

The Aestheticization of Violence in Animation:
Moral Ambiguity and Narrative Consequences

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Abstract

This report examines the aestheticization in depicting violence in animated films or series and the moral ambiguity behind it. It also takes a look at the implications for the narrative resolution and any potential character development along with it. It explores if the protagonist of the story might be forced to confront the consequences of their violent actions and if that leads to any character growth; or the antagonist can be seen as more charismatic due to the design choices and stylisation.

This report is written using two case studies - *The Demon Slayer* and *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* that help understand the influence of violence on the narratives and the moral judgement of the audience.

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Introduction

The aestheticization of violence in media formats, particularly animation represents a controversial aspect of visual storytelling. It blends brutal actions and intense emotions with art and stylisation that blurs the moral boundaries between the good and evil. It raises a question about the portrayal of both the protagonist and the antagonist and if the artistic element can make them look charismatic or sympathetic. While this medium can dampen the shock of horrific images and violent themes, it can sometimes retain the emotional resonance that connects the audience with the character and the narrative.

Stylised design choices in violence can raise significant questions like: Does it make the horrific acts seem acceptable or even glamorous? Does it provoke deeper engagement and affect the influence of the character in the narrative?

Therefore, by using examples from The Demon Slayer and Cyberpunk: Edgerunners, this report will explore potential long term effects on societal attitudes towards aggression and morality by examining the complexities of the juxtaposition of good and bad.

Literature Review

To explore violence in sci-fi anime, authors like Napier (2005) highlight how destruction often serves as an emotional release, emphasizing that *"destruction of evil is less important than simply destruction itself."* Baudrillard's concept of the "obscene ecstasy of alienation" (Napier, 2005) also supports this, showing how characters' isolation drives their violent actions. This suggests that the alienation experienced by many protagonists creates a detachment that facilitates acts of extreme violence, not as a moral choice but as a reaction to existential despair.

Expanding on those ideas, Mitkus. T (2021) highlights how the medium of animation artistically and uniquely handles violent imagery. "Thus, it could be argued, that anime uses violence for thematic purposes (and to be frank, sometimes as a fanservice), because the animation medium allows to viewers consume imagery of violence, that would be much more stressful to experience for the audience if it would be shot in live-action." (Mitkus. T 2021) He states the presentation of violence in a graphic content is less distressing than live-action portrayals.

Chapter 1: Stylised Violence & its Effects on Viewers Moral Judgement

Aesthetic visuals have the ability to grab the attention on the viewers very quickly and engage them emotionally. Unrealistic depiction of violent themes with exaggerated camera movements, vibrant colours and choreographed sequences creates a sense of detachment between the viewer and the bloodshed. This detachment blurs the moral judgement as the line between right and wrong becomes obscured by the artistry of the action.

In series like *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (2022) the violence is exhilarating and grotesque that encourage the audience to sympathise with David's desperation despite the destructive consequences of his actions. The stylisation of his cybernetic implants and transformations and how they make him act in an inhumane way frames his violence as tragic and redemptive, showing how it can serve both as a cause and consequence of negative situations. It draws the audience into the turmoil of the character like David and while they may have an artistic flair, still glorify bloodshed. The aesthetic beauty of the violence in his story distracts the viewers from the destructive cycle it perpetuates, underscoring how a focus on power and spectacle can lead to irreversible consequences.



Figure 1: Cyberpunk: Edgerunners (Episode 2 - Like A Boy)

On the other hand, in *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* (2019), bloodshed may be the central to the narrative, but it is rarely glorified in the same way as *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (2022). The violence is stylised and visually stunning, but its portrayal emphasises the emotional and moral weight of each battle. Tanjiro wields violence reluctantly, driven by a sense of duty and the desire to protect others. The series often contrasts the beauty of the combat with the sombre aftermath, highlighting the cost of bloodshed on both heroes and villains. The approach to violence here is a reflection on the consequences of violence rather than the glorification of it. It is framed as a regrettable part of a larger moral struggle. This makes the audience consider the humanity of both the protagonist and the antagonist to evoke empathy and reflection.



Figure 2: Tanjiro and Nezuko in Demon Slayer: Unwavering Resolve Arc

Chapter 2: Impact on the Narrative's Structure and Resolution

Aestheticized violence plays a central role in shaping the narrative structure of animated works. For protagonists, the journey of character development may start due to situations that force them to resort to violence. It is often accompanied by moments of reflection or regret that add depth to the character.

The structural impact in *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (2022) is a key driver of the narrative in how it changes the arcs plot and progression. David's descent into physical augmentation and his increasing reliance on implants are tied to the increasingly brutal acts of violence. By using violence to advance the plot, the escalation mirrors his internal struggles ultimately leading to him facing the dire consequences of his actions. The climactic scenes use violence to increase the dramatic tension in the story to create an emotional connect with the audience. The inevitability of loss and sacrifice as shown in the end with the death of David, amplifies the emotional stakes and maintains the narratives momentum.



Figure 3: Cyberpunk: Edgerunners (Episode 9 – Humanity)

In Demon Slayer (2019), with each battle Tanjiro acknowledges that the demons were once human. This complex portrayal of violence creates a narrative where acts of bloodshed is a form of moral and emotional struggle. Tanjiro's internal conflict with killing demons adds depth to the narrative's resolution as each act of violence is turned into a moral dilemma. Every battle becomes a test of his resolve that forces him to balance his duty to protect humanity with his compassion. His acts of violence are therefore not framed as triumphs but as necessary tragedies that underscore the cost of survival in a world full of suffering. This emotional layering adds a bittersweet ending to the battle reflecting the characters complexity and moral ambiguity.



Figure 4: Tanjiro in Demon Slayer: Mugen Train Arc

Chapter 3: Potential Long-Term Effects on Societal Perceptions

The implications of aestheticization of violence extend beyond individual narratives and influence the societal attitude towards violence and morality. When violence is presented as beautiful, it can desensitize the audience to its real-world consequences. Moreover, the normalisation of violence may encourage violent behaviour or make it more palatable to the audience. The frequent battles, although emotionally charged, may lead to a viewer's acceptance of violence as a necessary evil, without fully understanding the ethical complexities involved.

In *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (2022) the glamorisation of violence through technology blurs the line between the hero and the villain. The audience's relatability and empathy for David despite his reckless killing highlights how societal perceptions of morality have already changed and how they have been influenced by the stylised portrayal of violence. As technology continue to evolve, the media's portrayal of violence in a glamorous light might alter the perception of aggression and its consequences in the minds of the viewers. It raises certain question like: Should one prioritise artistic expression over the potential impact of their work? What are the ethical implications of glamorising violence in a medium accessible to diverse audiences?



Figure 5: Nezuko in *Demon Slayer: Entertainment District Arc*

Conclusion

The aestheticization of violence in animation represents a powerful narrative tool that enhances storytelling and helps in character development while challenging traditional moral frameworks. However, it also raises significant ethical and societal concerns regarding its potential to glamorise brutality. Through stylised portrayal of violence, both *Demon Slayer* (2019) and *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (2022) compel viewers to engage with the emotional consequences of aggression. These series show how violence, when combined with art and emotional depth, can blur the lines between right and wrong creating moral ambiguity that challenges societal norms. As these narratives unfold, they not only shape characters' development but also influence viewers' perceptions of violence, making it a crucial aspect of modern animated storytelling.

This report underscores the importance of critically examining the role of violence in animation, not only as a storytelling device but also as a reflection of societal values. As the medium continues to evolve, creators must navigate the balance between artistic expression and ethical responsibility and ensure that their work resonates emotionally without compromising its moral integrity.

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Image List

- Figure 1: *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (Netflix, Episode 2 - Like A Boy)
- Figure 2: Tanjiro and Nezuko in *Demon Slayer: Unwavering Resolve Arc*, (Netflix, Episode 1 – Cruelty)
- Figure 3: *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (Netflix, Episode 9 – Humanity)
- Figure 4: Tanjiro in *Demon Slayer: Mugen Train Arc*, (Netflix, Episode 7 – Set Your Heart Ablaze)
- Figure 5: Nezuko in *Demon Slayer: Entertainment District Arc*, (Netflix, Episode 6 – Layered Memories)