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A Grammar of Murder: Violent Scenes and Film Form

Karla Oeler

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The dark shadows and offscreen space that force us to imagine violence we cannot see. The real slaughter of animals spliced with the fictional killing of men. The missing countershot from the murder victim's point of view. Such images, or absent images, Karla Oeler contends, distill how the murder scene challenges and changes film.

Reexamining works by such filmmakers as Renoir, Hitchcock, Kubrick, Jarmusch, and Eisenstein, Oeler traces the murder scene's intricate connections to the great breakthroughs in the theory and practice of montage and the formulation of the rules and syntax of Hollywood genre. She argues that murder plays such a central role in film because it mirrors, on multiple levels, the act of cinematic representation. Death and murder at once eradicate life and call attention to its former existence, just as cinema conveys both the reality and the absence of the objects it depicts. But murder shares with cinema not only this interplay between presence and absence, movement and stillness: unlike death, killing entails the deliberate reduction of a singular subject to a disposable object. Like cinema, it involves a crucial choice about what to cut and what to keep.

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