

# Killing in Style: The Aestheticization of Violence in Donald Cammell's *White of the Eye*

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"Everything in this world has two handles. Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle... and *that*, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated *aesthetically*, as the Germans call it - that is, in relation to good taste." Thomas De Quincey (1890: 13)

"If any human act evokes the aesthetic experience of the sublime, certainly it is the act of murder. And if murder can be experienced aesthetically, the murderer can in turn be regarded as a kind of artist - a performance artist or anti-artist whose specialty is not creation but destruction." Joel Black (1991: 14)

"Donald looked upon violence as an artist might look on paint. What are its components? What's its nature? Its glamour?" James Fox (Matthews, 1996: 4)

## Introduction: Death Imitates Art

APRIL 24, 1996. 9:45PM. LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA. Local police receive word that sixty-two year old British filmmaker Donald Cammell has shot himself in the head with a handgun. "Because the shot went through his forehead rather than through the roof of his mouth," reported Tom Dewe Matthews in *The Guardian* one week later, "he lived for another forty-five minutes" (1996: 4). According to Cammell's widow, China Kong, who was with him at the time of his death, the writer-director had been studying the art of suicide for some time, reading about where you should aim the bullet in order to obtain not just a painless death, but a pleasurable one (Macdonald, 1998: 9). In her deposition, Kong recalled that Cammell asked for a pillow before he died, because he didn't want the carpet to be "fucked up" by his blood. He also asked for a mirror in the hopes of observing his own death (Matthews, 1996: 4). Among the last things Cammell said was: "Can you see the picture of Borges now?" (Macdonald, 1998: 9).

Immensely talented, but perennially frustrated by the limitations placed on him by Hollywood's conservative studio system, Donald Cammell directed just four feature films in his lifetime: *Performance* (1970, with Nicholas Roeg), *Demon Seed* (1977), *White of the Eye* (1988), and *Wild Side* (1995). Except for *Demon Seed*, Cammell wrote or co-wrote the screenplay for all of these productions.

FACT: At the end of *Performance*, psychosexually traumatized gangster Chas (James Fox) shoots polymorphously perverse ex-rock star Turner (Mick Jagger) in the head. The camera follows the bullet as it penetrates Turner's brain, where, inexplicably, a portrait of Argentinian poet, essayist, and short story writer Jorge Luis Borges appears and is shattered.

Because *Performance* is far and away Cammell's most commercially and critically successful work - screenwriter David Pirie has called it "a colossus in post-war British cinema," and in a 1995 *Time Out* poll of the century's 100 best movies, it tied for twenty-eighth with Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* - reporters jumped on the similarities between the film and Cammell's suicide. As recently as 1998, journalist Mick Brown claims that Cammell's favorite Borges story was "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," about a disgraced conspirator who agrees to a scheme which would provide him "the occasion to redeem himself ... and for which his death would provide the final flourish" (Borges, 1964: 74-75): the staging of his own assassination, one based on elements from *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*.

FACT: About halfway through *White of the Eye*, as-yet-unidentified psychopath Paul White (David Keith) bursts into a woman's bathroom, ties up the terrified occupant with stereo wire, and drowns her in the tub. Taking, or perhaps stealing, a page from Michael Powell's 1960 realist horror classic, *Peeping Tom*, the killer holds a mirror up to the woman's face, thereby forcing her to watch herself die. In large part because *White of the Eye*, like *Peeping Tom* before it, flopped miserably at the box office (total gross: \$225,000) even while garnering lofty praise from critics (none other than Leonard Maltin, a populist reviewer if there ever was one, has called it "a smashing return to films for [its] director" [1999]) the relevance of this scene to Cammell's death was never commented upon.

Despite the privileged status accorded to *Performance*, as well as its own lack of recognition, *White of the Eye* may stand as Cammell's most profound meditation on the aesthetics of violence, something that fascinated him throughout his life at both the personal and professional levels. Kevin Macdonald, producer and co-director (with Chris Rodley) of the 1998 documentary *Donald Cammell: The Ultimate Performance*, believes that "Cammell's suicide was the culmination of a life-long obsession with the strange territory where violence and death intermingle with pleasure" (1998: 9). The first time we see Cammell in this documentary, he is being interviewed on a previously-recorded television show wearing a black tee-shirt with white lettering on the front, lettering which reads "MURDER IS A WORK OF ART." Elsewhere, Macdonald states that "Cammell didn't kill himself because of years of failure. He killed himself because he had always wanted to kill himself" (Macnab, 1998: 8). In what follows, I will attempt to identify via close analysis of a few key scenes the cinematic means by which Cammell sought to aestheticize both the *act* and the *product* of murder in *White of the Eye*. Not only is it the case that particular shots in this film ask to be "extracted" from their narrative context and viewed as paintings of a highly disturbing and challenging nature; a cinematic metaphor is effected whereby the killer gets equated with a kind of artist, and the carnage he leaves behind with works of art (see Appendix One). I will also be arguing for a restricted version of auteurism, insofar as I claim (with reference to specific shots and sequences in the film) that Cammell took full advantage of the subject matter and conventions he was working with so as to create an identification of sorts between himself (as director) and the killer, perhaps in order to explore/experience in a virtual or secondhand manner the possibilities of artistic murder. Preparation, one might say, for his own carefully planned (even staged, à la Fergus Kilpatrick, Borges' traitor-hero in the story mentioned above) suicide eight years later.

## **The Art of Murder**

To the limited extent that *White of the Eye* can be classified as a genre picture, it falls under the hybrid heading of "Horror-Thriller-Suspense." In the words of reviewer Leonard Klady,

"calling... *White of the Eye*... a thriller is rather like saying that Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* is a painting. Both descriptions are unquestionably correct and immeasurably insufficient" (1988: 6). There are no supernatural occurrences in this tale of an on-the-loose serial killer, loosely adapted from a 1983 novel, *Mrs. White*, by Andrew Klaven (writing under the pseudonym "Margaret Tracy"). According to Kong, who co-wrote the screenplay with her husband, Cammell did not like *Mrs. White* "at all," viewing it as just another slasher-type exploitation yarn; he only agreed to direct (Cannon Films offered him the novel as compensation after yet another one of his ambitious projects was shelved at the last minute) when she told him, "you can just throw out the story" (Macdonald and Rodley documentary). In a *Video Watchdog* interview published shortly after his death, Cammell is only slightly more generous, calling *Mrs. White* a "strange little novel," and describing how he "rethought the plot":

Basically, her novel [one notes here that Cammell was so uninterested in his source material as to neglect performing even the most superficial inquiry into its author's history] explored this woman's feelings as she discovers that her husband is insane and yet she is completely dominated by him. Well, I...decided that it was more interesting to have her deeply in love, so that when she discovers that he's a serial killer, she has to make that decision to leave him or confront him and continue to love him. Even to the point where he degenerates into bestiality (Del Valle, 1996: 33).

Despite these apparent efforts by Kong and Cammell at conceiving (or perhaps reconceiving) of *White of the Eye* as first and foremost a love story - albeit one that is particularly/peculiarly perverse- it is undeniable that Cammell makes use of numerous horror conventions, including a steady diet of point-of-view camerawork and sudden explosions into the frame from off-screen space, in order to engender startle effects. In fact, the combination of dark subject matter and graphic violence resulted in the film's initially receiving an X rating from the Motion Picture Association of America. It took a letter from none other than Marlon Brando (a close friend of Cammell's at the time), one which "analyz[ed] sequences in the film in great detail,...praising it for its originality and its artistry," to get the X changed into an R, with only a "couple of nominal cuts" made to the original print (Cammell, quoted in Del Valle, 1996: 34).

Charming, handsome, happily married father of an adorable little girl, Paul White - a gifted stereo technician from a small town outside Tucson, Arizona (see Appendix Two) - becomes one of the prime suspects in a series of gruesome murders when it is determined that the killer's vehicle has the same rare brand of tires as his own. Though it soon becomes clear that Paul is not quite the faithful husband he appears, as the charismatic protagonist of the film, with whom we can hardly help but sympathize, we are encouraged to believe his protestations of innocence despite the mounting evidence against him.

About two-thirds of the way through, the film's hermeneutic code is blown wide open, as Paul's loving wife Joan (Cathy Moriarity) makes a gruesome discovery: human body parts, wrapped up neatly in translucent plastic bags, hidden in a hollow space underneath the bathtub. From this point on, the dominant focalization of events is through Joan rather than Paul, who (substituting for the viewer) no longer asks, in effect, "Who committed these horrible murders?," but "Paul, how could you do this?" and "What will you do to your family now that we know you're the guilty one?" What follows is an extended denouement in which Paul elaborates his totally twisted (yet still somehow logical, in its own bizarre way) and

horrifyingly misogynistic (yet still feminine-obsessed) motivation (see Appendix Three). After taking potshots at his daughter with a rifle, Paul - now wearing blue Indian war paint, and with a massive amount of dynamite strapped to his chest (a seeming allusion to the finale of Godard's *Pierrot Le Fou* [1965: see Appendix Four]) - chases Joan to an abandoned construction site, where in a clichéd moment her ex-lover suddenly arrives to save the day, only to be blown up along with Paul. Joan manages to avoid the explosion by diving into a nearby lake, and in the film's final scene a new, "healthy" family is constituted between Mrs. White, her daughter, and the detective previously assigned to the case, Charles Mendoza (Art Evans).

But a mere retelling of *White of the Eye*'s serial killer narrative does little justice to the picture's haunting power and strikingly original construction. What has led reviewers such as David Thomson to champion the film as "one of the great secret works in cinema"(1998: 3)? Here is one answer: through the creative employment of a host of audiovisual devices, including montage and overlapping editing, slow motion camerawork, mise-en-scene, and an eclectic soundtrack, Cammell forsakes the codes of realism (e.g., temporal linearity, motivational cues, a clear demarcation between diegetic and non-diegetic material) in favour of a highly stylized presentation of violence (see Appendix Five). This in turn produces a complex psychological and emotional response in the spectator, who has little choice but to analyze, reflect upon, even appreciate what he or she would normally despise, disavow, or deny. In his 1998 book on Sam Peckinpah (director of *The Wild Bunch* [1969], *Straw Dogs* [1971], and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* [1974]), Stephen Prince argues that "most films do not hold viewers accountable for, or implicate them in, the violent spectacles they witness. Peckinpah's films do, and this is one reason for their controversial nature" (48). The same can be said of Cammell's *White of the Eye*, with the added exceptions that the latter director implicates his viewers by means of violent *tableaux* as well as violent spectacles, and that the person he implicates first and foremost is *himself*.

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The first of two elaborate murder scenes in *White of the Eye* occurs just a few minutes into the picture, before any of the main characters have been introduced. I want to take a close look at how this scene, which incorporates fifty-five cuts in a mere two minute, twenty second interval, is constructed (by way of comparison, *Psycho*'s famous shower scene employs somewhere between sixty-five and seventy-eight cuts in about a three minute time interval). Rather than go through it shot by shot, however, I propose to break the scene down into three segments. But first, some remarks on the scenes which precede it - the first two of the film - are warranted.

*White of the Eye* opens with a beat-up car driving towards us on a dusty road in the middle of the Arizona desert. This is a film primarily concerned with the collapsing or conjoining of opposites, strict or otherwise, and right away we get our first example: a pair of motorcycles pass by the car going in the other direction. Among the differences brought into focus and momentarily united here are number (one car, two bikes); size (large vs. small); visibility (the driver of the car can't be seen, the bikers themselves are pretty much all we see); direction (towards us, away from us); and social identity (these are obviously different "types" of people). The fact that neither the vehicles nor their respective drivers play any kind of role in the rest of the film can be taken as evidence for the claim that Cammell's concern here is with providing an economical image that at once instantiates and exemplifies the narrative-proper's central "argument."

The credits (which initially appear in white on an all-blue background) are intercut with shots of a hawk in flight, shots which can be divided up into three categories: first we get an extreme close-up of its staring, straining eyes (one and then the other); next we watch documentary-style footage of it killing some defenceless prey; finally we see it circle the sky in graceful slow-motion. The camera then begins cutting back and forth between the gliding hawk and the Arizona cityscape (the remaining credits superimposed over the latter). It soon becomes apparent, from the cinematography as well as the editing, that the shots of the city are actually to be understood as p.o.v. shots from the perspective of the hawk.

What is so striking about the hawk sequence is the way it succeeds in alerting us to the film's central theme while at the same time mirroring precisely (that is, in formal terms) the murder scene to follow. Cammell's interest in problematizing certain key oppositions of modern Western (especially American) culture can be seen in his association - achieved via mise-en-scene and editing - of archetypal images of violence (the hawk killing its prey) and beauty (the hawk in flight). Mediating between these two traditionally-contrasted notions is a third one: nature. If we allow ourselves to read the extreme close-up of the hawk's eye(s) (soon to be substituted by the killer's eye) - surveying its prey, surveying *us*, with a fearful yet amoral intensity - as signifying the potency of pure, untempered natural instinct (the question of sexual desire does not arise here), then we may conclude that, for Cammell, violence and beauty are capable of co-existing insofar as both (in this case, the killing and the flying) involve the performing without hesitation of what comes naturally. In the human murder scene to follow, Cammell takes this idea one step - or rather, one giant leap - further, transforming a plausible claim about the co-existence of cultural contraries (the vicious killer is *also* a graceful bird) into a radical claim of identity (murder *is* art, art *is* murder).

The complicated use of point-of-view camerawork in this opening scene also calls for comment. When we first cut from a shot of the hawk flying high in the air to a smooth mobile crane shot of the cityscape, we are not apt to ascribe what we see in the latter case to the hawk's own perspective. It is only through repeated intercutting, and the arbitrary motion of what we thought was "objective" camerawork, that we realize we have been looking at the city from a literal bird's eye view. The significance of this somewhat manipulative ploy is that it anticipates Cammell's self-conscious association of himself as director with the film's killer (prefigured by the hawk) via the conflation of objective and subjective vision. This conflation becomes apparent only *after* we are encouraged to go back and correct our initial assumption regarding the source of the images presented; the awkwardness entailed by such a retroactive revision is precisely what gets us to reflect upon its meaning. What we initially take for granted as the omniscient director narrating with his camera from outside the world of the film, guiltless insofar as he is merely the teller of the tale and not the agent of death within it, turns out to share the perspective- visual and (I also claim) aesthetic - of the latter.

The contrast between *White of the Eye's* complex opening scene (which incorporates vehicles, credits, hawk, and cityscape) and the one that comes after it is registered at both the thematic and audiovisual levels. This next scene opens with a pan across the side of a Tucson mall, where the name of a store - Goldwaters - can be seen in huge white letters. Besides foreshadowing (at the linguistic level) a key image in the murder scene immediately to follow, this pan alerts us to the fact that, despite the desert backdrop, we are no longer in the natural world but in a world of culture, commerce, and consumption. This change is reinforced by the obnoxious electric guitar music blaring on the soundtrack, a packaged 80s-style pop tune which is strikingly different from the New Age, possibly Native American-influenced melody heard in the preceding scene. A long shot (through a tinted-mirror

reflection) reveals a woman coming out of Goldwaters, wearing an expensive but tacky jacket and high-heeled snakeskin shoes. She is followed by a young man, an employee of the store most likely, who struggles to prevent a pile of boxes from falling to the ground. The comical excess of this latter image - representing as it does the woman's haul for the day - positions the woman in opposition to the hawk, who kills exactly what it needs in order to survive, and who requires no assistance in doing so.

As the pair (who are separated by at least six feet) proceed towards a car in the mall parking lot, the camera cuts back and forth between the young man's face and eyeline matches to the woman's legs. As opposed to the previous scene, with its naturalistic backdrop and documentary inserts, this one is highly artificial. The reflected images invest the couple with a less-than-authentic/"natural" ontological status and; the absence of dialogue, the loud guitar music on the soundtrack, the young man's objectifying looks, and the woman's stylized walk (which ends with her stopping, turning towards the camera, smiling, and putting on her sunglasses) all result in the odd but unmistakable impression that we are watching a dated rock music video. (In his interview with David Del Valle, Cammell proudly notes that he "directed several rock videos" in the years just prior to the release of *White of the Eye*. In his own estimation, the "Memo from Turner" sequence in *Performance* "is probably the first rock video"; and he points out as well that he "did a bit of editing on GIMME SHELTER for the Myles Brothers" [1996: 33].)

Despite the numerous contrasts between *White of the Eye*'s first two scenes, the editing, mise-en-scene, and soundtrack of the latter all contain elements which problematize any too-simple conclusions concerning essential difference or mutual exclusivity. This is in keeping with Cammell's desire to call into question the status of certain culturally-determined oppositions. For example, although we are now right outside a mall - that locus, for better or worse, of post-industrial capitalism - the Arizona desert can still be clearly seen in the background. (That Cammell's choice of locale was fully motivated along the lines here specified can be seen in the Del Valle interview: "I'm European, and Arizona looks very exotic and a little surreal when I'm confronted by it. ...My main set piece is a run-down mining town called Globe, which is on the edge of an Apache reservation, where a crumbling civilization has this uneasy coexistence with violence - *pagan* violence" [1996: 33].) In addition, the New Age music of the previous scene possesses a noticeable electronic component which connects it to the electric guitar music here. Most obviously, the young man with his leering eyes is set up as a somewhat less threatening, but still potentially violent, analogue of the hawk, and the woman with her snakeskin shoes his prey. Snakes, of course, are a favorite delicacy of hawks (see Appendix Six). And considering that the subjectively-focalized eyeline matches to the woman's legs are intercut with straightforwardly "objective" shots of her taken from just behind the young man's back, we have here another closing of the gap between director (as extra-diegetic narrator) and killer (here in the guise of the young man, hunting his prey like the hawk before him, focusing his eyes on a specific body part like Paul White after him).

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With this background in place, we are now ready to turn to *White of the Eye*'s first murder scene, divided here into three segments. My aim is to further reveal Cammell's interest in problematizing (by collapsing, through cinematic means) a variety of traditional antipodes, and to support the claim that the director associates himself with the film's killer, thereby bringing himself closer to direct experience of aestheticized violence - something he only dared explore through fiction (after all, David Keith is just an actor pretending to be a

murderer; and nobody really dies). That is, until his own aesthetically-motivated suicide in 1996.

*I. Establishing segment (shots 1-9):* The scene opens with an angled shot from above of a goldfish swimming in a bowl (shades of "Goldwaters") that is sitting on a table in the center of the frame. Adding to the self-consciously aestheticized nature of the composition are some pink and green objects floating in the bowl alongside the fish. The camera pulls back slowly to reveal a set of kitchen knives in a holder positioned a foot or so in front of the bowl; what we have here is an early juxtaposition, achieved without recourse to a cut, of (contained) beauty and (potential) violence. We also get a look through a set of large windows in the kitchen, windows which substitute for walls and which open up the room to the outside landscape (see Appendix Seven). The camera continues its deliberate retreat backwards and to the left, finally resting on a small table upon which lie a bottle of red wine, a half-filled wineglass, a lemon, an eggplant, and some lettuce on a cutting board. The mise-en-scene here is so balanced in terms of color, shape, relative position of objects, and background (the extreme whiteness of the table serving as a virtual canvas) that it is hard not to view it as a kind of portrait. More accurately, as a kind of *cinematic still life*, eliciting a measure of aesthetic acknowledgment, if not appreciation, from the viewer.

The camera now cuts, first to an overhead close-up of some brown meat (ribs, which promise nourishment even while they conjure up thoughts of emaciation) in a glass bowl, then to a collection of shiny pots hanging above the table - another contrast, this one at the level of nature vs. culture - and finally to a close-up of the refrigerator door. A slow tilt up the surface of the door exposes some conventional signs of domesticity: a photo of a child, some fruit magnets, a postcard. All of a sudden, the camera pulls back jerkily, then cuts to an establishing shot of the house as a car pulls into the driveway.

*II. Hunting segment (shots 10-31):* The next cut, to a p.o.v. shot from above of a pair of gloved hands removing the lid from the bowl of meat, is significant. For here, as in the opening sequence discussed above, we are effectively forced to reinterpret the previous segment in such a way that the seemingly objective camerawork of the director - achieved via Steadicam shooting, smooth cutting, and the apparent lack of human presence in the mise-en-scene - gets conflated with the "subjective" point of view of the killer. Why else would the camera have pulled back so abruptly from its methodical inspection of the refrigerator door (shot #8), unless the director/killer suddenly heard the car approaching (visible in shot #9)? In modern horror cinema, first-person camerawork is typically employed as a means of effecting a degree of identification - epistemological, if not always ethical - between viewer and monster, or, alternatively, between viewer and victim (see Appendix Eight). In *White of the Eye*, such camerawork effects a *three-way* identification of sorts, between viewer, killer, and director. Not only are we forced to experience the murderer's violent actions for ourselves; we are encouraged to interpret these actions as expressions of Cammell's own (personal) aesthetic choices. And lest I be accused of advocating a naïve, because too literal-minded, auteurism here, it is important to emphasize the extent to which, even before we see the killer's gloved hands from his own perspective (shot #10), the previous segment's methodical, probing camerawork evokes the idea of a cautious, curious, and quite possibly up-to-no-good intruder.

Next come a series of shots alternating between (a) the killer's view of the interior, (b) objective shots taken from behind of a woman walking into the house, and (c) extreme close-ups of an eye, presumably one of the killer's. Immediately upon entering her living room, the

woman stops, freezes, and cocks her head ever so slightly: precisely the reaction of a squirrel or rabbit when it senses something dangerous lurking in its immediate vicinity but is unable to pinpoint the source of the threat. The phone rings, breaking the woman's spell (really, her survival instinct), and she proceeds to the kitchen in order to answer it. Once again in p.o.v. mode, the camera catches a glimpse of the woman, and moves quickly up a short flight of stairs so as to keep her in sight. Without cutting, the camera follows the woman around a table, and finally stops with only her midsection in view (her face and legs are obstructed by cabinets); as in the previous scene, we get a visual division of the woman into body parts.

Now there is certainly room here, and throughout *White of the Eye* - a film which registers its interest in and prioritization of the (male) gaze through its very title - for post-Mulveyan feminist horror film theorists to criticize such sequences on the grounds that they reveal/promote a sexualized objectification of the female form, whether fetishistic-scopophilic (woman displayed as erotic spectacle, rendered unthreatening by the controlling male look) or sadistic-voyeuristic (woman investigated, demystified, and eventually controlled through punishment) in nature (see Mulvey, 1975/1999: 840). However, I would like to suggest an alternative interpretation. Just as the hawk, whose relentless stare signifies the drive of natural instinct rather than that of perverse (however pervasive) sexual impulse, so the sequences in question are guilty of objectifying women primarily in the sense that they reduce them to mere sources of sustenance, not unlike the bowl of ribs. (It is worth noting here that Cammell was especially fond of the line appearing on *White of the Eye's* poster art: "The only difference between a hunter and a killer is his prey" [Del Valle, 1996: 34.]) The disturbing question never adequately answered by the film (Paul's "explanation" of his behavior towards the end is both untrustworthy and unsatisfying) is what exactly is being "sustained" by the murder of these women - after all, our killer is no cannibal. The claim here is that female bodies provide Paul with the raw material he needs in order to satisfy his artistic urges. Such a position does nothing, of course, to counter the charges of misogyny capable of being directed against either Paul White or Donald Cammell, but it does go some way towards explaining why the film seems to go out of its way so as *not* to gratify the heterosexual male spectator's desire for either gratuitous female nudity (the fetishistic-scopophilic preference) or sexualized violence against women (the sadistic-voyeuristic preference).

After another brief insert shot of the killer's eye - a great way of teasing the viewer, by simultaneously revealing him/her and keeping his/her identity a secret (see Appendix Ten) - the camera edges right up behind the woman, who is busy telling a friend on the phone how Maurice, her hairdresser, "*butchered*, he just *butchered*, my hair." (Cammell's dialogue lacks the subtlety of his camerawork, a fact pointed out by more than one reviewer.) The woman says goodbye to her friend, hangs up the phone, and reacts as she catches sight of something on the table. Cut to a close-up of the ribs, on top of which lies the goldfish gasping for breath. There is one final insert of the killer's eye, then all hell breaks loose.

Of the three segments composing *White of the Eye's* initial murder scene, this second one is probably the most conventional. Nevertheless, we may note the following: (1) first-person camerawork is employed in somewhat confusing fashion here, as Cammell cuts from a shot of the killer's p.o.v. directly to one of the woman's, right before she gets attacked; (2) the juxtaposition of images in the bowl sitting on the table serves not only to warn the woman of a malevolent presence in her home, but to once again conflate traditional aesthetic opposites (the uncooked meat is drab, revolting, and evocative of death, while the goldfish is shimmering, beautiful, and still fighting for life); and (3) the soundtrack, composed by Nick

Mason (of Pink Floyd fame), serves to reinforce the three-way identification between viewer/listener, killer, and director mentioned above. Throughout this segment, an electronic bass note sounds rhythmically in such a manner that we can hardly help interpreting it as a non-diegetic analogue of the killer's heartbeat - something we could hear only if we were positioned "inside" his body. It is precisely because Cammell (via Mason) chooses *not* to use the sound of an actual heart beating, opting instead for a stylized treatment that is at once objective *and* subjective - it isn't *really* the killer's heartbeat, though in a virtual or metaphorical sense of course it is - that the distinction between killer and director is elided, and the artificiality of the scene foregrounded.

*III. Attacking segment (shots 32-55):* The camera next cuts to a p.o.v. shot of the woman, who wheels around to face the camera/killer. A gloved hand reaches out from the position of the camera and grabs the woman's face as she begins to scream. Whose hand is it? David Keith's (i.e. Paul White's)? Donald Cammell's (or his camera operator's)? From the visual material presented to us, there is no way of deciding between these options... which may be precisely the point. After another image of the dying goldfish, we cut to a shot of the killer grappling with the woman; this latter shot is "objective" insofar as the camera remains static and there is no one else at home to claim it, but "subjective" insofar as the camera is positioned exactly where the killer was standing in the previous segment, when he was looking at the woman's torso from behind some kitchen cabinets. In other words, what was previously a shot from the killer's point of view now gets taken up by the director (again, in the guise of extra-diegetic narrator), further strengthening the visual and psychological link between them. Unable to immediately overpower her, or perhaps desiring not to, the killer spins around the room with his victim in a literal *danse macabre* that is reminiscent of a cat playing with an injured mouse (or a hawk toying with a defenseless rabbit) before ending its life.

What follows is a bit of highly-stylized camerawork reminiscent of that favored by Italian horror-meister Dario Argento, as we cut to the woman's head slamming into and shattering the glass door of a microwave, all in excruciatingly slow motion. Still in slo-mo mode, the camera next cuts to a butcher's knife slamming down on the bowl of meat; the impact jolts the dying goldfish up in the air, and the scene's locus of symbolic meaning explodes in our faces. Another cut shows the bloody detrital meat sauce spilling from screen right onto the white counter; like a mini-avalanche, it knocks over the glasses of wine, which proceed to empty *their* red contents onto the table. These last two seamlessly-edited shots serve to juxtapose - and thereby call into question - such familiar oppositions as violence and beauty, civility and wildness, nature and culture (especially when contrasted with the earlier cinematic still-life of the wine bottle, glasses, etc.). The cutting and use of slow motion only add to the poetic effect. Some comments Prince makes about Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* are apropos here:

The editing reconfigures, stylistically transforms, the deaths... The cutaways and the use of slow motion impose a marked distortion upon the time and space of the represented action. ... Their design foregrounds the hyperkinetic spectacle so that it becomes a detachable part of the film (1998: 72).

But more than just a detachable "hyperkinetic spectacle" - easy enough to produce in today's big-budget, special-effects happy Hollywood cinema - the sequence in question provides viewers with at least a modicum of experiential (that is subjective, psychological, atemporal, even aesthetic) awareness concerning what it is like to kill another human being. Consider the

following quote from Jack Katz, who uses phenomenological language to describe even the "common" killer's experience at the moment he performs his violent act:

Like the promise of an erotic drive, rage moves toward the experience of time suspended; it blows up the present moment so the situation becomes a portentous, potentially an endless present, possibly the occasion for a destruction that will become an eternally significant creativity. This is the spiritual beauty of rage (1988: 31).

The shots now come in rapid succession: we see the woman's legs splattered with blood, we see the microwave shatter once more, we see the killer's back as he finishes his murderous work, we follow another wine glass as it gets kicked off the table and crashes on the floor. Upon its release, one critic was moved to declare *White of the Eye* "a complex, cubist kaleidoscope of images" (Geoff Andrew, quoted in Jackson, 1996: T2); from this sequence of shots, it is easy to see why. As a child, Cammell exhibited immense talent at drawing, and he later attended the Royal Academy of Art. Before turning to filmmaking, in fact, he worked as a popular and respected portrait painter in London. The turning point in Cammell's career came when he "discovered" that figurative painting was dead, and that to continue on as an artist he would have to fragment the image. "He realized," said his brother in a 1996 interview, "that the mental process involved in observing objects shouldn't necessarily be linear, that what you are actually observing is a whole series of events at the same time. It's like a Picasso - you have to include several viewpoints, all within one frame" (Matthews: 4). If we substitute "sequence" for "frame" in this last sentence, then the attacking segment of *White of the Eye*'s initial murder scene - with its overlapping edits and several viewpoints of "the same series of events at the same time" - stands as a cubist-like moment in cinema. "I am a painter who happens to make films" [Del Valle, 1996: 33], Cammell was fond of saying, and not without justification.

But cubism is not the only artistic movement represented in *White of the Eye*. Nigel Andrews, in a 1987 *Financial Times* review, wrote that "Cammell...has taken a novel...and wreathed its story in busily expressionist visuals" (19). We have already seen how the director, through the creative use of first-person camera- and soundwork, conflates the killer's point of view, even his physiological reactions, with his own. Montage editing allows Cammell to go a step further, and express his aesthetic sensibilities through the poetic juxtaposition of images. Returning to Segment III, from the wine glass crashing on the floor, we cut to a pair of extreme close-ups whose objects (broken glass mixed with blood, perhaps) are difficult to discern. Next, we cut to (i) the goldfish dying on the floor, (ii) yet another insert of the killer's eye, and (iii) another shot of the victim's blood spilling out onto the table. What we have here is a kind of cinematic *haiku* constructed by the director, one which follows an emotional rather than logical progression in order to demonstrate at the level of symbolism the awful beauty of violent crime (Macdonald quotes Cammell as saying that "any film, like any story, forms an elaborate pattern. It is not a statement of truth, it's a design, a mandala; it's a construct whose virtues lies in its harmonies and its paradoxes and its evocations" [1998: 9; see Appendix Eleven). But beyond this, and throughout the entire scene, we have what Theodore Ziolkowski calls "a projection of the artist's own subjectivity" (1969: 290-91). Besides employing the various audiovisual techniques detailed above, Cammell, by endowing Paul White's violent actions with an undeniable aesthetic quality, "implies his identification with the criminal, his self-glorification as a transgressor" (Black 38). It is not simply that the killer in *White of the Eye* gets fashioned as an artist; the artist behind the film fashions himself a killer. As Cammell puts the point in his interview with Del Valle, "The killer has a

painter's eye, which I suppose *is* mine" (1996: 34). Eight years later, Cammell would take such self-glorifying transgression to the ultimate extreme: the artist who believed there could be beauty in the inherently violent act of murder took *himself* as subject of a final (terminal) artistic statement (see Appendix Twelve).

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Not long after *White of the Eye's* initial murder scene, Detective Mendoza and a crew of police officers arrive at the dead woman's apartment to survey the damage. This scene is relatively brief, consisting of only ten shots and lasting just a couple of minutes. Nevertheless, it is worth going over in some detail. For what we find here is a continuation and furthering of the murderer-as-artist theme, though not so much through first-person camerawork, montage editing, and sound effects as through mise-en-scene and dialogue.

The scene begins with a shot of Detective Mendoza walking into the apartment of the murder victim, whose body it seems has already been taken away. We then cut to a shot, presumably from Mendoza's p.o.v., of the apartment's interior. At first glance, it appears that things have been left in utter chaos. But as the camera slowly moves inside, we see that various items have been arranged quite self-consciously (again, whether by the killer or by the director is a moot point). The now-empty goldfish bowl and one high-heeled shoe have been placed carefully atop a white blouse which is resting on the smashed microwave, itself sitting on a table in the middle of the room. This collection of items is more cinematic sculpture or pop-art than cinematic still life, and it forces the detective (now standing in for the viewer) into the role of art interpreter and critic. In much the same fashion as *Manhunter* (1987), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and *Se7en* (1996), the detective/viewer must attempt to determine the meaning of, or message in, the crime scene (see Appendix Thirteen). Former FBI agent and serial killer profiler Robert Ressler explains that "a disorganized crime scene displays the confusion of the killer's mind, and has spontaneous and symbolic qualities that are commensurate with his delusions" (135). In *White of the Eye*, it is obvious that the crime scene has "spontaneous and symbolic qualities" that are to be understood as somehow commensurate with the killer's delusions; what remains open is the extent to which the scene is "disorganized," or (what amounts to the same thing) whether it is accurate to describe Paul White's mind as confused. For the possibility exists - a possibility never completely eliminated - that his mind is quite clear, at least in its own way. And this is a far more sinister and disturbing conclusion at which to arrive (see Appendix Fourteen).

Next we cut to a high-angled shot of Mendoza reaching down to pull a plastic covering off a bizarre arrangement of objects (cf. shot #10 in the murder scene discussed above). A pot with something unidentifiable in it, an internal organ perhaps, is surrounded by four kitchen knives with their blades turned outwards. The pot is sitting on a white table (another canvas), and what appears to be the victim's blood is smeared off to the left. It is in reference to this constellation of objects that Mendoza remarks, "I know a goddamn work of art when I see one." Nowhere in his oeuvre does Cammell make a more direct appeal to the audience's aesthetic sensibilities. The camera lingers on the pot and knives, then moves in for a closer look. But what makes Mendoza so sure this is a "work of art"? After all, it is not something most of us would be inclined to call beautiful. Cammell's response to this might be first, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and second, that a work does not have to be beautiful in the traditional (culturally-sanctioned) sense of the term to be art. Aesthetic experience comes in a wide variety of forms, some a great deal less pleasant, or pleasurable, than others. According to Joel Black, "Violent acts compel an aesthetic response in the viewer of awe,

admiration, or bafflement. If an action evokes an aesthetic response, then it is logical to assume that this action - even if it is a murder - must have been the work of an artist" (1991: 39). Since certainly not *all* violent acts "compel an aesthetic response in the viewer of awe, admiration, or bafflement," however, the question remains as to where the difference lies. Cammell's description of Paul White as a "serial killer [who] happens to be a psychotic with an aesthetic imagination" (Del Valle, 1996: 34) can be seen as providing the beginnings of an answer.

In his life, as well as in his films, Donald Cammell stylized violence in order to produce a rift between the aesthetic and the ethical. The murderer-as-artist, by taking it upon himself to violate the physical and psychological boundaries of his victims, is free to express himself - and leave his mark - in any way he desires. "Didn't you ever look at a Picasso?", Mendoza asks his partner, still referring to the self-conscious arrangement of pot and knives at the crime scene. "Picasso, my ass" is the cynical, naïve reply. But Mendoza is not to be deterred: "We're talking post-cubist Picasso...or maybe even later." Some viewers may be inclined to laugh at this exchange, thinking it pretentious at best, totally inappropriate at worst. But in defense of Cammell, it is clear that he is here less interested in comparing Paul White's work with that of post-cubist Picasso at the level of technical skill than of visceral impact. It may be worth calling to mind *Guernica*, Picasso's 1937 testimony to the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, a painting of terrible beauty filled with symbolic archetypes and encoded meaning.

## Appendices

Appendix One: See Schneider, 2001 for a taxonomic approach to the murder as art/art of murder theme as it gets played out in modern horror cinema, also along the act-performance divide.

Appendix Two: Shades of *Psycho* (1960) here. Actually, the opening scene of the film (discussed in detail later in the text), which includes a bird's eye view of an Arizona cityscape, resembles in some respects the opening scene of *Psycho*. By way of contrast, Klaven's version of the story takes place in small-town New England.

Appendix Three: In the Macdonald and Rodley documentary, Kong remarks on the difficulty she and Cammell had writing Paul's dialogue in this scene, since they wanted to depict a man who was insane but who nevertheless "made a kind of sense" and had "a religious point of view."

Appendix Four: My thanks to Peter Playdon for alerting me to this.

Appendix Five: One is tempted to conclude that Cammell is engaged in a distinctly "postmodern" experiment here, but despite the non-classical nature of his violent set-pieces, and his homages to Hitchcock, Godard, and Argento (discussed later in the text), my own view is that the complete absence of self-reflexivity on the part of *White of the Eye's* characters (they never express any awareness of their fictional status, for example), as well as the film's relative lack of intertextual generic referencing, renders postmodernism a less than ideal axis upon which to analyze it. For more on postmodernism in the horror genre, see Modleski, 1986; Pinedo, 1997; Sconce, 1993; and Schneider, 2000.

Appendix Six: The woman's jacket also bears a pattern on it that looks very much like a black snake.

Appendix Seven: In fact, as the next segment reveals, this house is constructed largely of glass. A tree from the backyard, for example, can be seen through an enormous window in the living room.

Appendix Eight: For a sophisticated discussion of the various species of identification and sympathy in the cinema, see Smith, 1995: 81-86.

Appendix Nine: This makes the fact that *White of the Eye* initially received an X rating very hard to understand, unless the ten minutes excised from the final version contained a large amount of (porno)graphic content. Assuming that this was not the case - as noted above, Cammell himself called the cuts "nominal" - it would be interesting to speculate on what it was about the film that so disturbed, frightened, or dismayed the censors.

Appendix Ten: In effect, the numerous shots from the killer's perspective constitute unclaimed p.o.v.'s. Carol Clover argues quite persuasively that this convention is part of the "gender-identity game" played by the slasher film subgenre: "we are invited, by conventional expectation and by glimpses of 'our' own bodily parts - a heavily booted foot, a roughly gloved hand - to suppose that 'we' are male, but 'we' [may be] revealed, at film's end, as a woman" (1992: 56). While this is certainly true of *White of the Eye* as far as it goes, my discussion of first-person camerawork in this film is intended to demonstrate its non-generic status, thereby preserving the legitimacy (and viability) of an auteurist reading.

Appendix Eleven: Cf. Cammell's reply to Del Valle, who observes that, in another of *White of the Eye*'s violent set pieces, "your painter's eye seems to be at work": "Well yes, I painted it as best I can, and if art is to be involved at all, you hope that some kind of energy or sincerity will result in some kind of revelation" (1996: 33-34).

Appendix Twelve: Colin Wilson writes of the similarities between murderers and artists: "[Outsiders who become killers] share certain characteristics of the artist; they know they are unlike other men, they experience drives and tensions that alienate them from the rest of society, they possess the courage to satisfy those drives in defiance of society. But while the artist releases his tensions in an act of imaginative creation, the Outsider-criminal releases his in an act of violence" (quoted in Masters, 1985: 283).

Appendix Thirteen: See Schneider 2001 for more on the "detective as art critic" trope.

Appendix Fourteen: See Appendix Three, above. According to Cammell, in this film, "I suppose I'm really asking if we really know the people we love. Do we really understand their motives?" (Del Valle, 1996: 34).

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