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THE DEPICTION OF VIOLENCE IN THE TERRIFIER FILM SERIES: REALISM VS. STYLISATION

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ABSTRACT:

The *Terrifier* horror film series, despite its low-budget, has become a cult phenomenon and achieved unexpected commercial success. This study focuses on analysing the function of violence in contemporary horror cinema, specifically examining the relationship between realism and stylisation in violent scenes within the *Terrifier* films. The theoretical framework of this research explores violence as both a narrative and aesthetic element, as well as its evolution in modern horror films. The core of the study is the application of this knowledge in the form of discourse analysis on three scenes from the *Terrifier* film series. The analysis utilises qualitative methods of film study to determine the extent to which these scenes balance realistic depictions of violence and their stylised presentation. The findings of this study contribute to a broader discussion on violence in contemporary horror, its ability to shock and captivate audiences, and its role in testing the boundaries of viewer tolerance.

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1 Introduction

The depiction of violence in cinema has undergone significant evolution since its inception. Elements of violence and action can be observed as early as in silent American slapstick comedies. The reason these elements appeared in these films was not solely to shock audiences. Violence and the action that derived from it do not require

spoken dialogue, making them an effective, dramatic, and visually engaging narrative device in early cinema, a function they continue to serve today. The question arises as to when the depiction of violence crosses a boundary, transforming from a mere narrative tool into the narrative itself.

An increase in the level of on-screen violence can be observed in various periods of cinema history, particularly during the New Hollywood era of the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of American independent filmmakers in the 1990s, or the French film movement "*New French Extremity*",which emerged with its first notable films in the early 2000s. However, with the arrival of, and in the context of this type of film, the unprecedented success of *Terrifier* films, it can be argued that we are entering a new era of cinematic brutality. The *Terrifier* film series has evolved from a low-budget project into a remarkable commercial phenomenon in contemporary horror cinema, reflecting shifting audience preferences and demonstrating how independent horror films can achieve commercial success without major studio backing. The first feature-length *Terrifier* film was crowdfunded, meaning it was financed by fans rather than a film studio (Hassenger, 2024). The franchise's main antagonist, Art the Clown, made his debut in the short film *The 9th Circle* (Leone, 2008) before becoming the central figure in *Terrifier* (Leone, 2016) and its sequels. At the time of this study, *Terrifier* has developed into a trilogy, with a fourth instalment in pre-production. The series is known for extreme gore sequences, featuring explicit, graphic brutality and a visual style inspired by the slasher subgenre, which was particularly popular in the 1980s. This aesthetic has helped *Terrifier* build a dedicated fanbase, as the retro appeal of 1980s genre films remains strong in contemporary cinema. Despite modest budgets, the films have proven to be unexpected box office successes, with the third instalment exceeding expectations and achieving significant financial success and global theatrical distribution which is a rarity for this type of film. The first film, made with a budget of only $35,000, grossed over $419,000 worldwide. The second instalment, with a significantly larger $250,000 budget, grossed over $15 million worldwide. The third film, produced on a $2 million budget, surpassed $89 million globally, a remarkable achievement for a niche horror franchise with a small target audience (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). These figures clearly indicate that the *Terrifier* series is becoming increasingly more successful with each new instalment, reflecting its growing popularity and strong appeal among moviegoers. This now-established horror franchise centres around the character of a sadistic, supernaturally powered killer, Art the Clown. Art is defined by his simple yet iconic makeup, pantomime performance, complete silence, theatricality, and almost childlike enthusiasm for brutality and the suffering of his victims. Actor David Howard Thornton never speaks in the films, relying entirely on physical acting, body language, and facial expressions, which are inspired by silent film stars such as Charlie Chaplin and Harpo Marx. The first film began as a straightforward slasher, structured as a series of brutal sequences in which Art tortures and murders his victims. However, with each new instalment and an increased budget, director and screenwriter Damien Leone expanded the story to include mythological and supernatural elements. The sequel, *Terrifier 2* (Leone, 2022), places the narrative in a broader context, exploring Art's mysterious origins. The plot follows Sienna Shaw and her younger brother Jonathan, who unknowingly become Art's next targets. The film introduces supernatural elements, hinting that Art is not just an ordinary serial killer but rather an immortal being driven by dark forces. Unlike the first film, *Terrifier 2* places greater emphasis on character dynamics and the confrontation between Art and Sienna, who takes on an almost mythological, heroic role within the story. The third instalment, *Terrifier 3* (Leone, 2024), is set during the Christmas season, incorporating the holiday horror subgenre into the franchise's ever-expanding themes. The third instalment further explores the supernatural elements and mythology introduced in the second film, while simultaneously intensifying the explicit brutality and theatricality of individual scenes. The *Terrifier* series serves as a perfect example of extreme cinema, one that does not rely on a sophisticated narrative structure or deeper thematic subtext (Dean, 2024). The core of the director's focus and the remarkable success of this series lies in its raw visual style, pulp-inspired elements, and grotesque humour intertwined with extreme violence. The *Terrifier* films are aesthetically rooted in Damien Leone's commitment to practical effects, meaning special effects created physically rather than digitally. Unlike many modern horror films that heavily depend on CGI, Leone's approach pays homage to classic slasher films while simultaneously amplifying their brutality through handcrafted gore effects. This commitment stems from the fact that Leone began his career in the film industry as a special effects makeup artist (Squires, 2024). The depiction of violence in the *Terrifier* film series is the primary subject of this study. Violence in cinema, its interpretation and overall impact, is a complex topic, as audience reactions to these scenes can vary significantly. While some violence can make viewers experience shock and horror,

other depictions may cause laughter or other contrasting emotional reactions, despite the morbid nature of the scenes. The way an audience perceives violence is directly influenced by the specific stylistic choices and directorial techniques used to depict it. Based on this concept, it can be argued that there are multiple ways in which violence can be presented in a film. For the purposes of this study, the depiction of violence in cinema will be categorised into two primary approaches: realistic and stylised, as we think that these two methods significantly influence audience perception and reaction. Through qualitative research methods, this study will examine whether director Damien Leone predominantly employs one of these approaches in the *Terrifier* films or if he blends both. By situating the *Terrifier* films within a broader discussion of contemporary horror cinema and its current trends, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how extreme violence functions in modern horror, why audiences find it acceptable, and how it oscillates between realism and artistic stylisation.

2 The Function of Violence in Horror Cinema

In contemporary media entertainment, death is often portrayed as a sensationalised event, which can serve to increase viewership or sales. It can also be used as a means to capture the recipient's attention, reducing the gravity of the subject and presenting death as a dramatic, stylised spectacle. The real consequences of death are frequently suppressed in media, making it appear dehumanised and emotionally distant. Violence and death are commonly utilised to heighten dramatic tension, particularly in horror films, television series, and digital games, where they often lose their authentic emotional impact. In some cases, brutal violence is depicted as a form of entertainment, leading to its trivialisation. This can result in viewer desensitisation, a process where repeated exposure to violent imagery reduces emotional responsiveness (Moravčíková, 2014). It can be assumed that cinema is one of the most popular mediums through which audiences consume images of death and violence, even though it remains a fictional construct. There are several reasons why people find media violence compelling, but they all converge on the same psychological mechanism - triggering specific mental processes that provide recipients with a sense of comfort or satisfaction (Nathanson, 2020). This is one of the primary reasons why violence and death serve as fundamental pillars of media entertainment. In the context of cinema, violence and death are most strongly associated with the horror genre. Horror is a genre construct present in cinema since its earliest days. It is built upon the experience of fear, a fundamental human instinct that drives survival. Death, unknown evil, trauma, and the afterlife have been central themes of horror since its literary origins. The viewer, when watching a horror film, becomes immersed in the experience, assuming the role of the hero, the victim, the killer, or even the person holding the camera, capturing these events. In this way, horror is a unique genre, one that both reflects and stimulates primal instincts and emotions in the audience (Loutzenhiser, 2016).

2.1 Gore

In the horror genre, various levels of brutality can be distinguished. The most extreme and explicitly depicted violence is categorised as gore. Gore refers to extravagant mutilation of the human body. However, gore scenes are not exclusively tied to the horror genre, they can also be found in war films or disaster movies. In the context of horror, gore is most prominently featured in the *splatter* subgenre, which is focused on explicit, graphic violence, sometimes presented in a comedic or exaggerated manner. The first traces of graphic violence in cinema, which can now be classified as gore, date back to the early 20th century. In the classic film *Intolerance* (Griffith, 1916), an explicit beheading is depicted. However, in the early phases of cinema, violent scenes served as a natural part of storytelling rather than being exploited. One of the pioneers of gore cinema as we know it today was director Herschell Gordon Lewis, whose film *Blood Feast* (Lewis, 1963) featured explicitly graphic gore scenes as its main attraction. The development of this stylistic element was further influenced by the rise of the *zombie horror* subgenre in the 1960s and 1970s, in which the main antagonists were walking, decaying corpses (Vierra, n.d.). Gore is not always a gratuitous exploitation of violence; it can also serve as a tool for conveying social themes. The *body horror* subgenre,

which focuses on unnatural deformations of the human body, does not necessarily aim only to disgust but can also address broader societal issues. For instance, *The Substance* (Fargeat, 2024) critiques unrealistic beauty standards in show business through its grotesque transformations. Like any other stylistic element in cinema, the function of gore is flexible, and its impact on the audience depends on the context in which it is used.

2.2 The Promise of Violence as a Tool of Marketing Communication

Explicit images of violence and death can serve as effective marketing tools in media communication, capable of influencing audience emotions, prompting action, or simply capturing attention. Attention, in the context of this topic, is the primary reason why media increasingly adopt this form of communication (Trotter et al., 2020). The concept of death and violence is inherently appealing to audiences, whether as positive or negative experiences. This is why the horror genre is considered one of the most profitable investments in the film industry, primarily due to its low production costs and high return on investment. Horror films typically do not require elaborate and expensive special effects, famous actors, or diverse filming locations. For example, *The Conjuring* (Wan, 2013) is set primarily in a single house, yet with a budget of $20 million, it grossed over $319 million worldwide. Production companies like *Blumhouse Productions* specialise in this low-investment, high-return model horror production (Lakes, 2023). While financial success is never guaranteed, studios often find it less risky to lose money on a low-budget horror film than on a failed high-budget action film starring big-name actors. Horror marketing also capitalises on the audience's morbid curiosity. It lures viewers into theatres by promising the most brutal or shocking film they have ever seen, often using footage of audience reactions - a technique notably employed in the marketing campaign for *Paranormal Activity* (Peli, 2007). Additionally, extreme audience reactions, such as vomiting or fainting in theatres, can be leveraged to sell a film. It can make the screening a thrilling and risky experience for viewers, which is exciting. The marketing team behind *Terrifier 3* utilised this strategy by constantly warning audiences on social media about the film's brutality and even distributing vomit bags in theatres (Jacobs, 2024). However, gore scenes are not exclusively tied to the horror genre; they can also be found in war films or disaster movies. In the context of horror, gore is most prominent.

3 Methodology

The methodology of the study consists of a combination of qualitative research methods. We chose qualitative methods because, to a large extent, we focus on the analysis of film works, and the concept being studied in them will often be left to our own interpretation, supported by the works of renowned experts. The qualitative approach focuses on understanding, interpreting, and analysing social phenomena in their natural context. This research emphasises subjective experiences, participants' perspectives, and the contextualisation of data (Silverman, 2013). We will use an explanatory study method, discourse analysis, and observation. Our intention is to search for verified facts in relation to individual viewpoints from various sources and possibly uncover unknown connections (Hendl, 2005). The explanatory study is useful in film analysis as it allows for a deeper understanding of various aspects of a film work, including causal relationships between different elements of cinematic language. Discourse analysis will enable us to interpret the films in the *Terrifier* series and their approach to depicting extreme violence. It is considered the most demanding qualitative content analysis procedure for media products. In fact, it is more of an interdisciplinary perspective on examining socio-cultural reality, which far exceeds the boundaries of specific media content. Discourse analyses of feature films, based on the selection of the studied topic, have the potential to create an important body of knowledge referring to the current social, cultural, political, and economic realities that appear in films. They help us identify, for example, references to other media culture products contained within the work, or, in our case, the analysis of the aestheticization of violence in contemporary horror cinema (Radošinská, 2019). Discourse can be perceived either as a set of selected media and the relationships between them within the context of the examined topic or as an extension of these media to their relationships with their production and perception

(Trampota & Vojtěchovská, 2010). The study also draws from the methodology of film analysis. Cinematic language is a combination of moving images that represent forms and structures of reality, but are not an exact depiction of it. The images created by our imperfect senses are a way of structuring the world around us. The relationship between the film image and reality is a cardinal topic in film theory and film analysis (Ciel, 2011). The key questions we ask include whether the director made specific stylistic choices in the context of this theme and how he made them. Our goal is not to assess the quality of the selected films but rather to observe, understand, and interpret predefined aspects related to the study (Ryan & Lenos, 2020). The research material to which discourse analysis will be applied in order to study the relationship between realism and stylisation in the depiction of artificial violence was selected as follows. First, we chose a basic set consisting of the filmography of director Damien Leone. The selection is justified by the fact that we sought a filmmaker whose filmography meets the requirements of our research. We then specified the basic set to a selection set, meaning the films *Terrifier 1* (Leone, 2016), *Terrifier 2* (Leone, 2022), and *Terrifier 3* (Leone, 2024). These films were chosen based on their commercial success, their exceptionally explicit depiction of violence in the contemporary horror genre (Cookman, 2024), and their popularity on social media (Jacobs, 2024). The units of analysis consist of three scenes from the selected films. One scene was chosen from each film. The scenes to which we apply discourse analysis were selected based on two factors. First, it was important that the scenes have similar duration—each selected scene lasts approximately 5 to 7 minutes. Secondly, it was important that the selected scenes contain the highest possible degree of concentrated, explicit violence. This gives us material to work with. The analysis of the scenes consists of a descriptive part, in which we detail the scene, and an analytical part, where we analyse aspects of cinematic language that contribute either to realism or stylisation in the given scene. The results are then further summarised.

4 Realism and Stylisation in Context of Horror Violence

In narrative filmmaking, there are few restrictions. However, one of the greatest limitations is death itself. The artificial depiction of death in cinema helps audiences recognise that they are watching fiction, as they have been conditioned to understand that real death cannot be shown in a film. Filmmakers can depict almost anything except actual death. This means that the portrayal of death in film ultimately exposes fiction (Lenne, 2003). The more abstract the depiction of death, the more pronounced the concept of demasking fiction becomes. The level of abstraction in the depiction of death determines how the audience reacts to it. The degree of abstraction in cinematic violence and death can also be described as the dominance of stylisation over realism within a given scene. The more realism is present in a violent scene, the more disturbing and unsettling it becomes, as it draws from the real world - something the audience can relate to. Conversely, the more exaggerated and abstract the violence, meaning the greater the stylisation and the less it resembles real-world experiences, the more tolerable the scene becomes for the audience.

4.1 Realism in Cinematic Violence

Realism in cinematic violence represents an approach in which violent scenes are depicted with a high degree of authenticity, aiming to evoke a strong emotional response from the audience, emphasise the severity and brutality of the scene, and encourage deeper reflection on the causes and consequences of violence. This contrasts with stylised or aestheticized violence, which may be presented with artistic intent or a certain detachment from reality. The realist approach employs naturalistic acting performances, practical effects that accurately depict human anatomy, and dynamic handheld cinematography, which creates a sense of immediacy and authenticity. The tone of the scenes should match the gravity of the violence depicted. Minimalist music or the complete absence of a score enhances the rawness of the scene, making the violence feel even more tangible. Realistic depictions of violence can have a profound

psychological impact on viewers, eliciting anxiety, fear, or trauma, and as a result, such films often become the subject of ethical discussions. On one hand, authentic violence can serve as a tool to raise awareness of its real-world consequences, discouraging its glorification. On the other hand, there is a risk of desensitising the audience or unintentionally encouraging violent behaviour. For this reason, filmmakers should approach the portrayal of violence with careful consideration. Realistic violence in modern horror can be seen in films such as *Strange Darling* (Mollner, 2023) and *MadS* (Moreau, 2024).

4.2 Stylisation in Cinematic Violence

Stylisation in film can be defined as deliberate aesthetic and formal adjustments to the image, sound, and narrative language, reflecting the director's artistic intent. In stylisation, a scene in a film does not have to be viewed as merely a realistic depiction of the world but as an expressive form of the creator's vision, communicated to the audience through carefully chosen visual, auditory, and narrative elements. Violence in films is often stylised by the director, who either draws from their own artistic goals or is inspired by established genre conventions that have become recurring stylistic choices due to their popularity. Violence stylisation typically combines elements such as colour, exploitation/exaggeration, specific acting performances, or the overall tone of the scene. Each of these elements can influence how a violent scene is perceived. For example, regarding colour, it could be the colour of blood, which in some films does not align with reality, appearing light red or even pinkish. As for exaggeration or exploitation, it could involve excessive blood spraying or deliberately inaccurate human anatomy. The tone is also an important factor that can influence how the audience perceives violence in a film. When the tone is humorous or light-hearted, it serves as a counterpoint to the violence in the scene, creating a stylised atmosphere. Stylised violence is particularly present in genre and auteur films. Highly stylised violence can be observed in films such as *The Substance* (Fargeat, 2024) or *The Monkey* (Perkins, 2025).

5 Depiction of Violence in Terrifier Films

5.1 Terrifier 1: Hacksaw Scene

The hacksaw scene is arguably the most brutal and shocking moment in the first *Terrifier* film. This scene occurs approximately halfway through the movie, serving as a defining moment where director and screenwriter Damien Leone makes it clear to the audience what kind of film they are watching. The sequence unfolds shortly after the sadistic Art the Clown kidnaps the film's protagonist, Victoria, and ties her to a chair in a warehouse. At first, he toys with her, indecisively selecting the tools he intends to use for her torture. However, the director has a dark and unexpected twist in store for the viewer. After finally choosing a hacksaw as his weapon, Art approaches a large white curtain. As he pulls it down, he reveals Dawn, Victoria's friend, hanging upside down, completely naked and suspended from the ceiling. After a brief comedic pantomime, Art begins to saw her body in half, starting from the groin and working his way towards her head, while Victoria is forced to watch in horror.

The aesthetic of this scene incorporates elements of both realism and stylisation. Leone strives to depict violence as authentically as possible, a goal achieved through the use of practical effects, which are a defining aesthetic characteristic of the entire *Terrifier* series. The hacksaw effect is created using latex, prosthetics, and fake blood, which is pumped through pressurised canisters. The combination of these elements enhances the scene's tangible quality, eliciting a physical reaction from the audience - as viewers, we see and feel that something is actually being cut apart, rather than merely looking at a digital effect. The scene's naturalistic approach is further emphasised by the complete nudity of the victim. The horror in this scene is not solely derived from Dawn's physical suffering, but also from the psychological torment of the protagonist, Victoria, who is forced to witness the gruesome act. Leone intercuts their suffering in a rapid montage, juxtaposing physical and psychological agony. The acting performances

and the anatomical accuracy of bodily mutilation contribute to the realistic aesthetic of the scene. However, stylisation emerges through the film's colour palette and the amateurish digital cinematography, which constantly reminds the viewer that they are watching a film. The slightly rough, low-budget audiovisual execution is an intentional aesthetic choice throughout the *Terrifier* films, as Leone draws inspiration from 1970s exploitation cinema. This stylistic approach reinforces the film's connection to its genre roots, making the audience aware of its grindhouse-inspired aesthetic. The scene can also be interpreted as a theatrical performance, with Art the Clown playing the role of an illusionist, performing a grotesque magic trick. The hacksaw scene pushes the boundaries of brutality beyond those of a traditional slasher film, as it features frontal nudity and extremely explicit violence. Leone tests the audience's endurance, and through a blend of realism and stylisation, he experiments with the limits of cinematic violence.

5.2 Terrifier 2: Bedroom Scene

In the second instalment of the *Terrifier* film series, director Damien Leone works with a significantly higher budget, which is reflected in the spectacle of brutal scenes and practical effects. The violent sequences take on a more theatrical quality, appearing more elaborate and exaggerated, yet they remain true to the old fashioned, analogue aesthetic of practical effects. The "bedroom scene" has no significant narrative importance - it does not involve any major character in the story. Instead, it exists purely for shock value, disgust, and extreme brutality, serving as a showcase for the quality of the practical gore effects. Similar to the most violent scene in the first film, this sequence also takes place almost exactly at the midpoint of the film's runtime. A young woman, Allie, is getting ready for bed when she suddenly hears noises coming from the kitchen. When she decides to investigate, she finds Art the Clown calmly washing dishes. Despite the tension of the impending horror, the scene has a comedic undertone, derived from Art's nonchalant attitude toward the situation. As soon as Art notices Allie standing at the stairs, he immediately chases her. She tries to escape to her bedroom, but fails to shut the door in time. Art first slices her eye open with a knife, referencing the famous surrealist short film *Un Chien Andalou* (Buñuel & Dalí, 1929). After that, he scalps her with scissors, throws her onto the bed, and slices the skin off her spine. He then breaks, twists, and rips off her left arm, and on her right hand, he breaks her fingers and tears her palm apart. At that moment, Art unexpectedly leaves the room, leaving Allie mutilated but still alive on the bed. As she tries to crawl toward her phone, Art suddenly bursts back into the room and begins pouring salt onto her wounds. The scene ends as Art grabs Allie's face and rips the skin off. This is followed by a brief epilogue, in which Allie's mother discovers her mangled body, while Art stands in the room, pantomiming a comedic gesture, as if acknowledging that he has done something wrong.

Leone presents the bedroom scene as four uninterrupted minutes of explicit brutality, escalating its shock factor with every passing second. The entire sequence has a bombastic, theatrical effect. The narrative comes to a complete halt, and for four minutes, the audience witnesses nothing but Art the Clown's sadistic rampage. In its spectacle and execution, as well as in the way it is integrated into the film, the scene resembles an action sequence in an action movie or a musical number in a musical - the story pauses, and brutality takes over the narrative. Similar to the hacksaw scene in the first film, the bedroom scene blends elements of realism and stylisation, however, in this case, the execution leans more toward stylisation than realism. Starting with realism, the gore effects are once again achieved through practical effects, emphasising tactile and physical authenticity. Realism is also enhanced by Leone's editing choices, as he allows the entire sequence to unfold in real time. However, the sheer excessiveness of the violence makes the scene so over-the-top that it becomes unbelievable and therefore, stylised. Art the Clown exhibits superhuman strength, effortlessly tearing off his victim's arm, while Allie remains conscious far longer than would be realistically possible - she would have passed out or died multiple times under normal circumstances. Art's performance also contributes to the scene's stylisation, as he gleefully enjoys the sadistic act with the unrestrained enthusiasm of a small child. With the second and third instalments of the *Terrifier* series, Damien Leone has shifted from a relatively straightforward, semi-realistic slasher to a slasher infused with fantasy elements, a shift reflected in the depiction of violence. Violence is no longer intended solely to shock but also to entertain through its exaggerated nature.

5.3 Terrifier 3: Opening Scene

The third instalment of the *Terrifier* series takes place during the Christmas season. The film's festive atmosphere, which contrasts sharply with the horror genre, is established immediately in the opening sequence, set on a snowy night in a suburban home. The house is occupied by a four-member family, consisting of a mother, father, daughter, and son, all of whom remain unnamed. When the daughter hears strange noises in the living room, she decides to investigate. She finds a figure dressed in a Santa Claus costume standing in front of the Christmas tree. Frightened, she runs to wake up and warn her parents. However, when they check the living room, they find no one, assuming their daughter imagined it. They leave a plate of cookies and a glass of milk for Santa and then return to bed. The mysterious Santa Claus figure is revealed to be Art the Clown, who picks up an axe and heads to the son's bedroom. The act of the boy's murder is heard but not shown on screen. Art then moves to the master bedroom, where the scene shifts to the mother's perspective as she wakes up to find someone repeatedly hacking her husband with an axe. She tries to escape, but just as she reaches the front door, Art swings the axe into her spine. As she collapses to her knees, Art proceeds to hack her to pieces in a rapid montage sequence. After the apparent end of the massacre, Art casually enjoys the plate of cookies, washing them down with the glass of milk. He then washes the dishes, and as he prepares to leave the house, he hears sounds coming from inside a kitchen cabinet. When he opens it, he finds the family's terrified young daughter hiding inside. The opening scene ends here.

The third instalment of the *Terrifier* series has the strongest comedic undertone, primarily due to its Christmas setting, which contrasts sharply with the horror genre. In this film, stylisation in the depiction of violent scenes largely overtakes realism. The opening sequence serves as a twisted parody of family Christmas movies, wherein a child insists they have seen Santa Claus inside the house. This scene also marks the first time children are killed in the series, breaking one of the taboos of the horror genre. The first child's death is heard but not shown, making it arguably even more disturbing, as the audience is left to imagine what is happening. Unlike the Hacksaw scene and Bedroom scene, Leone initially focuses more on suspense. There are longer pauses between the murders, and the audience is left uncertain about what will happen next. The absence of music further enhances the unsettling atmosphere. The sequence maintains its tension throughout the first half, as Art slowly moves from room to room with his axe. However, the tension dissipates when he begins chasing the mother, ultimately mutilating her in a fast-paced montage sequence. This marks one of the few instances in the *Terrifier* series where a kill scene is not shown in real time but instead through montage editing, further emphasising the scene's stylisation. The montage of dismemberment is filled with exaggerated gore effects, which no longer attempt to be realistic. The scene concludes in a purely comedic fashion, as Art sits down to enjoy the cookies and milk - a punchline that was established at the beginning of the scene. He even washes the dishes afterward. Through this moment, Leone invites the audience into a film that embraces black comedy, a tone that persists throughout the entire third instalment. The film contains more humour and absurd moments, yet it still delivers just as much brutality and explicit violence. The comedic tone and Christmas setting make the third film more tolerable, despite its continued extreme brutality. The film's stylisation is ultimately rooted in its tonal shift, blending horror, absurdity, and dark humour.

6 Results

The selected scenes from the *Terrifier* horror film series have demonstrated the presence of both realism and stylisation in the director's approach to depicting violence. When analysing key scenes that best represent violent moments in each of the films, it is evident that stylisation of violence prevails in the second and third films, while the first film leans more toward realism in its depiction of violence. The reason for this may lie in the fantastical genre elements that contributed to a more theatrical and stylised approach in the direction of violent scenes in *Terrifier 2 and Terrifier 3*. The exaggeration, and thus the stylisation, of violence in the sequels can also be explained by audience expectations and the filmmakers' ambition to create something bigger and more shocking, as violent scenes are the main marketing draw of this film series (Jacobs, 2024). However, despite the varying degrees of these aspects, none

of the films adheres solely to one style of violence depiction. Director Damien Leone combines realism and stylisation in the aesthetic of his films fluidly, making extremely brutal scenes more bearable for the audience. The realism of violent scenes in the *Terrifier* film series primarily stems from authentically executed gore effects, which give these scenes a realistic feel and sense of bodily revulsion - provoking physical reactions in the audience, unlike digital effects, which can sometimes feel unconvincing and artificial. Practical effects allow actors to interact with real environments and props, which also increases the likelihood of a more authentic performance, as they have something tangible to react to in the scene. Digital effects, when depicting violence, can appear unnatural in movement, texture, or in how they interact with light. These are details, but it is precisely these details that contribute to the authenticity and effectiveness of individual scenes. Proper use of prosthetics, animatronics, and artificial blood creates an immersive experience that digital effects cannot replicate. However, when it comes to realism and stylisation, it is not just about the production quality of practical effects but also their representation. Filmmakers must ask themselves how closely they want to adhere to the laws of human anatomy. The more authentically the body and its damage are depicted, as in the analysed scene from *Terrifier 1*, the more disturbing the scene becomes for the viewer. The more exaggerated and theatrical the depiction of bodily damage, the more it detaches from reality and becomes stylised, as seen in the analysed scenes from *Terrifier 2* and *Terrifier 3*. Another important factor in the realism and stylisation of violence that we identified in the analysis is tone. Tone dictates the overall impact and atmosphere of a film and typically stems from the genre or genre hybridisation to which the film belongs. A director may depict violence in a film in an entirely realistic manner, but the context and tone of the scene may evoke a contrasting response from the audience. *Terrifier 1* is a combination of horror, thriller, and slasher subgenres. Stylistic elements of these genres contribute to a more serious tone, which, combined with realistically depicted violence, results in a shocking and uncomfortable audience reaction. *Terrifier 2* and *Terrifier 3* are a combination of horror, thriller, fantasy, comedy, and slasher subgenre. The fantasy and comedy genres contribute to a lighter tone, which, together with more exaggerated and less realistic violence, leads to a less uncomfortable audience reaction. Cinematography and editing are also important factors in the degree of realism and stylisation in the analysed scenes. Director Damien Leone uses a digital camera for all three films. Digital cameras tend to lack the natural depth, colour, and texture of an image. The aesthetic of the *Terrifier* film series is intentionally amateurish, referencing the early exploitation films that Leone is inspired by. This is a creative decision that adds a certain level of stylisation to all three films, as it reminds the audience that they are watching a film. When it comes to shot composition and shot size combinations, we found no specific directorial intention that would contribute either to realism or stylisation. Editing is also a tool the use of which can potentially disrupt the balance between realism and stylisation. In the case of the analysed scenes from the first and second films, the editing contributes to their realism, as the scenes are allowed to unfold in real-time, without temporal retardation or time jumps. In the case of the analysed scene from the third film, the editing is more varied. In addition to slight temporal jumps, we also find rapid montage - sequences of fast, successive shots. The editing thus brings the scene closer to stylisation. Music and sound effects can also influence how the audience perceives the violence being presented. In the analysed scenes, director Damien Leone opted for a more realistic approach, as music is almost entirely absent, and the sound effects are not exaggerated. By combining realism and stylisation, a balance can be achieved that appeals to different types of audiences. This approach allows for some detachment from the violence - realistic effects create a sense of authenticity, but the stylisation pulls them away from the real world. This approach can reduce emotional strain while still providing an intense experience that is entertaining and thrilling for the viewer. It may not only be an aesthetic choice but also an effective tool in marketing communication within the context of contemporary horror cinema.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

The *Terrifier* series opens a discussion about the shift in preferences among modern audiences, who appear to be less sensitive to images of explicit violence, becoming part of a new trend in the horror genre where nostalgic elements, the shock effect, and the adrenaline experience play an important role. The depiction of violence in the

Terrifier film series is open to a wide range of interpretations. This is also one of the main limitations when conceptualising such research, especially when we use, as in our case, qualitative analysis methods that tend to be somewhat subjective. This subjectivity arises from personal, cultural, and social frameworks that influence how a researcher reacts to violent depictions. For example, a researcher from a more conservative cultural background may consider the excessive violence of the *Terrifier* films to be morally unacceptable or disturbing, while a horror fan accustomed to such types of films may see it as a unique and interesting contribution to the genre. Different cultural norms concerning violence and its depiction in the media affect how violence is perceived and discussed. Based on this, such research will always be somewhat subjective, although with the greatest possible effort for objectivity. Therefore, we consider it essential for researchers to acknowledge the diversity of opinions and take into account cultural and individual factors that influence how violence is perceived. One of the main challenges in writing this study was the limited availability of scholarly sources specifically focused on the *Terrifier* film series. Although this film series has gained cult status and significant commercial success, it is still seen as a lesser-known horror series within the broader film industry. As a result, academic research on these films is not as extensive as it is for more popular horror series. The *Terrifier* series is still relatively new, meaning it is still developing in terms of its potential cultural impact. However, even now, it offers material for future interdisciplinary studies, such as the influence of extreme horror on the psychology of the recipient. The impact of media violence on recipients and the question of whether such images can or cannot provoke violent behaviour in real life is a complicated topic, with studies providing contradictory results (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Research may also focus on the concept of gender and the victimisation of female characters - whether female characters are subjected to violence disproportionately compared to male characters. The study of violence portrayal in the *Terrifier* film series is still only a small part of a broader topic that is present in most mass media content. The examination of realism and stylisation in the context of artificial violence do not have to be limited to films alone, but can also apply to television series, series produced by streaming services, or digital games.

The selected scenes from the *Terrifier* horror film series have demonstrated the presence of both realism and stylisation in the way violence is depicted. Director Damien Leone combines these elements smoothly in the aesthetic of his films, making extremely brutal scenes more bearable for the audience. Realistically crafted practical gore effects give the sequences a sense of realism and bodily revulsion, while the lighter tone and spectacular theatricality of these scenes, especially in the second and third instalments, detach them from reality. Thanks to this, the audience can also distance themselves from the brutality being presented. The combination of these elements may be one of the factors behind the success of this horror series. The *Terrifier* films openly push the boundaries of explicit violence in modern cinema and base their marketing on it (Jacobs, 2024). The success of this series also offers insight into the preferences of the modern audience, which is less sensitive to graphic depictions of violence, the development of the current horror genre, in which nostalgia, shock value, and the overall appeal of violence in mass media communication resonate. It can be expected that the financial success of the *Terrifier* films will inspire the production of similar films in the future, which will attempt to compete with them through their violent scenes. The result may be the emergence of a new subgenre, which is already being discussed in the film community as the "Mega-Slasher". This term was first used in the context of the *Terrifier* film series by renowned director Mike Flanagan, sparking a discussion on social media and contributing to its widespread use (Musnicky, 2022).

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