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Deconstructing Hollywood: The Effectiveness of Violence and Death in Film

As the entertainment industry continues to grow, the need for commercialization in movies can make films feel formulaic. While certainly not true of all cinema, many of the highest-grossing works, especially those that fall within a series, are subject to banalities that are commonplace across Hollywood. These tropes include using violence as a means to solve conflict, a somewhat unexceptional occurrence in typical blockbusters. Furthermore, death as a means of advancing the plot is a device that often feels out of place or unnecessary. Criticizing the effectiveness of these platitudes is Zak Penn's *Incident at Loch Ness*, a mockumentary about the production of a fictional film, *Enigma of Loch Ness*. Essentially, Penn uses comedy to critique the use of standard Hollywood tropes, namely, death as a plot device and violence as a solution.

Incident at Loch Ness, although presented as a true story, is entirely fiction. Though talking head scenes and observational-style footage is spliced together to mimic standard documentary narrative techniques, the absurdity of the plot characterizes the film as manufactured. As a whole, the film details Werner Herzog's experience with filming with Penn on the aforementioned *Enigma of Loch Ness*, a documentary about people's fascination with the Loch Ness monster. The crew of the fake movie travels to Scotland, interviews locals, and experiences the aura of the lake themselves over several days. While the production of *Enigma*

initially starts well, Penn's desire for control over the project soon turns Herzog against him, and the conflict between the two directors becomes the subject of the mockumentary. Herzog's complaints revolve around several issues, including Penn forcing crewmembers into 'uniforms', hiring an actor as a 'monster expert', and wanting to use a fake Loch Ness monster to add drama to their documentary. Though their various disagreements are meant to be somewhat grounded in reality, the presence of a 'real' Loch Ness monster that causes the cast's boat to sink and leads to the death of two of its members truly classifies the project as fantasy.

The somewhat algorithmic action of violence is judged by the film, both through framing and scale. For instance, when Herzog and Penn argue over the morality of shooting a fake monster, Herzog stubbornly refuses to cooperate with Penn's request, leading to Penn threatening Herzog with a gun, saying he will "shoot [him]" if he does not record the fake monster (1:08:47). Before Penn returns with his gun, the framing of the shot is such that Herzog is the only person on-screen, generating a moment of suspense as the audience awaits how the frustrated Penn will return to the scene. This 'pause' in the film emphasizes the ridiculousness of Penn's arrival back with a flare gun, as the unexpected turn in the sequence comes from a state of neutrality in the movie. Had the audience been aware of Penn's actions, by seeing the gun beforehand or watching Penn pick it up, the shock value of Herzog being held at gunpoint, though still amusing, would not have been as played-up. Therefore, through the framing, the already somewhat humorous situation turns into a farce and the comedy of this sequence completely undermines the power that a gun would normally have. Despite the seemingly dire events transpiring before the viewer, no true fear is instilled, serving as an example of some of the ineffectiveness of this traditional threat in Hollywood blockbusters. One such traditional use of

violence is within the highest-grossing movie of 2008, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, in a scene in which the hero, Batman, interrogates the villain of the film, Joker. Here, to extract information from the villain, Batman relies on violence, repeatedly punching the Joker until he complies. While from a pure entertainment standpoint, it would be boring to see Batman have an hour-long, police-style conversation with a crazed villain, nonetheless, the use of violence, in the diegetic world, seems out of place. Though *The Dark Knight* is certainly meant to be taken seriously, with the arguments of *Incident* in mind, the scene loses some of its value, since the violent actions are re-classified as an ineffective commonplace rather than a powerful and unique experience for the viewer.

Likewise, the Hollywood cliché of death is mocked within the film, epitomized by the editing, which delivers strong irony. As the mockumentary approaches its end, Penn reflects on the loss of two crewmates that occurred during the filmmaking process. He claims that death is “what happens in any great adventure”, explaining to the viewer that “stories from Ancient Greece” or movies like *Lord of the Rings* feature death, and that it is just “the way it works” (1:28:52). His statement is coupled with a montage that features slow motion shots of the deceased characters that transitions into footage of the surviving crewmates aboard another vessel, clearly upset at Penn's endangering decisions throughout the film. This transition into found footage is edited in a way such that it coincides with Penn's assertion about mystical ‘grand adventures’, generating dramatic irony as the aforementioned expressions of disgust across the survivor's faces are undeniably different from those resulting from a Homeric epic. This comedic irony emphasizes the irrationality of Penn's statement about death being a requirement in cinema, ultimately serving as a meta-commentary on how death can feel out of

place when used improperly. With this sentiment in mind, one can look back on Hollywood blockbusters and see how unnecessary death sometimes is. For instance, J. J. Abrams' *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, which grossed over \$1 billion worldwide, features the apparent 'death' of Chewbacca, who is revealed to be alive only a few minutes later, allowing the audience a moment of relief, but undermining the entirety of the previous scene. Here, something as potent as death is used merely as a transition between two scenes, epitomizing it as a throwaway plot device, something that is made apparent by the criticisms of *Incident*.

Although the mockumentary condemns traditionalism in filmmaking, that is not to say that traditionalism is always inherently negative. At times, death and violence can truly generate an impact on the audience. The aforementioned *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is a prime example of successful traditional filmmaking: the death of certain characters is not overdone, and the viewer truly feels their loss. Furthermore, when the death of characters is 'faked', such as that of Gandalf the Grey, it is purposeful beyond solely being a checkbox for adventure (*Incident*) or a means of advancing the plot (*Star Wars*), rather, it enables character development. Additionally, fighting is ever present in *Lord of the Rings*, but feels acceptable within the film, as it belongs in a world where conflict revolves around land that is fought over, contrasting the nonnecessity of violence in a simple disagreement (*Incident*) or interrogation (*Dark Knight*). That is to say, while *Incident at Loch Ness* certainly criticizes the orthodoxy of violence and death, it is certainly not true that all orthodox methods are futile.