

The art of torture analysis



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The Art of Torture According to a 2006 survey conducted by BBC News, 58% of Americans say that any form of torture upon a fellow man for any reason is wrong (“ One-third” 1), which is ironic because horror films, such as *Saw* and *Hostel*, where victims are brutally murdered and ripped to shreds for the audience’s pure entertainment pleasure topped the box offices with their releases in 2004 and 2005.

By looking at sociopolitical platforms and moral messages behind the ‘ torture porn’ subgenre, it is apparent that this style of film is in fact art and has a prominent spot in the history of film, because it is expressive and forces people to come to terms with difficult truths about our culture and humanity as a whole. As the movie industry has progressed, it has pushed the limit with each new release in hopes of continuing to get the ‘ shock and awe’ response out of its audiences.

It use to be the simple monster popping out of a closet or the grotesque face of the killer sufficed in bringing terror to people, but as these aesthetics are used consistently, movie goers have become desensitized to them, causing filmmakers to have to intensify the subject matter they show onscreen. This is what helped affirm the subgenre known as ‘ torture porn’. Torture porns are often characterized as not being as concerned with the plot as it is with how graphic and gory its kill scenes are. The spurt of blood is suppose to be equivalent to that of the money shot in porn (Edelstein 1).

It is for these reasons that there is much controversy surrounding this subgenre of horror films, asking if this type of filmmaking should even be considered art and/or is worth mentioning in our history of films. Besides the

excessive amount of blood shown, torture porns share attributes such as not really having the traditional ‘killer popping out and making you jump in your seat’ kind of scare. Most of the terror that comes from these movies is just the disturbing content of people being dismembered.

They also tend to have a deeper meaning to them and show some of the moral dilemmas humans face on a day-to-day basis. In this way and others, they reflect on our society today. Torture porns can go as far as further proof for the famous Stanley Milgram obedience to authority experiment. In this experiment, test subjects are ordered to push buttons that they are told will send a shock of a certain amount of voltage to a person in the room next to them. Once the voltage level of the shocks reach a certain point, the people can actually hear the person in the other room crying out in pain due to the shocks.

They are instructed to continue increasing the voltage, which most do, some even have a slight smirk on their face at this point. What the test subjects do not know is that no one is actually receiving these shocks and that the groans of pain they hear are really just a recording. This case study is important to this point because it proves man’s capability of inducing pain, especially in a high stress situation. The stakes are raised higher in the circumstances of the Saw movies by having the other person’s life at stake, but it is still interesting to see man’s quickness to choose his life over another’s.

These films are great examples as to how perfectly sane people can resort to hurting other human beings out of anger, revenge, fear, survival, or sport. In

a scene from *Hostel*, the character Paxton has his cell phone stolen by kids just after he has started to realize he cannot find his friends. Out of anger, Paxton grabs one of the kids and starts strangling him. Once he realizes what he is doing, he lets the kid go. This first hints that this character is capable of inflicting pain on another.

It becomes completely clear at the end when Paxton is making his escape and he notices his friend's killer. Out of pure revenge, Paxton decides to follow the man, cut off his fingers, and then kill him. In a post 9/11 world, torture is a topic that has been brought to our attention various times. The question of just how moral torture is first came into debate with the Abu Ghraib case, where American military guards were tormenting Middle Eastern prisoners. The majority of our population seemed to be okay with it. However, torture porns may give them a new perspective. We've been talking about torture in this culture a great deal recently and these films raise a very clear question: Is it ever permissible to torture someone? It's a hell of a lot different thinking about that when you're watching somebody torture somebody, in all of its ugliness, on-screen than when you're watching the nightly news" (Rogers 1). By having the torture presented to an audience in this style, it will most likely cause one of two reactions. Either it will make a person rethink his or feelings toward torture or satisfy some deeply hidden, sick desire to be able to mutilate another human being.

In the same way that some people cut themselves (they say) to feel something, maybe some moviegoers need to identify with people being cut to feel something too. Either outcome can be looked upon as a positive one. It is like " lifting a trapdoor in the civilized forebrain and throwing a basket of

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raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean river beneath,” according to Stephen King, who suggests that by doing this one can keep the metaphorical alligators at bay (Worland 14).

The argument as to whether or not by feeding these alligators will keep them content for a while or if they will just get busy making more alligators remains intact. A common attribute among torture porn movies is how they try to justify the amount of torture in them by having a moral value taught in the process. It can be argued that behind all the sex and torture conveyed in these movies there are positive messages. In the Saw series, Jigsaw only make those who he knows has gotten away with some kind of evil play his game. Also, the time of traps that Jigsaw sets up usually reflect in some manner the crime that the victim has committed.

The third installment of Saw has a scene where a man is faced with the hard question of saving the life of the woman who let his son’s killer go free. Due to the man’s hesitation while trying to decide whether he wants to help her or not, the woman ends up dying anyway. This particular predicament deals with man’s ability to forgive someone who has wronged them. In I Spit on Your Grave, the young female character; who is barbarically raped, tortured, and left for dead; returns to her torturers and kills each one of them in a fashion that is as ruthless as how they treated her.

It is because of these men’s evil acts that we find ourselves actually cheering for the young heroine, when in reality, if we were to hear on the news about her vendetta, people would probably be rather appalled and feel she was in the wrong, thinking she should have just gone to the police instead. What we

are not thinking about is all the pain and suffering that the woman must have had to endure at their hands. This movie deals with revenge and if and when it is acceptable.

Eli Roth's *Hostel*, Lars Von Trier's *The Antichrist*, and Steven Monroe's *I Spit on Your Grave* all seem to be the epitomes of torture porn. It is interesting though how Roth seems to be the only one who keeps the torture part separate from the porn part. In *Hostel*, the only point where the two slightly overlap are when the boys see a dominatrix arousing her client by whipping him. Trier and Monroe both display porn and torture together either by having actual torture occur during sexual intercourse or by having the sexual intercourse, itself, act as the torture.

Some similar aesthetics are shared within the subgenre as well. James Wan's *Saw* series are also considered torture porns, even though there is not really any porn seen in them. *Saw* and *Hostel* both start off with brighter colors but start to become more bleak as the films progress and the situation goes from bad to worse. This is different though in *The Antichrist*. Here, Trier, goes for a more artistic approach with using desaturated colors and slower frame speeds. This helps enforce the idea that torture porns should be considered art.

These films like to use close ups of the blood right as it first spurts out from the victim. In all these films, the directors are daring enough to hold the camera on the mutilation or sex act the entire time, whereas most movies cut away once the audience gets the idea. Torture porns are a gory, yet expressive, form of art. It provokes certain feelings within the audience and

brings to surface some the humanity's darkest fears. By putting before us an excruciating scenario that is sometimes hard to watch, it compels us to ask the hard questions that no one wants to talk about.

That is the objective of art. Like Rob Zombie told one of his actors who had been traumatized by playing the role of a psycho killer in *The Hills Have Eyes*, “ Art is not safe. ” However, those who are not a fan of this horror subgenre should not fret. With the decreasing box office sales of these movies in recent years, it is felt that the ‘ torture porn fad is on its way out. It is even reported that *Saw* movie director, James Wan, is tired of doing those sort of movies and wants his next movie to be a romantic comedy.

Work Cited “ One-third support ‘ some torture’ ”. BBC NEWS. 19 Oct. 2006. 4 May 2011. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6063386.stm> Worland, Rick. *The Horror Film: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing 2007. Edelstein, David. “ Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn ”. *New York Movies*. 28 Jan. 2006. 7 May 2011. <http://nymag.com/movies/features/15622/> Rogers, Thomas. “ The Meaning of Torture Porn ”. 7 June 2010. 1 May 2011. http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2010/06/07/philosophy_of_horror_movies