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Torture Goes Pop! : Screening the Praxis of Torture in Films & on TV

Madelaine HRON

In 1977, Michel Foucault proclaimed “the disappearance of torture.” His study *Discipline & Punish* opens with a gruesome public torture and execution scene which is then contrasted with a sanitized schedule of prisoners’ daily duties. Foucault wished to highlight the changes that occurred in the 18th century towards the humanization and institutionalization of punishment with the birth of the modern prison. By page seven, Foucault dismisses torture and remarks on its “disappearance,” just as he notes “the disappearance of punishment as spectacle” or that of “the body as a major target of penal repression.” Foucault concludes that “[t]oday we are rather inclined to ignore [torture]; perhaps, in its time, it gave rise to much inflated rhetoric.”

Thirty years later, Foucault’s generalizations seem highly ironic. In April 2004, photographs from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq – of naked Iraqi prisoners in demeaning sexual positions, victims garbed in hoods and wires, and triumphant American soldiers posing near corpses – were made public on TV, circulated in newspapers and Websites worldwide, and even exhibited in museums. Contrary to Foucault’s claims, torture had manifestly not disappeared from penal discourse; it had simply become an art (usually) practiced in secret. Even in the barbaric past, when torture was official and routinely practiced, torture manuals insisted on the secrecy of torture procedures. In our enlightened present age, when torture has been made illegal in most countries, torturers are trained to torture prisoners without leaving any proof of their crimes. The Abu Ghraib images, therefore, offered overwhelming, irrefutable, visible evidence of secret practices of torture that human rights scholars and activists had been condemning for decades – in Latin America, in Israel, or as taught at the School of the Americas, in Fort Benning

Georgia. The Abu Ghraib evidence prompted, in Foucault's terms, much "inflated rhetoric" about torture (e.g. Rumsfeld). Most importantly, Abu Ghraib revived public debate about torture, be it about the definition of torture— as "severe pain and suffering" in the *United Nations Convention Against Torture* (UNCAT); as "stress positions" adopted by the US or as pain equivalent to "organ failure or dismemberment" according to U.S. Assistant Attorney General John Yoo – or about the complex problems impeding the prosecution of torture-practicing states (especially the fact that while the US has ratified the UNCAT, it also "retains" the right to "interpret the convention" in its own way).

Just as the Abu Ghraib photographs expose existing political praxes of torture, they also reveal, perhaps more subtly, the conjunction between torture and popular culture. Sexual in nature, the Abu Ghraib photos remind us more of amateur internet pornography than they do of crimes, matters of state, or interrogational proceedings. When we consider why these photo-trophies were circulated, we cannot but think of "happy-slapping," the practice of recording assaults by camera-phone, so that they can later be watched and disseminated for entertainment. Finally, we cannot help but compare these images to the torture we may see in films and on TV. Contrary to Foucault's claims, the public spectacle of torture has not disappeared: it has simply moved from the town square to our living room.

In this paper, I propose to sketch the evolution of torture in current films and TV shows, from Foucault's generation to our own, focusing in particular on the radical shift that occurred in the representation of torture after 9/11, before and after the publication of Abu Ghraib images. However, my analysis is not solely concerned with torture as a thematic, but also as praxis. Just as film is a praxis, an aggregate of methodologies and

tendencies supported by explanatory theories, so too is torture. It is a praxis that has developed historically from the ancient Greeks to the present time. As I will show, historical formulations, literary representations, and socio-cultural assumptions continue to structure cinematic representations of torture. In so doing, my analysis seeks to point out some of the generic conventions that shape our understanding of torture, while also considering possible effects that these popular representations of torture may have on current praxes of political torture.

In 1919, Franz Kafka penned a short story entitled “In the Penal Colony,” which, set in a fictional country, describes the breakdown of an elaborate torture machine, The Harrow. Instead of inscribing the prisoner’s crime on his flesh, The Harrow destroys the official responsible for it, an official who continues to justify the machine’s use, despite its obsolescence and its failure to draw crowds to the public torture proceedings. The standard interpretation of this story resembles Foucault’s reading: it is an allegory of the failure of colonial means of discipline and punishment. In other words, torture, with its elaborate apparatus and spectacular display, has been rendered obsolete, or at least unnecessary, given the internalization of disciplinary apparatus via advanced technologies of surveillance as posited by Foucault.

Before 9/11, films featuring torture reflect Kafka’s story in interesting ways. First, it is worth noting that, until the 1990s, the few films that feature a torture scene very often draw their inspiration from fiction; they are adaptations of famous literary works such as Poe’s *Pit and the Pendulum* (1964), Orwell’s *1984* (1984), Golding’s *Marathon Man* (1976), Burgess’ *Clockwork Orange* (1971), Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden*

(1994), or Fleming's Bond Series. Just as Kafka's story is set in a fictional locale, these films similarly intimate that torture derives largely from fiction.

More saliently, when viewing the torture scenes in these adaptations, the viewer cannot help noticing the unremitting gaze on the instrument of torture: the Pendulum in Roger Corman's *The Pit & the Pendulum*; the music/movie contraption in Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange*; the dentist's drill in Schlesinger's *Marathon Man*; or the rat cage in Radford's *1984*. Kafka's story also focused on the intricate workings of the Harrow, and only referred to the Condemned Man's pleading in passing. Similarly, on screen, the camera follows the torture instrument's every movement. Suspense is created by close-ups of the machinery, often in low angles which magnify its menace or by amplification of the bizarre sounds of the instruments interspersed with brief, segmented shots of the terrorized faces of the victims or their screams. Torture is thus reduced to its referential medium – the torture instrument – which often relegates torture to the barbaric past, especially that of the Inquisition. Nowhere is this more evident than in Corman's version of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, which takes place in a dungeon, filled with various medieval torture instruments, or in *The World is Not Enough* (1999), where Bond (Pierce Brosnan) is strapped to an antiquated tourniquet-chair contraption. In neither of these films do we gain perspective on the effects of torture upon its victims. In the former film, the victim is strapped and gagged on a sacrificial table below the Pendulum, and utters neither a scream nor even a moan. Only his bulging eyes express his fear. In the latter film, though Bond grimaces and squirms as his neck is screwed tighter, he still maintains his cool and sense of humor; in fact, during his torture, he is able to interrogate his torturer Elektra and get her to confess her crimes while quipping that she's a "good screw."

In these torture scenes, therefore, viewers acquire an objectified view of torture and gain little insight into the trauma of torture or its traumatic *sequelae*. While theorists such as Elaine Scarry have referred to the impossibility of formulating language during the physical ordeal of torture, or to the displacement of torture's inexpressible pain and terror onto the more easily describable torture weapon, Scarry also poignantly reveals the traumatic unmaking of the victims' world in torture, and its painful remaking in recovery. We gain little insight into such psychological processes in these films. Emotions during torture are limited to pain and fear, brilliantly exemplified by Dustin Hoffman in his performance in *Marathon Man*. By contrast, the literary versions of these films often focus precisely upon the psychological torment that the victims endure under torture. For instance, Poe's short story, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, is a twenty-page description of the psychological torment of a victim who has yet to be physically violated. Similarly, Orwell's *1984* delves into Winston's psyche much more persuasively than Radway's film, which simply contrasts the rat scene with a field until Winston finally breaks, screaming: "Do it to Julia!"

Historically, torture did not merely consist of torture instruments, nor was it solely limited to the Inquisition. From the 13th to the 18th century, torture was an established part of juridical proceedings in the Latin Church and in secular European states. Torture was above all an interrogational procedure, an "epistemology of discovery" in Elizabeth Hansen's terms, which aimed to arrive, ultimately, at the truth. In its praxis, this "interrogation procedure" functioned according to the most basic of modern dialogical principles: the question and the answer. The *telos* of torture was, quite simply, the Truth. It was "the inquisition of truth by torment," as 13th century jurist Azo defines it, echoing

officials before and after his time. In the Catholic Church, such truth was equated with conversion or transformation, wherein heretics would confess the one true faith.

With their focus on the *techne* of torture, pre-9/11 films that feature torture generally obviate or critique the praxis of torture – interrogation – or its *telos* – truth, transformation, or conversion. Interrogation sequences are usually very short; in some cases, they are missing completely. One notable exception is *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s "Chain of Command," where Picard is subjected to a protracted interrogation in this two hour special episode. Most often, like Picard, the hero remains unscathed and unchanged by the torture he experiences (the exception being Winston in *1984*). Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* perhaps best exemplifies the failure of torture to achieve its remedial, transformative aims: protagonist Alex, who committed terrible sadistic and violent crimes, is subjected to the "Ludovico technique," wherein he is exposed to ultra-violence in order to "cure" him; as his doctors explain, "Violence is a very horrible thing. Your body is learning it." In the end, however, Kubrick's film makes it patently clear that despite first appearances Alex's curative conversion was unsuccessful (which contrasts with Burgess' interpretation, where his transformation remains ambiguous).

Throughout the 1990s, torture scenes in films begin to multiply, in such thriller/action films as *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Heaven and Earth* (1993), *Reservoir Dogs* (1995), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Braveheart* (1995) *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *Three Kings* (1999) and such horror/sadism films as *Whispers in The Dark* (1992), *The Dentist* (1996), *8MM* (1999) or *The Cell* (2000). Torture is no longer associated with fiction; rather, it is set in real-life contexts and thus becomes more

realistic and graphic. Yet in so doing, the focus on the suffering and trauma of the torture victim is, paradoxically, minimized even further.

By 2000, torture has become a cliché, if not a commodity, in popular culture. Two films circulating at the time of Abu Ghraib, *Die Another Day* (2002) and *Hostel* (2004), perhaps best illustrate these tendencies. In *Die Another Day*, torture is completely banalized – as part of the credits. As viewers are settling into their seats with their popcorn, James Bond (Pierce Brosnan) is being tortured by the North Koreans. As viewers munch on their popcorn, they also consume virtual images of naked, fiery female body parts interspersed with brief glimpses of a chained 007 being drowned, beaten, or exposed to scorpions. All the while, Madonna croons “I guess I’ll die another day” or “Analyze this.” If we analyze this, we know that Bond will die another day; in other words, we presume that, as an action hero, he will be tortured and will survive unscathed. Torture has become a generic trope, if not a stereotype, of the action film genre.

In horror films, torture loses its political connotations to become pure fear and spectacle. Eli Roth’s horror film *Hostel*, however, brings the “torture chic” genre to another level. It revolves around an East European torture center, where “customers” pay to torture people to death, and features cumulative scenes of graphic, blood-squirting body mutilation with chainsaws, drills or scissors. Suspense is created by the amplified sound of clicking and scraping instruments which prove much more terrifying than the subsequent cut-off sounds of the torture victims; release is gained in maiming and bloodshed that “gets easier every time.” *Hostel* thus clearly comments on the commodification of torture in popular culture; as one customer in the film notes, “it gives you an experience you’ll never forget.”

Aside from their increasing gore, and the trivialization and sexualization of torture, films about torture relate to Abu Ghraib in an even more subtle, yet pernicious, way: most of these films posit torture in terms of socio-cultural, gendered, or ethno-national differentials. Here again, a historical perspective on torture proves most informative. Already in the Roman Empire, where it was legal, torture operated according to strict differentials: only slaves, women, and foreigners could be tortured. In fact, in the case of slaves and foreigners, only testimony obtained under torture was considered valid in court. In films about torture, we are similarly not surprised that it is the North Koreans who torture Bond, or that there is a torture hostel in Slovakia. It is as generic as the Nazi torturer in *Marathon Man*, the Cardassian one in “Chain of Command,” or the Azerbaijani Elektra in *World is not Enough*. Similarly, after 9/11, the main cultural differential manifestly became that of Muslim and Westerner, increasingly, therefore, represented in torture scenes in films and on TV.

After Abu Ghraib, films featuring torture multiplied even more, not only in action films (e.g. *Syriana*, *Casino Royale*; *Bourne Supremacy*; *Rendition*) horror flix (e.g. *Hard Candy*; *Saw II-IV*; or *Hostel I-II*), but also in further adaptations (*V for Vendetta* *Goya's Ghosts*), as well as in documentaries, (*The Road to Guantanamo*, *The Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*). More saliently, torture scenes on prime-time television exploded exponentially. According to a review by Parental Television Council, from 1995-2001 there were 110 scenes of torture in prime-time broadcasting; from 2002-2005 this number skyrocketed to 624. They project that estimates in 2005-2007 will approach 500.

Since Abu Ghraib, the representation of torture has become even more realistic and graphic. Torture no longer focuses on obsolete instruments of torture, but rather on

more modern, operative means of “interrogation” and the effects they bear on subjects under torture. Torture thus takes place in politicized real-life contexts, be it in Iran in *Syriana* (2005), Saudi Arabia in *The Kingdom* (2007), or Egypt in *Rendition* (2007), and is increasingly associated with terrorism, military operations, and law enforcement. What is most notable about current TV series is that they often simulate actual law enforcement agencies and counter-terrorist organizations: the *CSI* crime lab; the Special Victims Unit in *Law & Order SVU*; the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit in *Criminal Minds* or Missing Persons’ Unit in *Without a Trace*; the fictional Counter Terrorist Unit in *24*; the CIA in *The Agency* or combined operations of the FBI, NSC, and MI-5 in *The Grid*. Representing various forces of “law and order,” these shows reflexively comment on current torture practices— sometimes critically, at other times ambiguously, and in certain instances, even approvingly.

Documentaries such as *The Road to Guantanamo*, *The Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* or CBC’s *A Few Bad Apples* (2005) manifestly seek to expose current US practices of torture – such as “stress positions,” “sensory deprivation,” “solitary confinement” or “extraordinary rendition” – in such locales as Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Baghram or in “black site” torture camps in Europe. Similarly, TV shows such as *Boston Legal*’s “Guantanamo by the Bay” or *Criminal Minds*’ “Lessons Learned” episodes condemn the inhuman treatment that both the innocent and guilty suffer in Guantanamo. In “Lessons Learned” for instance, instead of breaking down the Arab terrorist with degradation or abuse, the team outwits him by using both the Muslim cultural values, and a “ticking time bomb” scenario. Though a terrorist plot is imminent, hero Gideon treats the suspected terrorist with the utmost respect, asking him to expatiate on his Muslim beliefs, while

allowing him to pray regularly. At the same time, he shortens his prayer hours – so the terrorist is foiled into confessing the plot before it occurs.

Like *Criminal Minds*, series such as *CSI*, *The Closer*, *The Shield* or *Numbers* regularly stress the need to use intelligence instead of force to outwit criminals. *The Shield*'s two-hour special, "Back to On/Chasing Ghosts," for instance, reveals the problems of using torture: it can lead to forced confessions, and thus erroneous intelligence or the prosecution of innocent people. Likewise, *Without a Trace*'s "Res Ipsa" episode pits the FBI against the CSI, to criticize the CIA's torture procedures – their brutality, illegality, and inability to elicit the truth – while also revealing the trauma of both torture victims and their torturers.

Yet even certain well-meaning representations of torture often prove ambiguous. For instance, though *Criminal Minds* "Lessons Learned" suggests more humane methods of interrogation, ultimately Gideon's show of cultural respect is only a performative ploy; the ultra-religious Muslim man is still guilty and though he has been imprisoned for years in Guantanamo, he still possesses vital, time-sensitive, intelligence information. Similarly, *Lost*'s episode "Enter 77" deliberates the effects of torture on its victims and on torturers, in a powerful narrative of reconciliation and realization centering around the tormented psyche of character Sayid. However, the value of this positive message is undercut by other episodes of *Lost*, such as "Solitary," where Sayid and Jack successfully torture Sawyer to gain information.

The traumatic effects of torture on victims of torture and torturers are also brilliantly explored in the film *Bourne Supremacy* (2007). Although the film focuses on the archetypal action hero Bourne (Matt Damon), the viewer witnesses how Bourne is haunted and debilitated by painful, fragmented flashbacks of torture he experienced at the

hands of his own agency, the CIA. Flashbacks periodically interrupt the diegesis, as viewers witness as Bourne is crippled by his trauma in the midst of fighting or observe his memories of lovemaking as they are destroyed by images of “waterboarding” or his lover being drowned. Everything revolves around the originary moment of trauma – “at the beginning” –the film’s central leitmotif. *Bourne Identity* is thus clearly critical of US practices of torture and intelligence in the “War on Terror,” and poignantly reflects the traumatic *sequelae* of torture. Yet paradoxically, the film also intimates that, were he not tortured, Bourne would not be the excellent spy, and efficient torturer, that he himself is.

Indeed, one of the most subtle, yet pernicious, changes in the representation of torture post-9/11 is its conflation with the antiquated notion of torture as transformation and conversion. Heroes such as Bourne, Bond, Jack Bauer from *24*, as well as heroines like Syndey from *Alias*, Bonasera from *CSI: NY* or Benson from *Law & Order: SVU*, are all tougher and smarter because of the torture, captivity, and abuse they have endured. In some ways, then, torture has become a rite of passage to heroism. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sci-fi/fantasy film *V for Vendetta*, where heroine Evey (Natalie Portman) is subjected to a “mock torture” by the mysterious revolutionary hero, V (Hugo Weaving). To explain: viewers observe Evey captured, imprisoned, shaved, and clad in a red smock reminiscent of a Guantanamo orange jumper, and then subjected to extreme cold, again reminiscent of US practices of “sensory deprivation” – all in order that she confess in interrogation. When she refuses, viewers learn that the whole torture ordeal was in fact, staged by V, in order to turn Evey into an unswerving, resistant fighter. Indeed, the torture scene intimates rebirth: in her cell, Evey is portrayed as an egg, in the foetal position; after her torture, in a rain sequence, we witness as she rises up from ashes

and morphs into a revolutionary fighter. As V explains, in the torture cell Evey found the “truth” – “something true about yourself” and was thus able “to commit to it.”

Finally and most problematically, certain post-9/11 representations promote the use of torture. Before 9/11, torture was solely deployed by villains. Since Abu Ghraib, however, the most obvious and perturbing change in the representation of torture is the fact that torture has become the accepted praxis of on-screen heroes. In the futuristic spy series *Alias*, for instance, the “good spies” often torture their enemies, even suspect family members, with brute force or drug injections. The finale of season four for example, concludes with heroine Sydney (Jennifer Garner) battling it out with her sister on the roof, while her father and mother torture and ultimately kill her aunt, her mother’s sister, in the compound below. In season five, episode two, a pregnant Sydney (reminiscent of Abu Ghraib torturer Lyndie England, who was four months pregnant at the time photos were taken of her engaged in torturing Iraqi prisoners), boasts that she is extra “hormonal” and beats up a suspect in interrogation, finally sending him crashing through a window six stories high. In *Alias*, then, torture is heroic, intimate and familial, and nonchalantly breaks taboos of kinship, gender, or maternity. Most importantly, torture always works; it leads to “truth,” and subsequently, to power and status for the heroine.

Clearly, the popular series *24* is most associated with torture as truth and heroism. In its first four seasons, *24* featured 67 scenes of torture, most of them performed by the counter-terror spy hero, Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland). Like Bourne or Sydney from *Alias*, Jack is a torture survivor; his own excruciating torture at the hands of the Chinese has rendered him both shrewd and merciless. Show after show, we observe Jack torture a suspect whom the audience believes may possibly be innocent; however, Jack’s expert

“interrogation” always breaks the victim to confess the truth. In episode 606-7, for instance, we observe Jack suffocate his own brother with a plastic bag, then drug him and make him confess to their own father’s devious schemes. In *24*, torture is blatantly justified by the “ticking bomb scenario” – in order to avert an imminent catastrophe, intelligence information must be gained as soon as possible, and at any cost. While this “emergency crisis” trope is familiar to many shows, in *24*, it is taken to extreme, if not preposterous, levels: a whole season follows one day in Jack’s life as he battles to save the world from deadly viruses, nuclear disasters, and of course, Islamic terrorism.

24’s glorification and legitimization of torture has led to serious concerns within the military itself. In February 2007, Brigadier General Finnegan visited the set of *24* to urge producers to cut torture scenes from the show, as they were having damaging effect on young troops: “I’d like them to stop.[...] The kids see it and say, 'If torture is wrong, what about *24*'? The disturbing thing is that [in *24*, torture] is always the patriotic thing to do.” Finnegan’s intervention may be too late, however. The Web is laden with entries extolling Jack’s torture exploits; *YouTube* features humorous spoofs of Jack’s torture; and the PS-2 video-game *24* requires an “interrogation session” at every level. More problematically, Tony Lagouranis, a former interrogator at Abu Ghraib, has revealed that he and his fellow interrogators took inspiration for their torture, namely mock executions, from *24*. More perturbing still, John Yoo, former US Attorney General responsible for the change in torture policies under the Bush administration, cites *24* in order to legitimate his new political praxes of torture in his book *War by Other Means*. Even Bill Clinton has recently publicly stated that “Torture like on *24* is OK.”

After 9/11, therefore, torture has become justified, glorified, and most importantly, further routinized and entrenched in popular culture. Each and every on-

screen reproduction of torture, be it one of contestation or legitimization, risks drawing viewers further and further away from the “truth” – that torture is a grievous human rights violation – and instead lead them to greater desensitization and compassion fatigue. Given the fictions circulating about torture on screen – as a simulation of law enforcement, as heroic transformation, or as an effective, if not necessary, means of interrogation – it may be difficult for some people to separate fiction from fact. In the political forum, human rights abuses are already granted relatively little attention. To cite *Boston Legal’s* “Guantanamo at the Bay” glib assessment, “This is America. Human rights are so yesterday.” In the end, given the proliferation and diversity of torture on screen, we cannot help but question whether, in the next thirty years, or even in our lifetime, we will ever witness the “disappearance” of torture as a spectacle or, more importantly, as a political praxis.