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Reviews

Screening Torture: Media representations of State Terror and Political Domination edited by Michael Flynn and Fabiola F. Salek, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 328 pp., $89.50,
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Screening Torture: Media representations of State Terror and Political Domination examines the representation of torture in the post-September 11 era. It argues that since 9/11, the Bush administration's authorization of the use of torture and the exposure of these 'alternative interrogation' techniques at Abu Ghraib, there has been a shift towards more graphic depictions of torture on screen. As a consequence, contemporary audiences are more inclined to consider torture an acceptable weapon of the state for procuring information and are more likely to believe that accurate information can be gathered by using interrogation techniques that involve torture.

The book contributors include film scholars, sociologists, political scientists, historians, American studies scholars, psychologists, a human rights project director and the director of an international non-profit arts organization. Some contributions come from those with direct involvement in state trials and legal hearings relating to torture. The diversity of the professional backgrounds of the authors enables the volume to cover a broad spectrum of issues and perspectives in the analysis of torture in a variety of national and political contexts and to examine the wider international implications and consequences of this issue.

The volume is divided into four themed sections, I – 'Torture and the Implications of Masculinity' II – 'Torture and the Sadomasochistic Impulse'; III – 'Confronting the Legacies of Torture and State Terror'; IV – 'Torture and the Shortcomings of Film'. My review identifies three major themes which emerge from the volume: the representation of torturers and film, photographs and testimonies from Abu Ghraib; victimhood and 'cleansing violence', that is violence/suffering for redemptive purposes; the ambivalent and punitive gaze of the camera, film maker and audience.

In Chapter 1, David Danzig examines the relationship between the US TV show *24* and the use of torture by the American army, a common source of reference for a number of the analyses in the volume for fueling public misapprehension of torture and advocating its efficacy as a method in achieving accurate information fast. Danzig cites sources suggesting that on-screen depictions of torture influenced and 'inspired' techniques used by US soldiers. Danzig juxtaposes claims by US military educators that *24* is one of the biggest problems in their classrooms with statements from the creators of *24*, who recognize that the ticking time bomb situation premise of the show that everything can and must be achieved in 24 hours is 'absurd'. In Chapter 10, Darius Rejali refers to evidence cited in his *Torture and Democracy* (2007), exposing two common misapprehensions reinforced by media representations: 1) that torture works, and 2) that there is a 'universal distributor' of torture. However, his critique of film and media's 'convenient' representations of torture, 'imagining torture in ways that leave their lives unchanged and their politics untouched', does not correspond to his own advice to actors to portray electrotorture by sticking to what audiences imagine it to be (Rejali, 222; 234). In addressing the question of the US torture which took place at Abu Ghraib, Marni Lazreg (Chapter 12) and Rejali both analyze films about Abu Ghraib contrasting these with *The Battle of Algiers* (1965). This film was screened to an audience of military officers and civilians at the Pentagon in 2003 and allegedly has been a source of reference for US counter-insurgency techniques in other conflicts. While Rejali argues that the film presents torture as an effective interrogation method, Lazreg contends that ultimately the film conveys the message that torture does not work as the French lost the war in Algeria. Both analyses gloss over the critical impact of the film on French audiences, which, although it won the Lion d'Or prize at Venice, was not screened in French cinemas because of threats made to film theatres from repatriated French Algerians and former soldiers about its unflattering portrayal of the French army Apart from one screening in 1970 and several screenings of the film in 1971 at Studio Saint Sévérin, which resulted in the cinema having all its windows smashed at each showing, the film did not appear in the cinema in France until 2004.[1] For Lazreg *The Battle of Algiers*, *Standard Operating Procedure* and *Taxi to the Dark Side* share an ambivalence concerning the depiction of torture's effectiveness and failing to show its consequences for victims. Lazreg proposes that documentaries provide the most suitable format for interrogating state torture and investigating accountability. Stjepan G. Mestrovic (Chapter 12) acted as an expert witness for the defense in the court case of three Abu Ghraib soliders. Writing from this perspective, Mestrovic takes up the question of the reliability of documentaries in his examination of *Standard Operating Procedure* and *The Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*. Mestrovic argues that both documentaries fail to include the findings of the Levin-McCain Report about abuse at Abu Ghraib and do not present a case for the defense of the soldiers. For Mestrovic, the structural devices employed by these films mirror techniques of interrogation and torture used by the soldiers. He claims the films further compound the failure of human relatedness and the systemic sadism identifiable in the chain of command issuing from the White House. However, his critique of the films' directors as 'captains of the culture industry', who commodify news stories for profit and power is less convincing. Faisal

[1] http://www.univ-paris13.fr/benjaminstora/limage/199-la-qbataille-dalgerq-histoire-des-qcensuresq-par-benjamin-stora (Accessed 06.01.13).

Devji (Chapter 11) argues convincingly that the exposure of torture, as documented in the photos of Abu Ghraib, undermines the rationality of a state or institution that commands the torture. Insistence on utilitarian rather than moral arguments in political debates about the use of torture reflects the way that on-screen, ticking-time bomb scenarios deflect audience attention from the body of the 'terrorist' to the threat posed to citizens. Torture is rationalized by invoking the contradiction between duty and morality. In *Black Friday* (2007), Devji argues that the protagonist's assumption of responsibility for the forbidden act of torture gives him freedom and moral agency. Similarly, in the language of global Islamic militancy, the backdrop to torture in Guantànamo and Abu Ghraib, the act of martyrdom becomes fully responsible for itself as it occurs in the absence of a common moral understanding. In Chapter 7, Carolyn Strange reads the state terror and secret torture in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) against the historical background of the development of physical and psychological torture techniques in 1960s America. In light of the film's re-release in 1999, she argues persuasively that the film presents a more compelling ethical engagement with the use of state torture against 'criminals'/ 'terrorists' who threaten society or the state than Abu Ghraib films such as *The Road to Guantànamo* (2006), *Rendition* (2007), *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007), which depict all victims as innocents. The empathetic portrayal of perpetrators in Israeli 'confessional cinema' is the subject of Livia Alexander's analysis (Chapter 9). Guilt, regret and accountability remain unaddressed for the most part in these films, which portray filmmakers and their subjects as tragic victims of the Arab-Israeli conflict. For Alexander this genre seeks to provide a healing and restorative image of Israeli society and to maintain a democratic image of the state internationally. Lack of engagement with the direct victim of torture culminates in a cinema that expresses 'the desire to confess in order to forget' (Alexander, 212). *Z32* (2008) is an exception to the trend, offering a more sincere engagement with Israeli military violence, guilt and responsibility. However, it also absolves its soldier-protagonist from responsibility by blaming society and fails to engage with Palestinian agency.

Turning from the theme of perpetrators of torture to its victims and the notion of cleansing violence, in Chapter 2, Lee Quinby examines the portrayal of male victims of torture in *Braveheart* (1995), *The Passion of Christ* (2004), and *Apocalyto* (2006). Incorporating Gibson's commentary on the use of torture and violence Quinby links the suffering and sacrifice endured by the victim-heroes of Gibson films to Gibson's statement: 'pain is the precursor to change, which is great. That's the good news.' (Quinby, 40). Gibson's heroes suffer in order to produce societal change and gain purity through doing so. Quinby suggests that while Gibson's direction is insightful in identifying contemporary cultural preoccupations such as fear, the search for meaning and a desire to understand past cultures, the overuse of violence and torture undermines Gibson's moral message, aligning his films either with the horror genre's lack of morality or with sado-masochistic pornography in which the gender roles are reversed. In Chapter 2, Flynn and Salek argue that torture is linked to confession, sacrifice and catharsis in *Unthinkable* (2010), *Man on Fire* (2004) and *Taken* (2008), revealing a post-September 11 return to the spectacle of torture of the Middle Ages. Audiences' lack of compassion for the tortured supports the notion that the violence inflicted by the torturer is carried out in the name of defending socio-cultural values from the threat posed to these by the

criminal-victim. As defenders of political or religious values, terrorists opposing imperialistic or oppressive practices of other nations are less ‘satisfying torture victims’ than organized crime members, who are simply interested in increasing their own profit (Flynn and Salek, 65).

The question of the ambivalent and punitive gaze of the camera/film maker and audience is explored by Phil Carney in Chapter 5. Carney argues that the release of the disturbing film *Peeping Tom* (1960) signaled a pivotal change in spectatorship history. The rise of consumerism and the associated emptiness of desire combined with the paparazzi culture of stardom and stalking in the predatory and invasive use of the camera. This responded to the audience ‘desire to look in order to violate, and to violate in order to look.’ (Carney, 103) In relation to contemporary use of torture and its digital documentation such as at Abu Ghraib we need to shift our attention from the psychoanalytic investigation of ‘symptoms’ to examine the power relationship at work in the spectatorial, torturing gaze. In Chapter Six, Alfred W. McCoy compares Susan Sontag’s response to Abu Ghraib torture images interleaved with pornographic pictures of US soldiers having sex with each other with his own reaction to those photographs and Pasolini’s *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom.* McCoy notes the conflation of pornography, sadism, masochism and torture in the photos and the film and asserts that ‘torture is power’ (McCoy, 113). He suggests this is what makes it attractive to audiences. Explicit demonstrations of power are seductive, adding to the perpetrator's sense of impunity for acts of torture carried out or commanded. In support of one of the volume's overarching claims that the depiction of torture has become more prevalent, brutal and a more widely accepted weapon of state, McCoy uses statistics which confirm a dramatic increase in torture scenes on network broadcasts in the five years since September 2001. In Chapter 4, Chris Berry argues that although Ang Lee’s *Lust, Caution* (2007) does not explicitly show torture, the image of a German shepherd dog spliced repeatedly into explicit sex scenes points to the professional torture carried out by the film's male collaborator protagonist against Chinese resisters. Research on Chinese audience reception of the film reveals that the post-1980 generation accepted the notion of a torturer as a love interest and of a resister betraying her comrades out of love for a torturer. This contrasted with vehement opposition to these notions among older viewers. Berry argues that the film subverts traditional values of patriotism, political commitment and revolutionary resistance, revealing the younger Chinese generation’s fundamental skepticism' about political idealism and their pursuit of individual romance. In Chapter 8, with its focus on South African filmmaking, Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg assesses J.M. Cotezee’s claim that the writer who represents torture is aligned with the state that tortures. She notes that the interest generated by post-apartheid films in the United States may be more closely related to America’s desire to address its own violent, racial past through the representations of nonviolent redemption than a real interest in the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Swanson Goldberg problematizes the role of the TRC as a vehicle of the ANC government in the representation of state torture. She criticizes *Forgiveness* (2004) for presenting an advert for the TRC though the representation of a repentant perpetrator seeking forgiveness from a victim’s family, which was not an accurate representation of the case on which the story was based. On the other hand, by reconstructing both the memory of torture and the act of mourning outside of the TRC process, *Zulu Love*

Letter (2004) moves beyond the problems of becoming aligned with the state that tortures and the state that advocates forgiveness or remains silent about the repercussions of torture.

As a volume, *Screening Torture* puts forward a persuasive argument for the increased prevalence of representations of 'effective' state-sanctioned torture in post-September 11 films across the international spectrum. However, analysis is weighted towards American films and in one instance assumes a purely American readership (Rejali, 234). The book provides evidence of a shift in audience ambivalence about the use of torture and a general trend in empathy for the torturer rather than the victim of torture, owing to a lack of representation of the effects of torture on perpetrator, victim and witness. Although the focus and style of analysis shifts between chapters, reflecting the different professional backgrounds of the contributors, ultimately, this adds breadth and freshness to the analysis of media representations of state terror and political violence.

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