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### Torture Porn & Classical Aesthetics

[] In Charles Maturin's 1820 novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*, which is sometimes called the end of the English gothic, the author describes for us an extraordinary scene. While Maturin did not excessively indulge in the grotesque but saved most of his cruelty for the *psychological* torture of his characters, we know that he had a special flair for at least two kinds of violence: death by fire and bloodthirsty mobs. In the "Tale of the Spaniard," the persecuted noble Juan di Monçada tells John Melmoth of a spectacular death he witnessed in Madrid. Monçada watches as a parricide is literally torn to pieces before his eyes in a frenzy of destruction. []

It is a fact, Sir, that while witnessing this horrible execution, I felt all the effects vulgarly ascribed to fascination. I shuddered at the first movement—the dull and deep whisper among the crowd. I shrieked involuntarily when the first decisive movements began among them; but when at last the human shapeless carrion was dashed against the door, I echoed the wild shouts of the multitude with a kind of savage instinct... My existence was so purely mechanical, that, without the least consciousness of my own danger, (scarce less than that of the victim, had I been detected), I remained uttering shout for shout, and scream for scream—offering worlds in imagination to be able to remove from the window, [] yet feeling as if every shriek I uttered was as a nail that fastened me to it—dropping my eye-lids, and feeling as if a hand held them open, or cut them away—forcing me to gaze on all that passed below, like Regulus, with his lids cut off, compelled to gaze on the sun that withered up his eye-balls—till sense, and sight, and soul, failed me, and I fell grasping by the bars of the window, and mimicking, in my horrid trance, the shouts of the multitude, and the yell of the devoted. I actually for a moment believed myself the object of their cruelty. *The drama of terror has the irresistible power of converting its audience into its victims.*

I quote from Maturin at such length not merely for the richness of his iconography but for the sophistication of what I would call his *aesthetic* discourse. This carnage has a strangely hypnotic quality, clearly relished by both narrator and author. The character of Monçada experiences a voluptuous terror that he shares with the victim, forcing him to echo "shout for shout, and scream for scream," internalizing the horror of dismemberment even as he lacks even "the least consciousness of his own danger." How precisely is this sleight of hand accomplished? In Maturin's fantasy, a shiver of pleasure emerges via the interposition of a screen, a window, a mediating device that produces the sensation of a distance no matter how close the object of contemplation actually is. Maturin's hapless observer provides us with a preliminary genealogy that would extend from the classical sublime to the exhibition space of the cinema. Here, in the text of a gothic novel, a film is unfolding before our eyes, a film of gruesome and gritty body

horror that we might place under the generic heading of the contemporary “torture porn,” alternately known as “gorno.”

One might think that torture porn and classical aesthetics make strange bedfellows. But as I have suggested, the conjunction between these two discourses is as old as aesthetics itself. Seven years after the publication of *Melmoth*, Thomas de Quincey wrote an article with the astonishing title: “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts.” De Quincey describes an evening of tea with Coleridge, who is discoursing on the merits of Plotinus when a sudden cry of “Fire! Fire!” rings out. The two rush over to the incendiary scene and gaze in rapture at what “promised to be a conflagration of merit.” [] De Quincey concludes that “the tendency toward a critical or aesthetic valuation of fires and murders is universal,” particularly if one is barred from making any intervention in the progress of the atrocity. Once again, a screen has been erected between the event and the subject of perception. [] This screen, whether real or imagined, not only protects the viewer from fear or discomfort but isolates the event itself; that is, it presents the fire or murder without cause or history, and the aesthete does not trouble himself with the individual tragedies of those who perished but merely admires the aesthetic trace left behind in the form of maimed bodies. As for the criminal, he is the supreme artist, a Maturin who acts not on words but on the social text itself. []

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[] What exactly is torture porn? The phrase was coined David Edelstein in 2006 and was provoked by the release of *Hostel* (2005), though mention is also made of *Wolf Creek* (2005), *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005), *Saw* (2004-2010), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Edelstein writes: [] “Explicit scenes of torture and mutilation were once confined to the old 42nd Street, the Deuce, in gutbucket Italian cannibal pictures like *Make Them Die Slowly*, whereas now they have terrific production values and a place of honor in your local multiplex.” I would suggest that elements of the genre have even begun to creep into films by “respectable” directors like Almodóvar (*The Skin I Live In*, 2011), Von Trier (*Antichrist*, 2009) and Winterbottom (*The Killer Inside Me*, 2010).

Indeed, one of the films that Edelstein holds up for scorn is Gaspar Noe’s 2002 feature *Irréversible*, which has international art credibility (Noe teaches at the European Graduate School in Switzerland) and is presented as a “deeply moral” work. [] As many of you surely know, one distinguishing feature of *Irréversible* is a 9-minute rape sequence. “According to press accounts, the Cannes premiere of *Irréversible* provoked fainting and a walkout by an estimated 250 of the 2400 audience members.” I want to linger on *Irréversible* not for its aesthetic merits but because I believe it provides us with one of the most succinct thought-images of the cinema today.

After leaving a party, a Parisian woman enters a pedestrian underpass, where she encounters a man in the process of beating a prostitute. For a brief moment, she stops and watches in horror. This proves to be her undoing; for, as soon as the man catches sight of her, he abandons his work in order to punish the bystander. Holding a knife to her throat, he forces her down against the hard concrete. For the remainder of the scene, before an unflinching camera, a woman is being raped.

The composition of this juvenile provocation is more directly revealing than its content, for it is precisely through the director's *mise-en-scène* that the act of filming is equated with the act of rape. The underpass functions as a perfect metonym for the camera; its walls, ceiling and floor echo the rectilinear character of the frame, as does its clearly discernable vanishing point. Not only is the cinema equated with rape; it is also likened to a form of prostitution, a notion underscored by the woman's form-fitting clothing. "Your man dress you like that? Only a faggot would let you go out like that!" shouts the pimp—as if the violation of this woman was somehow deserved, or, as in the film's own temporal logic, inevitable—and thus "irreversible."

This rape is ours, and we are forced to endure it by means of the crudest cinematic technique of identification: the point-of-view shot, which dogs the woman's footsteps as she descends into the maelstrom. The various profanities uttered—"slut," "fucking high-class bitch," "stinking cunt," "little whore"—are addressed to the audience as much as to her. We are repeatedly solicited for our enjoyment. "This turn you on?" he asks, caressing the woman's cheek with a knife. "You like that?" Her answer, in the form of sobs, is unequivocal. That of the audience is seemingly more ambivalent, an ethical decision not aided by the rapist's repeated injunction: "Don't move! Don't move!" Locked in our seats, we are made explicitly aware of the fact that, indeed, we have "never been reamed like this before." Compare this with Michael Haneke's notorious quip from a 2007 interview: "I'm trying to rape the viewer into independence."

This "feminization" of the viewer through an act of cinematic rape is underscored by the fact that detainees at Abu Ghraib were forced to wear women's lingerie on their heads, to engage in acts of homosexual fellatio, and other such idiotic humiliations. One could even parody Virilio by saying that 'torture is cinema and cinema is torture' insofar as both are predicated on a violation of the subject. The pimp and the woman beneath him face the camera in a diagonal line that runs from one corner of the screen to its opposite. In his rewriting of film history, Noé has conjured up a truly primal scene: [] that of the Lumières. In place of a locomotive that, at the dawn of a new era, hurtled across the screen in an uncannily vivid rush, the modern director gives us a woman in the throes of agony who reaches out toward the viewer in a fruitless cry for help. Cinema is conceived as an unpardonable act of aggression. Cinema violates. Cinema is what hurts. The message is drummed into our heads with each new entry in the torture porn genre, with each new tale of unquenched sadism and bodily permutation. No amount of critical or governmental backlash will prevent these films from becoming more explicit and more cynical. They gross in more ways than one, and the modern audience seems to revel in its own discomfort. []

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The hallmark of a true torture porn is that bodies are cut up or mutilated in one way or another, and in this they are somewhat different from a film that merely depicts waterboarding or stress positions. There are three phases of torture porn, each of which builds upon the other. I will briefly describe them as the assault on the face, [] the assault on the body, [] and the assault on aesthetics itself. []

Now, there are few films classified as torture porn that do not feature some kind of explicit violence to the human face. I believe that this is due to the persistence of physiognomic science in our own time, however quaint it may seem. [] “Of all parts of the body,” wrote Darwin, “the face is most considered and most regarded, as is natural from its being the chief seat of expression and the source of the voice. It is also the chief seat of beauty and of ugliness, and throughout the world is the most ornamented.” [] Similarly, Lavater believed that the face presented a microcosm of the body, with the eyes and forehead epitomizing intellectual life, while the mouth and chin was reflective of animal life. It is only natural that hardened filmmakers would turn to the face as a privileged site of violence. [][][]

Next, of course, is the assault on the body proper. The hacked-off limb is the money shot of torture porn. Aside from the spectacular visual effect, the reason for this goes deeper: Torture of the body is intimately related to truth, and one generally tortures a victim to obtain information. [] The ancient Greek word for torture, as used by Aristotle and his contemporaries, is *basanos*, a term that originally meant “touchstone” in the sense “of putting something metallic to a touchstone in order to verify its content.” The term is also philologically related to the task of the historian, as found in Thucydides: “*Basanos*, torture, evidently connoted a kind of necessary critical inquiry.”

But torture can be removed from its narrow legal circumscription as an investigative technique. There is another truth revealed by torture: the truth of the body. That is, there is something at stake in the violence committed against the body, and in many of the films under discussion here, this violence is inseparable from nationalism. The scenario of *Hostel* is well known: what if an entire nation conspired to kidnap tourists and offer them to clients willing to pay good money for the privilege of torturing another human being? A Slovakian cartel charges \$10,000 for a European victim, while Russians provide a more affordable option at \$5,000 and Americans in a post-9/11 climate clock in at a stunning \$25,000. The message is clear: no mere body is being destroyed but the very values embedded within it. Here I borrow from Elaine Scarry’s analysis of the mechanisms of torture and war. The body is not a pre-linguistic entity but contains its own discourse, a discourse it begins to learn as soon as it is born and which is [] “more permanently there, less easily shed, than those disembodied forms of patriotism that exist in verbal habits or in thoughts about one’s national identity.” Culture dwells in the body and must be eliminated if this war of worldviews is to be concluded.

[] The third and final stage of torture porn is the assault on aesthetics itself. This is but a short leap from the previous stage, because the human body, most often the female body, has often been held up as the very epitome of the aesthetic. [] Schiller’s ludic philosophy found its ultimate expression in the author’s encounter with the Juno Ludovisi, a large marble head of Mark Antony’s daughter in the guise of a Roman goddess. The body is a metonymic placeholder for the aesthetic. Torture porn, then, would appear to reject one of the fundamental tenets of Western humanism: that the contemplation of beauty is an ennobling activity. []

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But here I want to make a sudden shift from the iconographic to the structural perspective. One cannot say that torture porn is simply *anti*-aesthetic. The most infamous examples of the genre

are aesthetic through and through; some are even quite beautiful. *A Serbian Film*, writes A. O. Scott, “is filmed, not without skill, in slick and lurid widescreen composition.” *Wolf Creek* is filled with gorgeous vistas of the Australian outback, uncannily vivid sunsets, starry skies and spider webs flecked with dew. *The Human Centipede* is shot like many a successful art house film, its camera moving at a glacial pace in clean, intersecting, modernist lines, while various locations are carefully color-coordinated in steely blue or warm orange tones. What remains for us to consider here is precisely the way in which *the aesthetic is always already a contradictory object that turns back upon itself in a gesture of self-flagellation*. It is common in critical parlance to speak of any overworked aesthetic object as “tortured.”

Let us turn for a moment to Kant, the progenitor of the modern aesthetic tradition.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant speaks of the beautiful as marked by an absence of purpose—or, more famously, “purposiveness without purpose” or “finality without end” (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*). [ ] At this moment in the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful, we are informed that “the beauty of a human being (and in this species that of a man, a woman, or a child), the beauty of a horse, or a building... presuppose a concept of the end that determines what the thing should be, hence a concept of its perfection, and is thus merely adherent [as opposed to free] beauty.” For the experience to be truly *aesthetic*, however, vision must *break the body apart* without regard for metaphysical concepts like *ends* or *perfection*. When the human figure is perceived as beautiful or sublime, [ ] “we do not look to concepts of the ends *for which* all its members exist for determining grounds of our judgment and must not let agreement with them *influence* our aesthetic judgment (which in that case would no longer be pure).”

In his influential re-reading of the third critique, De Man posited a notion of Kant’s materialism, or the brute fact of textuality as it emerges in his work. The Kantian moment of judgment leads us to a radical dismemberment of the body in cognition, a willed ignorance of its instrumental values. In the aesthetic moment, says De Man, [ ] we must “disarticulate, mutilate the body... We must consider our limbs the way the primitive man considered the house, entirely severed from any purpose or use.” One imagines the figure of a body falling apart, its limbs floating dreamily in the weightless atmosphere of pure contemplation. Aesthetics is already akin to an imagined vivisection.

If Kant wasn’t quite the butcher of Königsberg, his spirit has been reborn on the screen in the shape of chainsaw-wielding Germans. But the real figure of violence is not the actor but the cameraman. The failed doctor of *Hostel* who pays \$25,000 to dissect an American tourist might remind us of Benjamin’s famous essay, in which he writes:

The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient’s body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, in contrast to the magician - who is still hidden in the medical practitioner - the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from

facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him... Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman.

This cinema-surgeon heroically emerges from the muck of the visible world's entrails with "multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law." But this new law, the law of montage so inimical to Bazin's sensibility, is first predicated on a Kantian vision of the body in pieces. It is no accident that professional torturers are put through a grueling cycle of watching beatings and being beaten themselves before taking on the gravity of the task; they must become inured against violence through the habituation of the scopic. Torture and cinema and cinema is torture—at least according to the terms dictated by aesthetic disinterest, for the sadist who finds voluptuous pleasure in the mutilation of bodies is a direct descendent of De Quincey's criminal artist. These contemporary films are not a "reaction" to the re-emergence of torture in mainstream discourse or indices of their historical moment of genesis; they belong to a similar conception of aesthetics that has indelibly marked us since the late eighteenth century. [] If anxieties about Abu Ghraib find their outlet in torture porn, it is only because, as Freud might say, an unconscious excitation will tend to make use of the paths already available for discharge... "like new wine in old bottles."

(The anxieties laid bare by torture porn are not only limited to the sphere of politics and human rights. They are also anxieties about representation and technology. By way of conclusion, I can do no more than hint at that anxiety here.

In an age of increasing digital hegemony, the security of the body on film has been lost. Whereas the actor of traditional cinema could at least be certain of what surroundings his performance would unfold in, the digital revolution has peeled him away like a sticker to be planted against a potentially infinite number of landscapes. Human bodies are no longer necessary for the creation of narrative cinema at all. Their numerical likeness will do. And yet contemporary cinema has developed what Hoberman calls a "new realness" focused on the experience of bodies precisely when their filmic material has become less stable than ever before. One sees this logic at work today even before the credits roll. [] In 2009, AMC Theaters introduced a new "feature presentation" segment prior to the films being screened at their various locations. Three teenagers walk into a local multiplex and take their seats, carrying enormous bags of popcorn and comically large sodas—a world of fullness and plenty. The camera zooms in as vines begin to sprout behind their chairs. The ceiling of the theater opens up like the vault of heaven, the vines take root beneath the floor, everywhere we see lush foliage blooming, and whoosh!—the three friends are catapulted into the sky on a horticultural dais as they face a screen that has become nothing but an expansive vista. The radical separation of film and audience is effaced; we are plunged headlong into a uniform space completely co-determinate with our own. As the fireflies play about our heads and the warm summer dew gathers at our feet, we sigh with contentment and whisper to ourselves: "Ah, yes, this is life." Or so AMC Theaters would have us believe. Torture porn is yet another symptom of this discourse that would smooth over the transition from film to digital, much as human bodily motion once helped suture together the discontinuities inherent in the flickering technology itself. What I am ultimately saying is that the lady doth protest too much. *This excessive rhetoric of violence and rape is a way to ward off the threat of total disembodiment.* The new cinema of extremes desperately assures us that our bodies are still here—even if only in utter agony.)