent harm inflicted by American soldiers against the civilians in Middle East, such

as *Rules of Engagement* (2000) or *Redacted* (2007). What is meant by “taken to extremes” here is that these recent war films, aiming to arouse the anger of viewers against the American war policy, often combine the strategies of detailed depiction of consequences of violent actions and non-justified motivations of characters’ use of violence. The next subsection elucidates how this combination could construct another narrative function and trigger anger, disgust, and guilt in viewers.

3.3 Condemnation of violence and the learning effect

This subsection focuses on the third type of narrative effects included Figure 1: critical condemnation of violence. The violent actions of the main characters are contextualised by the narrative strategies of [unjustified motivation] and [depiction of consequence]. It is exemplified by the most brutal scene in the war film *Rules of Engagement*. The selected screenshots of this scene are shown in Figure 5. The scene shows the main character Colonel Childers (shown in image 1) leading a mission to rescue the US ambassador from the Yemen embassy. When a local anti-American demonstration turns chaotic, a catastrophe ensues. While several soldiers are shot at by the hidden snipers from somewhere outside the embassy compound, Childers orders his men to fire into the crowd of civilian demonstrators (images 4 and 5) — having to repeat his order (image 3) to a terrified subordinate (image 2) who can see no justification for this — and causes scores of civilian deaths (images 6 and 7).



Figure 5: Selected screen shots of a scene depicting American soldiers killing a crowd of civilian protesters in Yemen (*Rules of Engagement* (2000)).

This fighting scene, before Childers orders to kill civilians, is contextualised by a justified motivation for soldier’s combating actions: namely, the troop is sent to rescue the US ambassador and is sieged and attacked by several snipers around the compound. However, as Childers finds several of his men pinned down and fatally wounded, he makes a decision that begins the unjustified motivation for the later brutal killing. Rather than pulling his troops back to the waiting helicopters, he decides to keep them on the roof. After seeing his men injured and killed, and receiving a slight injury himself, for some unclear reason, Childers gives the order to fire into the crowds below, forsaking the snipers in the opposite roofs, with the order “waste the motherfuckers!” (image 3), resulting the deaths of several dozen innocent Yemeni civilians.

The unjustified motivation of the American troops for killing the civilians is combined with the close shots of the civilians’ dead bodies, among them many women and children. This combination contextualises the violent actions to mobilise an anti-war critical discourse, often seen in the recent war films, which focuses not on the patriotism, bravery, confusion, or disorientation of American troops, e.g. *Path of Glory* (1957) or *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), but on how vicious wars turn the American soldiers into brutal murderers or rapists, e.g. *Casualties of War* (1989), *Redacted* (2007).

Empirical studies have shown that this way of increasing the viewers’ negative affect (e.g. feelings of guilt, disgust, and anger) often leads to stronger behavioural and action tendencies (e.g. learning about issues, influencing interest, and engagement) than positive affects (Frijda, Kuipers & Ter Schure, 1989). In other words, the brutality of screen violence, when properly contextualised, might greatly enhance the learning effects of social political issues. A further comparative hypothesis following this could be then drafted for future empirical studies — without the crucial element of screen violence, the degree of interest or engagement of the issues might not be as high.

Offering a more constrained hypothesis for empirical studies is also the strength of the multimodal linguistics-based framework proposed in this paper. For instance, rather than testing psychological effects of lower-level audiovisual stimuli on the screen, one can examine factors of narrative interpretation drawing on the combination of features as mapped out in Figure 1 and manipulate narrative event-related elements (such as manipulating violent actions, verbal justification, or close shots of suffering victims) to test event perception, engagement, and emotional impact.

3.4 Representing the glamour of violent actions

Finally, the fourth type of narrative effects of screen violence is precisely the one that is often the main target of criticism against media violence. The violent actions are contextualised with no sufficient justification of motivations for using violent actions and no depiction of consequences. Consider the notorious church killing scene in the film *Kingsman* (2014). The selected screen shots are shown in Figure 6. This violent killing scene starts with a woman in a church scolding the main character, a secret agent Kingsman, played by Colin Firth (image 1). Controlled by an external force, Kingsman turns to the woman, points a gun at her (image 2), and shoots her in the head (image 3). This killing causes a chaotic fight in the church and this fight is observed by another main character, Kingsman's disciple, through a computer monitor (image 4). The entire killing scene lasts more than three minutes, showing how the outnumbered Kingsman kills everyone in the church without any justified motivation (images 5, 6, and 7).



Figure 6: Selected screen shots of violent killings in a church in *Kingsman* (2014).

Similar to the example of the superhero fighting scene in Figure 3, the present scene does not depict the consequences of Kingsman's mass killing in the church — that is, no suffering of those killed by Kingsman is presented in detail. One can see some bloodshed (e.g. image 7) between the fast cuts of the scene, but the camera focus on the main character's actions as well as the occasional, rather distant and out-of-focus images mediated by the computer monitor (e.g. image 4) possibly reduces the empathy-related impact on the viewers.

The empirical studies on moral consistency (Grizzard et al. 2016) have explicitly shown that moral consistency, e.g. upholding with reinforcement or violation with punishment, would be expected to increase moral intuition sensitivity (i.e. the ability to see an ethical dilemma, including how our actions will affect others). Conversely, media content depicting negative moral conditioning, namely, upholding with punishment or violation with reinforcement, would be expected to decrease moral intuition sensitivity. In this present example, we have provided some explanations from the functional textual perspective about how this might be the case — the narrative construction of moral inconsistency, such as the Kingsman example, is often contextualised by non-justified motivation and minimal depiction of consequences. That means no sufficient narrative mechanisms are mobilised to establish logical relation of events and consequences, resulting in less moral sensitivity about how violent actions affect others.

This kind of narrative construction combines the features in Figure 1: [no justification of motivation] and [no consequence depiction]. It presents the glamour of the violent actions and no explicit critical narrative function is mobilised. It contextualises the violent actions with no justification of main characters' killing, while no suffering or consequences of the violent actions are depicted.

In sum, the above four ways for contextualising the main characters' violent actions could trigger four different types of narrative functions, i.e. lead to four distinct effects ranging from positive discourse (achieving justice) to critical discourse such as moral conflicts, condemnation of violence, and the social impact of screen violence which has been regarded as rather negative and harmful (glamourizing violence). In the first three narrative functions, the presence of violent actions is crucial to trigger empathy-related emotions, anger, disgust, guilt, etc. to enhance the learning, interest, and engagement of particular social political issues embedded in the narratives. Filtering out the violent actions, i.e. changing the configurations of the narrative events proposed in Figure 1, will possibly reduce the potential media effects and social influences.

4 Characters' motivations for using violence and the viewers' genre knowledge

This section combines a basic typology of characters' motivations in the narrative (Tseng 2017) with the system of [justification of characters' motivation] proposed in the last section. The goal is to show how the combination of motivation types and the above analysis of narrative functions further addresses the two research questions: (1) what basic types of characters' motivations for using violent actions are; and (2) how these motivations are

often made predictable and taken for granted when drawing on viewers' genre knowledge — that is, how easily these motivations can be justified with little elaboration in the narrative before the main characters use violence.

The motivation system in Figure 7 is expanded from the typology and integrated by Tseng (2017) from the recent physiological and psychological findings about human social-cultural motivational systems. For instance, empirical findings by the Moral Foundation Theory by Graham et al. (2011) suggest that at least the six domains of motivations — care, fairness, ingroup affiliation, hierarchy, liberty, purity — can be found in different cultures and subcultures. Gilbert (2014 and 2015) proposes three main types of motivations which drive different kinds of behaviour: excite/vitality, content/safe, and anxiety/anger. Recent brain studies by Vignemont and Singer (2006) also categorise human motivation systems into specific types — for instance, self-centred interest (such as power, achievement, and consumption), more prosocial values (such as care and ingroup affiliation), and negative motivations (such as fear and anger). In my previous work in comparing cross-cultural values represented in narratives, I integrated these empirical findings of value and motivation systems, proposing a model suitable for examining values embedded in narrative events. There are at least the following domains of motivations:

1. *Personal drive*: this category deals with motivations of self-centred interest such as personal power, achievement, and consumption.
2. *Content and connect*: this category includes motivations such as care and ingroup affiliation, which drive prosocial behaviours.
3. *Social-cultural values*: this category deals with motivations defined and driven by social norms or widely accepted ideologies within cultures and subcultures.
4. *Violation of the above values*: motivations caused by harm, betrayal, deterrence in gaining personal interest, violation of social-cultural accepted values, etc., leading to aggressive and defensive behaviours.

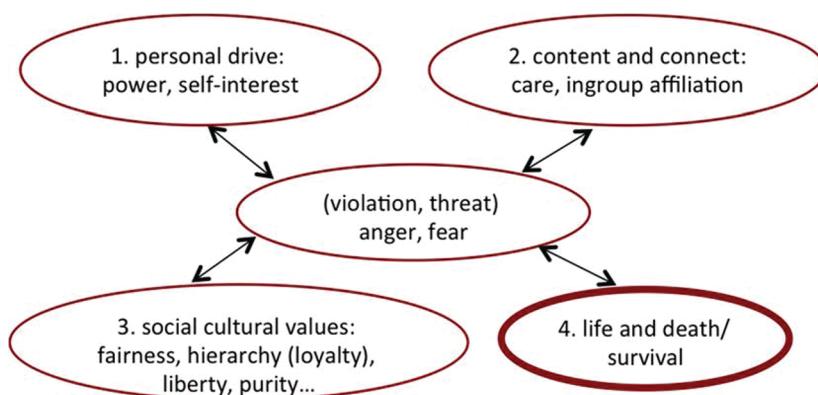


Figure 7: Basic system of human motivations and values. The bold oval, namely, the fourth type is the non-value motivation added to the framework proposed by Tseng (2017).

As shown in Figure 7, this paper adds one more type to the motivation system of narrative characters' motivations, namely, *survival*, which does not belong to any socio-cultural value but rather the human struggle for life and fighting against death.

Applying the typology to the previous examples with justified motivations, the shogun' motivation in the final scene in Figure 2 is fairness, depicting how the shogun executes laws and punishes the bandits. Similarly, the motivation type of the superhero genre is also often fairness — with the superhero taking on the role of enforcing the law. To some degree, the shogun is a superhero of seventeenth century Japan, performing the duty of law enforcement motivated by social fairness. The example by Kurosawa, on the other hand, justifies the samurais' killing of the bandits with the unquestionable motivation of survival — the samurais kill the bandits to protect the villagers from looting, hunger, and murder.

Other types of motivation for using violence, such as killing for power or self- interest, are often the actions of the main crook characters in action genres. They are often punished by the heroes, who are motivated by fairness. The value of purity, relating to the need to avoid bodily contamination and disease, is not valued in the action genre because violence is a main feature of action movies (Brown 1993). Action films are more likely to include screen violence and disgust-inducing images, which are often associated with positive narrative resolutions. The motivation of care and ingroup affiliation are the main values portrayed in genres of romance and drama, which generally contain less violent actions.

To this point, the discussion has closely related the motivation types to the narrative genre conventions. Generally, a considerable proportion of genres features focus on recurrent themes and types of values and

motivations (cf. Raney, 2002; Carroll, 2010; Grizzard et al., 2016). For instance, action genres are often about harm wrought upon the undeserving (fairness) or about using violent actions to punish and eliminate the violation of social cultural values and threats to human lives.

Empirical studies (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Grizzard et al., 2016) have suggested that there is a close bi-directional relation between filmic genre expectations/comprehensions and the perceivers' judgements of values and motivations:

- Repeated exposure to genres with specific value and motivation features (e.g. action genre with fairness, romance with care, war film with loyalty, survival, etc.) strengthens the persuasion of the motivations and consequences depicted in the narratives (e.g. the viewers' belief that the violation of fairness deserves punishment).
- Genre-consistent attitudes and values held by the viewers prior to the viewing the media facilitate the viewers' engagement, transportation, and enjoyment of the narrative work.

That means, upon the reception of screen violence, the viewers' prior genre knowledge guides their expectations of how and why the characters use violent actions. Research findings reveal that screen violence is experientially distinct from real life violence (Shaw 2004; Tamborini et al. 2013) because screen violence is a part of recurring narrative event patterns that contribute to the enjoyment of the media and is contextualised within broader storytelling conventions familiar to the viewers.

In sum, the narrative impact and social influences are rooted not in the presence of single violent fighting scenes but rather in the overall representation of human motivations and values, realised by complex relations (such as justification, motivation, and consequence) between narrative events. Most predictable, recurring narrative patterns encompassing violent scenes, particularly in the action genre, are tolerable, positive narrative resolutions rather than disturbing presentations of violence.

5 Intermedial application: Empathy games

This section extends the approach intermedially, applying the same methods to analysing an *empathy game*. An empathy game is an emerging game genre with a specific focus on arousing empathy-related emotions and reasoning. The goal of these games is to promote prosocial behaviours and to change people attitude towards certain social issues (Hromek & Roffey, 2009; Belman & Flanagan, 2010; Schrier, 2015). Drawing on the analytical method of characters' motivations, this section will particularly show how empathy-oriented communicative goals are achieved. The game analysed in this section is a war-themed empathy game. The analytical results will precisely show how a war-themed game, with substantial shooting and killing actions, can still be labelled as a prosocial empathy game.

Generally, a war-themed empathy game confronts the players' with real historical or recent wars. It places the players in the shoes of disempowered civilians, fighting, shooting, and killing for survival against militants. In the beginning of these empathy games, historical contexts and the suffering of the characters, whom the players choose, are contextualised within real historical or recent wars. For instance, the game *Hush* is contextualised within the Rwanda genocide, *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* within the Iranian Revolution, *This War of Mine* within the events in the 1992–1995 siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian war. The remainder of this section elucidates the narrative functions and motivation types mobilised in the game *This War of Mine*.

This War of Mine is a strategy game in which the player controls a group of civilian survivors in an occupied, war-torn fictional city in Sarajevo. The main goal of the game is to survive the war by avoiding or killing the militants when under attack and by gathering tools and materials. In this case, the prominent motivation type presented throughout the game is survival; violent event actions like killing and shooting in the game are mostly justified by the characters' struggles to stay alive.

Most of the characters controlled by the player have no military background. Their biographies are presented verbally in the beginning of the game. One example is shown in the top left image of Figure 8, in which the overall justifications for fighting and shooting in the game are described, including the three characters' identities as civilian without military trainings and their dire situations in the war:

... It's been years since government military surrounded the rebels in the capital, cutting off all supply lines. The civilian population trapped in the city are suffering from hunger, disease and shelling. Katia used to be a reporter, while Bruno had his own television cooking show. Pavle was the star of the local football team ... Now they meet in dramatically different circumstances, looking for food and shelter.



Figure 8: Selected images from the empathy game *This War of Mine*. From left to right, top to bottom: personal backgrounds, announcing the death of a character, describing the dire situation, and dialogues justifying the killing.

These personal descriptions, combined with close shots of their faces and the game's portrayal of death — namely, the faces of dead characters with closed eyes, shown in the top right image in Figure 8 — very likely triggers character engagements, identifications and empathy-related emotions.

Throughout the game, the players/characters have to make many difficult decisions in order to survive everyday dangers, including using weapons to shoot and violently kill for their own survival. As described in the previous section, the motivation of survival itself can be rather unquestionably and straightforwardly justified. Nevertheless, several other narrative mechanisms are at work to reduce the guilt or moral conflict to the minimum. Before fighting and shooting starts, verbal descriptions are often shown as inter-titles to remind the players of the dire situation the characters face. It is exemplified in the bottom left image in Figure 8, in which the line: "The dawn has caught Katia. It will be harder to return." stresses the dreadful and deadly position the character is now in, further adding to the justification of shooting the militants.

Moreover, players need to make careful moral decisions throughout the game. Namely, the players need to pay attention to the dialogue between the main characters and those confronting them. This feature is exemplified in the white line in the middle of the bottom right image in Figure 8. These dialogues confirm these people's status either as enemies or as other civilians. This means, throughout the game, strategic reasoning and moral reasoning are equally required, making moral considerations highly relevant in winning the game. Finally, the consequence of characters' killing and shooting is never depicted, as the players need to move on to achieving further tasks.

To sum up, the multimodal textual and motivation analysis precisely suggests how the prominent narrative functions of a war-themed empathy game are mobilised: the game pursues the first type of narrative function modelled in Figure 1, while the players need to constantly avoid the mobilisation of the fourth type of narrative function, namely, non-justified killing of other civilians. Hence, although this game requires the players to constantly use violent actions, the kind of discourse it constructs throughout the game is substantially prosocial and educational in the perspective of informing the players of the social political issues.

6 Conclusion

This paper started by reviewing recent research in screen violence and the persuasive effects of audiovisual narratives. It then proposed a theoretical model to integrate the textual and cognitive factors of narrative functions of screen violence, synthesising the research in cognitive, media, communication, and multimodal linguistic disciplines. Within the model, a system of multimodal textual mechanisms for contextualising violent events and the four directions of narrative impacts yielded from the combinations of the features in the system are also elucidated and exemplified: (1) a rather prosocial narrative function, reflecting the achievement of justice; (2) a slightly more critical discourse, constructed through the representation of moral conflicts; (3) narrative function from a highly critical perspective, condemning the uses of violence and creating positive social influences, triggering the highest learning, interest, and engagement effects in the issues; and (4) narrative functions for presenting the glamour of violence without justified motivations and without depiction of the consequences.

This article also proposed a typology of motivation types for screen violence and argued how the interpretation and comprehension of these motivation types are closely related to viewers' genre knowledge and prediction. That is, screen violence and the motivations for it, particularly in most action films where violence

is used for constructing prosocial discourse about justice or survival, is often expected prior to the viewing. These predictable, recurring genre patterns encompassing violent scenes create positive narrative resolutions rather than pure presentation of unjustified violence.

The approach to screen violence was also extended to analyse the war-themed empathy games, showing how it is possible to define a video game replete with shooting and killing actions as an empathy game. The findings showed that the genre of empathy game contains several carefully embedded mechanisms that reduce the possibility of moral conflict when the players need to kill or shoot other people. These mechanisms include constantly maximising the first type of narrative function (i.e. killing for justice or survival) and minimising the fourth type of narrative function (i.e. unjustified violence).

Furthermore, the motivation analysis of this particular empathy game dealing with the theme of war victims reveals that one principal narrative mechanism of the empathy game operates on the basis of constantly impelling the player to avoid violation of *content and connect* (such as the value of care and ingroup affiliation) and maximising the player's awareness of *life and death*, despite the fact that the players are given tasks to aggressively and violently shoot and attack other soldiers and guerrillas throughout the game. This shows that it is not sufficient to relate narrative elements to specific readings without also addressing embedded motivational structures.

In addition to screen violence in entertainment, the era of 24-hour news and social media makes the information we receive each day replete with violence. It has become ever more pressing now to concretely and systematically unravel the widely-used yet ambiguous term of "media violence" and to proceed to examine its impact and social influences, taking into account how screen violence is co-located with other narrative mechanisms, how it is socially, culturally, and politically contextualised, and how different contextualisation creates different narrative functions and narrative impact.

As the concept of media violence still remains rather controversial after decades of debate, issues such as to what degree violent actions are allowed, how to treat images of tragedy and violence, media censorship, narrative impact, and learning social issues for adolescents are ever more pressing. I hope this article, by theoretically integrating research findings of narrative impacts of screen violence and by constructing a more systematic framework with concrete factors and mechanisms drawing on the integrative approach, will stimulate further building of theories and empirical investigations for effectively resolving these pressing issues.

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Bionotes

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