The Culture of Violence

Research Paper / Prospectus

- Final paper will be around ten pages (or so), and should include substantial consultation of at least three reliable sources (“reliable,” generally = NOT WEBSITES!) besides your primary texts
- Research prospectus due Tuesday, November 14
- First draft of research paper due (in my office) Wednesday, November 29
- Second draft of research paper due Thursday, December 7
- Writing portfolios due to the English Committee Thursday, December 14

The first thing to remember about a research paper is that it’s not really substantively different from the kind of papers you’ve already been writing. It’s longer, usually. And it involves the voices and ideas of other people. But the same basic gestures are involved as in your earlier papers: you’ll still do close readings of texts, you’ll still make critical comparisons, you’ll still structure the paper in sections. The only thing that makes a research paper really different is that in your earlier papers you were only trying to say what you thought: in a research paper, you’re trying to place what you think into a conversation going on among experts. The research paper is the place where you actually join into that larger academic conversation.

Prospectus – due next Tuesday

You will define your research project yourself. But a good way to start is simply by defining what you’re interested in, why you’re interested in it, why you think it matters, and how you want to go about studying it. That’s what the prospectus is for.

To write the prospectus, start by reading the excerpt from The Craft of Research I handed out in class: these chapters will help you think about the kinds of questions to ask to motivate research, and how to ask them so they yield the most fruit. Read the whole packet – then, pay special attention to the rubric on page 63, the three questions you need to answer in order to define your project initially.

Then, write your prospectus. It doesn’t have to be long – after all, you haven’t done the research yet – but it should contain three sections:

1. In the first section, define your research question following the guidelines on page 63 of Craft. What are you studying, what questions are you asking about it, and why? What do you expect to find out? The harder you push here, now, the easier the research will be later, so think about this for a while.

2. In the second section, try to say, briefly, what you already know about the research question. If you’re going to focus on literature, what primary texts will you be studying – what stories, what books, what chapters, what characters? If you’re going to focus on history, or political theory, or law, what will form the backbone of your research? What sources do you already have in hand? What ideas do you already think are applicable to this project?

3. In the third section, try to define what you need to know in order to answer your research question completely. What other sources do you need to consider? What kinds of research do you need to do? Where do you expect to find those sources? It might be a good idea to do a little preliminary research before you write this part. Get on InfoTrac, use the library catalog, check the MLA and JStor databases (all accessible through the library page of the website). Find out what’s out there.
Bring your prospectus with you next Tuesday. But before then – and this is crucial – start doing your research. Start finding articles. Start reading books. Start taking notes. The sooner you start gathering materials, the better. Don’t wait for me to tell you to start.

Some thoughts on topics

I’ll consider just about anything if you can make a case for it – what I’m really interested in is that you care about it, although it will be easier for me to help you with it if it has some connection to some aspect of violence or violent media in America: then at least I can be sure you’ll have access to texts that will help you. But you might consider some things as you ponder your topic:

1. There are an almost infinite number of film papers you could write: the films I’ve shown in the class are really not much more than the tip of the iceberg of American film violence. You could write a paper about horror films, or about the role of women as defined by horror films. You could write a paper about the “realistic” depiction of war – contrast, say, Saving Private Ryan with a WWII film made in the forties, or Full Metal Jacket with The Green Berets.

2. Or you could focus on films that implicate the audience – Fifteen Minutes, say, or the French film Man Bites Dog or the German Funny Games.

3. You could write a paper on the aesthetics of Japanese ultraviolence: Ichi the Killer, any number of Yakuza films come to mind.

4. You could write a paper on rape/revenge films we haven’t considered. Or you could research the persistence of the western myth in any of a number of films we have not looked at. Or you could examine other works by one of our directors – Peckinpah, Scorsese, Kubrick, etc. – to see if you can trace the development of themes in his or her work.

5. You could write a paper examining the relationship between screen violence and real violence. Is there such a relationship? If so, what is it? There is a lively and ongoing debate on this issue.

6. Another, similar debate concerns violent video games, in particular FPS games.

7. You might consider the relationship between violent “spectacles,” like the Columbine shootings, and the media coverage of those events. Do the media play a role in creating such events? Does media coverage of change the way we see and think about violence? About our culture?

There are others, of course. . . the list goes on and on. You might want to take a look at Lonny Athens’s Criminal Acts and Actors and The Creation of Dangerous Violent Criminals are interesting. You might try to lay your hands on a recent book called The Culture of Fear. Or maybe the latest book to explore media/fantasy violence, Everything Bad is Good for You. Read. Think. What’s important, though, is that you choose something to look at that you can ask focused, specific questions about. And, of course, that you care about it. When both of those things come together, you’re ready to start.