

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

From *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969)



An explicit violent action can bring us face to face with our corporeality.



There is an adrenaline high — the ecstasy of kinetic activity — in violent films.

Hostel II Representations of the body in pain and the cinema experience in torture-porn

by [Gabrielle Murray](#)

"Civilization itself in its language and its literature records the path that torture in its unconscious miming of the deconstruction of civilization follows in reverse: the protective, healing, expansive acts implicit in "host" and "hostel" and "hospitable" and "hospital" all converge back in "hospes," which in turn moves back to the root "hos" meaning house, shelter, or refuge; but once back at "hos," its generosity can be undone by an alternative movement forward into "hostis," the source of "hostility" and "hostage" and "host" — not the host that willfully abandons the ground of his power in acts of reciprocity and equality but the "host" deprived of all ground, the host of the Eucharist, the sacrificial victim."

— Elaine Scarry (*The Body in Pain* 44-45)

Whenever possible I avoid gruesome horror films. I don't find pleasure or purpose in my own terror. On those occasions when I have been cajoled by friends or for some other forgotten necessity have had to see one, the apprehension fills me with dread. My imagination works hard in anxious anticipation to conjure up what I will see, but it fails me. I can never quite picture the forthcoming terrors. Instead, I envisage a dark vacuum of wisps, shadows and trails of half-formed shapes, always tinted in dark red, pungent yellow and black. My anxiety increases in equal measure. In the cinema, I cover my eyes and look away before the slashing, grinding and cutting even begins.

But I do love violent films — the adrenaline high — the ecstasy of kinetic activity. An explicit, intense violent action can bring us face to face with corporeality, the transient nature of our



Peckinpah weaves real-time kinetic action ...



... with slow-motion impact ...



... to capture that stunning moment between a body in life and a body in death.

From *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992)

mortality. Back in 1976, Vivian Sobchack in “The Violence Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies” reminded us of this human tendency when she said, we humans attempt to

“hide from the frightening reality of our fragile innards by believing in the strength of plastic and supermarkets. Yet we [are] fascinated as we have always been, by blood and tissue and bone” (82).

It is this internal knowledge — this psychic and somatic meaning — I find in Peckinpah’s choreographed opening and closing sequences of *The Wild Bunch* (1969). He weaves real-time kinetic action with slow-motion impact capturing the annihilation of flesh — that stunning moment between a body in life and a body in death. Here too, I think of the humanity of Tarantino’s Mr. Orange (Tim Roth) lying on a dirty floor, his blood leaking from a bullet wound, gasping, crying, and slowly dying through what seems like the reel time of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). Rarely has death been so raw, so unromantic — so painfully long. Stanley Cavell says of the beings that people cartoons that as

“[b]easts which are pure spirits, they avoid or deny, the metaphysical fact of human beings, that they are condemned to both souls and bodies” (171).

Cavell is speaking of Mickey Mouse and his cohort but I think the recent use of CGI and animation in film leaves us with an interesting quandary. *Sin City* (Frank Miller & Robert Rodriguez, 2005) is a wonder in the way it uses cartooning but still creates a brutal and bloody impact. The animation and oscillation of actual characters means we transfer our allegiance, our empathy, between their “flesh and blood” images and their graphic representations in a way that maintains a feeling of reality — that these animated figures are mortal and damned. However, none of these films are as explicit as the contemporary trend in the horror genre.

The film critic David Edelstein’s review “Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn” appeared in the 6th February 2006 issue of the *New York Magazine*. Edelstein, commenting on the upsurge in extreme, prolonged graphic torture, abduction, rape and dismemberment in films such as *The Devil’s Rejects* (Rob Zombie 2005), *Saw* (James Wan 2004), [1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] *Wolf Creek* (Greg Mclean 2005) and



Mr Orange (Tim Roth) lies on a dirty floor ...



... his blood leaking from a bullet wound



... gasping, crying, and slowly dying through what seems like the reel time of *Reservoir Dogs*.

Hostel (Eli Roth 2005), dubbed the phenomenon “torture porn.” The label stuck. The box-office success of films like the *Saw* series and *Hostel* stunned many critics; most seemed bewildered by young audiences’ thirst for such graphic fare. While keeping an eye on the public debate around this trend, I managed to avoid most of these films, finding excuses for not seeing them. I did, however, see Greg McLean’s *Wolf Creek*, but I saw it at the drive-in, glad of my smudged windscreen softening the visions before me. Furthermore, I consoled myself by holding tight to the knowledge that Crocodile Dundee’s psychopathic *doppelganger* Mick was really friendly John Jarrett from Australian drama and children’s TV.

What I haven’t as yet made clear is that one of my main research interests is the aesthetics and experiential aspects of screen violence. I teach a course on violence and the cinema — and for the last couple of years my students have been talking about the new horror, “torture porn.” Fortuitously I happened to see a brief interview with the articulate director Eli Roth promoting the release of his new film, *Hostel II*. In regards to the first *Hostel*’s box office success and this trend in explicit horror, Roth commented that teenagers who were 10 when 9/11 happened are now 16 or 17. They have “grown up being told you are going to get blown-up. Terror Alert Orange... They want something to scream at” that is as shocking as the events of their lives.[2]

An interesting observation considering that, reacting to a backlash against its apocalyptic underbelly, the U.S. entertainment industry post-9/11 has also displayed a tendency to cosset its audiences. These “torture porn” productions are predominantly U.S. ones, not surprising considering the United States has the most powerful global film industry. However, this appetite for “torture-porn” is not restricted to U.S. directors and audiences. Besides *Wolf Creek*, the original *Saw* was made by the Australian Leigh Whannell and James Wan, who is Malaysian. Wan went to film school at RMIT in Australia with Whannell. These films have gained broad international success.[3]

Media effects

Hostel II’s director, Eli Roth’s statement about needing something to scream at sent me to Edelstein’s review, which says:

"Fear supplants empathy and makes us all potential



Rarely has death been so raw, so unromantic — so painfully long.

From *Sin City* (Frank Miller & Robert Rodriguez, 2005)



Sin City is a wonder in the way it uses cartooning but still creates a brutal impact.



The animation and oscillation of actual characters means we transfer our allegiance between their "flesh and blood" images and their graphic representations.

torturers, doesn't it? Post-9/11, we've engaged in a national debate about the morality of torture, fueled by horrifying pictures of manifestly decent men and women (some of them, anyway) enacting brutal scenarios of domination at Abu Ghraib. And a large segment of the population evidently has no problem with this. Our righteousness is buoyed by propaganda like the TV series *24*, which devoted an entire season to justifying torture in the name of an imminent threat: a nuclear missile en route to a major city. Who do you want defending America? Kiefer Sutherland or terrorist-employed civil-liberties lawyers?"

The images of U.S. and U.K. military personnel torturing prisoners were initially brought to the public's attention by a *60 Minutes II* news report on 28th April 2004, and an article by Seymour M. Hersh in *The New Yorker Magazine*, posted on-line 30 April 2004 and published in the May 10 issue. Edelstein's suggestion that this media coverage helped feed the escalation of uninhibited images of torture, degradation and mutilation in film is echoed in most reviews and commentaries on the phenomenon.[4] How can we draw correlations between our exposure to images of torture, such as the images of the victims of Abu Ghraib,[5] and the escalation of explicit representations in the horror genre? Why are films that represent extreme forms of violence and degradation currently popular?

Prior to this growth in explicit productions, the horror genre had been in one of its cyclic declines. The overblown reflexivity of films like the *Scream* series (Wes Craven 1996-2000) and *Scary Movie* (Keenen Ivory Wayans 2000) resulted in a comic trend in the horror genre, to the point where it seemed to have lost its edge. It no longer scared its audience. Since 2004, the success of horror films such as *Freddy vs. Jason* (Ronny Yu, 2003), and the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Marcus Nispel, 2003), began an escalation in the production of these explicit films.[6] The industry reasoning for this increased production is straightforward. In a period of mounting pressures due to diverse markets, new technologies and platforms, these films have proven to be financially successful. *Hostel* was produced for under \$5 million, yet it grossed close to \$50 million in the United States and around \$80 million world wide (IMDB). These films are cheap to make partly because they do not need expensive locations or sets. They are formulated on special effects rather than featuring stars who command huge

From *Wolf Creek* (Greg Mclean, 2005)



The film critic David Edelstein commenting on the upsurge in extreme, prolonged graphic torture, abduction, rape and dismemberment in contemporary film dubbed the phenomenon "torture porn."



Crocodile Dundee's psychopathic doppelgänger Mick.



salaries. Furthermore, the U.S. industry, responding to the increasing popularity of extreme Asian cinema with audiences and directors, has exploited this influence by using Asian directors, remaking films and increasing the explicitness of its own product. Roth is one of the directors who acknowledge this debt to Asian cinema: in *Hostel*, he paid homage to the famous Japanese horror director Takashi Miike by casting him in a cameo role.

What also needs to be acknowledged is the issue concerning under-age access to the release of R rated films either through renting them or buying them. Anecdotally, I know from discussion with 14 to 16 year olds that many of them have seen the *Saw* series, *Wolf Creek* and *Hostel*. Currently, they are waiting with anticipation for *Hostel II* to appear on DVD so they can rent, buy or borrow it from a friend. The longevity of this trend is another issue to be considered. Recently a brief article on CNN.com (17 July 2007) noted that *Hostel II* had grossed only \$17 million in the United States and Canada, much less than the millions generated by the first film. Similar trends have been seen across the industry and there is a sense the market is now in overload and fickle audiences have had enough. Production companies such as After Dark Films, "anticipating the end of the torture flick trend," are reducing their planned output (CNN.com).

Whether this is the end of "torture-porn" is yet to be revealed, but increasingly graphic scenes appear in a broader range of mainstream and art-house releases. We've seen screen attacks on the human body from the protracted beating, lashing, and scourging of Jesus in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* (2004) through to the latest Bond film offering *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006), in which Daniel Craig had his genitals whipped, while tied to a seatless chair. The suggested relation between our increased visual knowledge of violence and torture in the "real" world — garnered from images on television and the Internet — with the escalation of representations of explicit violence in the commercial and creative medium of film, can seem glib. After exposure to images of real torture, why would audiences then want to see films in which enact representations of dramatized torture in intimate detail and for protracted periods of time? What kind of people are we?

In simple terms, fictional cinema is a cultural object which is creative. It might exist, react to and reflect upon events in the world, but what it does best is create imaginary worlds. Like all art forms it is also capable of insightful social commentary. Also, as a commercial product it must respond to the mood of changing milieus to maintain audience interest and survive

I consoled myself by holding tight to the knowledge that this Mick ...



... was really friendly John Jarrett from Australian drama and children's TV.

From *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005)



They want something to scream at that is as shocking as the events of their lives.



Roth acknowledges this debt to

economically. And it must adjust to changing screen and viewing experiences. Historically, critics have seen the horror genre as functioning like a Richter scale, charting the unease in society of generational subconscious fears. Remarking on the "torture porn" trend in horror films, for example, Ross Douthat observes one "might note...a thread of imperial anxiety appropriate to an age of blowback and terrorist violence." He further explains,

"the gore-fests of the 1970s terrified a nation that was coming home from Vietnam; they were about the darkness waiting in the heartland's heart, whether in Leatherface's Texas or Michael Myer's Illinois. Some of their contemporary imitators recapitulate that theme, but others ... send their young Americans abroad to be slaughtered, in Old Worlds and Third Worlds that the New Worlders visit without even beginning to comprehend" (54).

This easy linkage of national events and cinematic representation has a long history. J. David Slocum argues that there is an overriding perception that an upsurge in "film violence" occurred in relation to the social upheaval of "the 60s." In 1967 Pauline Kael branded this escalation in film violence a cinema "of blood and holes," while retrospectively Paul Monaco and Stephen Prince have termed this development as, correspondingly, a "cinema of sensation" and "ultraviolence" (Slocum 13).[7]

[Go to page 2](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 50](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

Asian cinema in *Hostel* by casting the famous Japanese horror director Takashi Miike in a cameo role.