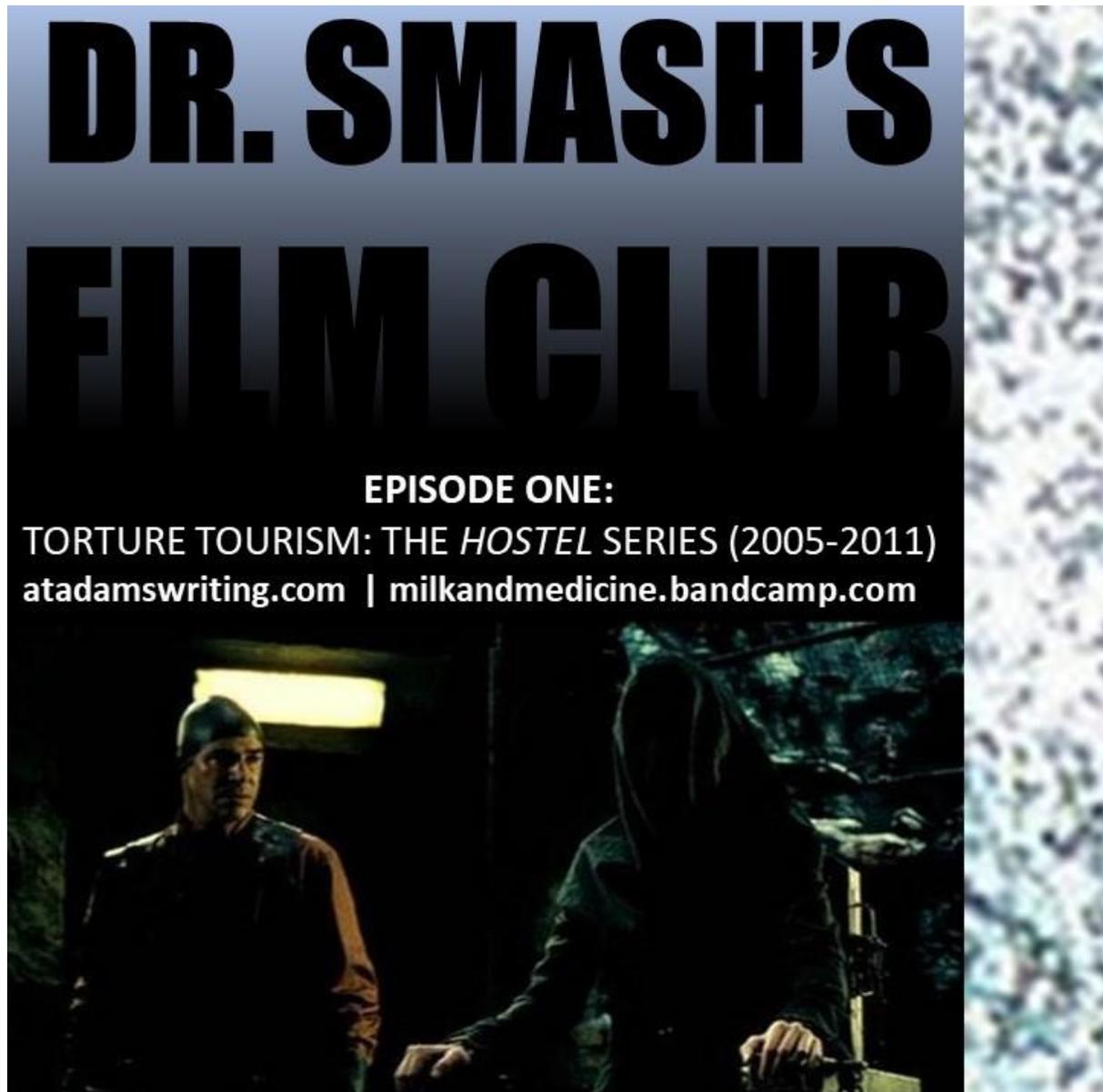


DR SMASH'S FILM CLUB, EPISODE ONE
TORTURE TOURISM: THE *HOSTEL* SERIES (2005-2011)



BY Alex Adams BROADCAST 29 January 2021 URL 1 <https://youtu.be/E14gc0eReMI>
URL 2 <https://www.mixcloud.com/RepeaterRadio/dr-smashes-film-club-01-hostel/>

Hello everyone, and welcome to Dr Smash's Film Club. My name is Alex Adams, and I'm going to use my time on Repeater Radio as a space to think about movies, politics, and representation in a historicized and critical way. In 2019, I published a book called *How to Justify Torture* with Repeater, which was about the role that popular culture plays in disseminating justifications for torture and state violence. Specifically, the book was about the ticking bomb scenario, and how fictions of emergency mobilise political emotions in order to generate support for human rights abuses. In these audio essays I'm going to talk about movies in a similar way, looking at them in the

light of the political and historical currents that were important in the social and political conditions and contexts of their production, distribution, and reception.

So, kicking right off, today I'm going to talk about the *Hostel* series, about the politics of a certain iteration of early twenty-first century torture horror, and the accompanying moral panic about what came to be called torture porn.

“Imagine you're sitting here, in this room, strapped to this chair, and someone very rich has paid a lot of money to come in here and kill you. No political message, no webcams, they just want to know what it feels like to kill someone. And there's nothing you can do about it. This really happens.”¹

Now, in some ways *Hostel* is a bit of a basic bitch text to look at with respect to these issues, but I think that the fact that it's a fairly widely known movie, that is still remembered today, and that is in some ways synonymous with the torture porn label actually makes it quite an interesting place to start.

To begin with, here are some of the facts about the *Hostel* trilogy. The first movie was released in 2005, and it was written and directed by Eli Roth. It was executive produced by Quentin Tarantino when he was going through his retro grindhouse phase, a phase of self-consciously retrograde and grimy exploitation work that included his collaborations with Robert Rodriguez and his own movie *Death Proof* (2007). The same creative team made *Hostel Part 2* in 2007, and the third movie, something of an afterthought, was a contractually obliged direct to DVD release directed by Scott Spiegel and released in 2011.

Thematically and in terms of their story, they are fairly easy to summarize because they are based around one simple, bold idea. Young, attractive Americans on holiday in Europe are kidnapped by a secret organisation called the Elite Hunting Club so that their wealthy members can pay to torture and kill them. The third film relocates the action from Slovakia to Las Vegas, and features a leery stag party falling victim to the Hunting Club.

So for the first section of this episode, and before I get much further into the specifics of the *Hostel* movies, I want to talk about and contextualise this term torture porn. It's usually used to refer to a subgenre of horror movies that are described as being particularly nihilistic, bloodthirsty, and sadistic, and movies that were produced and released in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Examples include the *Saw* (2004-2021) and *Human Centipede* (2009-2015) franchises, *Wolf Creek* (2005), Rob Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), *Captivity* (2007), and so on. The term itself, though, is rarely embraced by horror filmmakers or fans, and it is generally used pejoratively, in much the same way as terms like Video Nasty were used in the 1980s by conservative moral campaigners like Mary Whitehouse. That is, torture porn is a term that has connotations of either sneering, dismissive disregard or of moral panic more than it has very much descriptive or analytical value.

¹ *Hostel Dismembered*, a bonus feature on disc 2 of the *Hostel* Ultimate Edition DVD.

Also, in a fun side note, if you google it, you don't actually find much information about twenty-first century horror. You are directed to the Wikipedia entry for Splatter horror, and if you don't turn on safe search you will get some fairly out there *actual* pornography.

Coming back to the term torture porn, historically it is generally traced to a pretty shrill and sanctimonious op-ed by David Edelstein which was published in the New York Times [sic] in 2006. In this piece, called "[Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn](#)", Edelstein disparages a range of violent movies, from genre pieces like *Saw* and *Hostel* to more high-class cinematic pieces like *Irreversible* (2002) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). He describes them as "freak-show sensationalism", as "not art by any definition I can think of", and he seems horrified that they have "terrific production values and a place of honor in your local multiplex." Famously, he writes that "As a horror maven who long ago made peace, for better and worse, with the genre's inherent sadism, I'm baffled by how far this new stuff goes—and by why America seems so nuts these days about torture."²

This remark is telling, because he openly admits that his preoccupation with his own revulsion has inhibited his ability to think critically about the appeal of these films that he dislikes so much. Perhaps more importantly, he positions himself as a hardened horror fan who has finally found his limit in terms of the cinematic extremity that he is able to stomach. Now, as everybody knows, there can be a lot of dick-swinging involved in horror movie fandom, as people argue over who is the toughest gore hound for having watched and remained unmoved by the most extreme and unpleasant content. One of the more tedious aspects of it is that some of those who most vocally defended extreme horror in their youth have now come to vocally condemn it in their old age. To my mind this is reminiscent most of all of classic rock fans complaining that these newer, noisier bands can't write a good tune anymore, and that you can't even hear the lyrics when they just shout like that.

Mark Kermode, for example, who has advocated in favour of Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* in front of the BBFC, [condemned *Hostel 2* as infantile, stupid, and boring](#), as a symptom of the moral and intellectual decline of cinema that had been brought about by postmodernism.³ Quite how postmodernism is responsible for *Hostel* is not, of course, really clear, but it's an interesting early entry in the list of social ills for which postmodernism is vaguely and gesturally condemned. These days it's Jordan Peterson and co. who enjoy blaming postmodernism for the destruction of gender norms and the decline of Western civilisation as part of their reactionary conspiracy-theory garbage, so actually it's in a way refreshing and wholesome to just see it as part of a boomer's furious misunderstanding of a horror film.

Terms like torture porn, or its even less subtle partner porno, are useful in the sense that you know what people mean when they use them, but for me it's more usefully understood as characteristic

² I said that this was in the *New York Times* in the episode, but it was actually *New York Magazine*. David Edelstein, "Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn". *New York Magazine*, Jan 26, 2006. <https://nymag.com/movies/features/15622/>

³ Mark Kermode, "Mark Kermode on Censorship: What Are They Scared Of?". *The Independent*, Nov 28, 2013. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/mark-kermode-on-censorship-what-are-they-scared-of-180943.html>. Kermode's review of *Hostel* for BBC 5 Live is archived on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pNFROE4UZQ>, and his review of *Hostel 2* is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uk34m87Kf8Y>.

of a certain sneering critical perspective than it is a generic marker that could meaningfully describe any kind of body of cinematic work. My major problem with it, as you've probably guessed, is that it's misleadingly polemical rather than descriptive. You would think, listening to critics like Kermode or Edelstein, that films like *Hostel* were 90-minute torture scenes, full of unrelentingly cruel and pornographically depicted violence with no context or characterisation or dramatic arc. Films like this do exist, *Flowers of Flesh and Blood* (1985) for instance, but they remain a long way from the multiplex. Whilst they do have some fairly tough scenes in them, the *Hostel* movies are generally fairly conventional horror films apart from the admittedly grisly effects shots.

That said, some commentators have tried to reclaim the label, and to characterise torture porn not simply as knuckleheaded nastiness but as a form of social commentary that fuses extreme imagery with an ethical message. There is of course precedent for this kind of reading of extreme materials. Pier Paolo Pasolini's adaptation of the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, for example, or the movies of Michael Haneke or Gaspar Noe, are regularly understood to have solid political and moral concerns which intellectually and ethically legitimise the extremity of the violence they depict.

In general, the argument about the moral force of extreme cinema runs along the lines that films with moral arguments to articulate, or positions to take, use violence in a particular way. Rather than presenting violence as an enjoyable spectacle, films like *Salo* (1975) or *Funny Games* (1997/2007) confront us with near-unwatchable horrors in such a way that we are unable to enjoy them. In an essay on extreme art cinema, film scholar Tina Kendall for example argues that by presenting us with indefensible, unendurably unpleasant violence that feels morally contaminating, extreme cinematic artefacts force us to recognise the futility and cold, damaging evil of violence as a social and political force and, crucially, that they prompt the spectator to reflect on their potential complicity in such violence in the real world.⁴

A similar argument has raged in classical literary studies about the writing of the Marquis de Sade. Sade's most notorious work, the partial manuscript of the *120 Days of Sodom*, has always provoked extreme reactions, because it is a catalogue of violent sexual perversions that is presented as being perpetrated against kidnapped children. Sade also interleaves these scenes of sexual degradation with his long, boring philosophical harangues about why it is wrong to help those in need, and why the individual libertine's search for violent sexual pleasure is the only meaningful pursuit for any enlightened human being. That is, Sade fuses together extreme pornography and indefensible, ultra-libertarian invective. His defenders have frequently argued that in doing this, Sade is actually an ironist or a satirist, an anti-aristocratic moralist who shows the libertines in his writing as disgusting, shit-spattered avatars of despotic power who gain sexual joy from abusing their power over others.

In their introduction to the most recent English language edition of the *120 Days of Sodom*, Will McMorran and Thomas Wynn summarise this reading of Sade. "An element of satire clearly underpins his four grotesque libertines – a bishop, a judge, a nobleman and a financier – and the novel may be read as an assault on the institutions they represent."⁵ Such a reading of Sade would

⁴ Tina Kendall, "Affect and the Ethics of Snuff in Extreme Art Cinema", in *Snuff: Real Death and Screen Media*, ed. by Neil Jackson, Shaun Kimber, Johnny Walker and Thomas Joseph Watson (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 257-275.

⁵ Will McMorran and Thomas Wynn, "Introduction", in Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Libertinage*. (Penguin, 2016), p. xxix.

match later readings of Pasolini's film adaptation of the *120 Days*, in which Pasolini transforms Sade's philosophy into what Gideon Bachmann, interviewing Pasolini, called "[a sexual metaphor for class struggle and power politics](#)."⁶

That is, there is a long history of understanding extreme material as having ethical force. Sympathetic critics have often argued that the Marquis de Sade is a little like Dante Alighieri or John Bunyan, Christian moralists who depicted demons the better to glorify God, apart from the fact that the Marquis de Sade's writing features more gigantic penises and forced coprophilia. Likewise, people have argued that extreme cinema like *A Serbian Film* (2010), with its sustained depictions of child abuse, sexual violence, and decapitation, can actually articulate a form of social commentary.

Now, this is a very accommodating critical position, and it's worth holding at arm's length to an extent. But it is true that part of the fascination of this debate is the slippery and provocative way that these extreme and transgressive materials can have something meaningful to say whilst also being intentionally indefensible, or indeed *by* being intentionally indefensible. I would also like to shout out here Mark Steven's book *Splatter Capital* (2017), which was published by Repeater a few years ago, which makes an interesting argument that splatter films, including *Hostel*, are responsive to the catastrophes and exploitation of capitalist economics.

This argument only goes so far, though, as Eli Roth himself pointed out in a promotional interview for *Hostel Part 2*: "When people come to see *Hostel Part 2* they want some of the fun, they want some of the sex, they want some of the humour, but they want to see some gnarly shit happening to people. They want to see people getting fucked up, bad."⁷

This argument that extreme cinema is moral is therefore always in tension with its counterpoint, sometimes articulated by the very people who intellectualise extreme horror, which is that it is, actually, just as fucking dumb and objectionable as its detractors claim.

So what about *Hostel*? Is it possible to read this series of movies as though it is doing the same kind of political work?

Eli Roth, for his part, argued fairly consistently in interviews promoting the first *Hostel* movie that the film was motivated by a desire to use horror films to make social commentary. He never exactly states his message – and nor should he have to – but he was insistent that there was a message there to be unpacked by his audiences.

Roth is also interesting because he likes to deflect criticism from his films by claiming that they are commentaries rather than straight up exploitation. His favourite rhetorical manoeuvre is to say that the things that actually happen in the world, the things that his films address, are worse than the things that critics attack his films for depicting. For example, he addressed accusations that his cannibal movie *The Green Inferno* (2013) was racist and dehumanising by saying that [his](#)

⁶ Gideon Bachmann, "Pasolini on de Sade: An Interview During the Filming of *The 120 Days of Sodom*". *Film Quarterly* 29:2 (1975), p. 39.

⁷ *Hostel Part 2: A Legacy of Torture*, a bonus documentary on the *Hostel Part 2* DVD.

[representations of the savagery of indigenous peoples was chicken feed in comparison to the brutality of the corporations who are determined to exploit those same indigenous populations.](#)⁸



So there is something interesting here. Roth uses the ethical commitments that he attributes to his films as a get out of jail free card, as though his intent to make some kind of woolly statement about corporate deforestation legitimises the uncritical rearticulation of racist fantasies about cannibal tribes.

So, to return to *Hostel*, what was happening politically in the early 2000s that would make the *Hostel* series popular and politically meaningful, and what, if anything, is it trying to say? Is it a form of bloodstained moralism that implicates the viewer in the pleasure that it critiques, or is it simply, as Kermode was happy to insist, a series of [popcorn and vomit films](#)?

First of all, it is worth noting that the first movie takes exploitation as its major theme. For the first half, the three boys at the centre of the story are engaging in some whoopee sex tourism in Amsterdam, starting fights, getting high, and routinely objectifying and sexually exploiting women. In a dramatic irony with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, in the second half of the movie they find themselves objectified and exploited at the hands of wealthy torture tourists who have paid to inflict violence upon their bodies. The series is therefore positioned as being in some way *about* exploitation at the same time as it offers its viewers the pleasures of exploitation. There is also

⁸ Aaron Gell, “Eli Roth Faces Off With Tribal Rights Campaigners Over Cannibal Film”. *Business Insider*, Aug 11, 2014. <https://www.businessinsider.com/eli-roth-cannibal-rainforest-controversy-2014-8?r=US&IR=T>

Holocaust imagery at play, particularly in the idea of Eastern European death factories, the imagery of smokestacks and chimneys, and, in the third film, the storage rooms overflowing with the victims' personal property. The films don't really do anything with this imagery, but it is there, as a kind of suggestive set decoration. They are also quite ostentatiously cineliterate, particularly the second film, which references Italian *Giallo* films throughout. The first also has a cameo from Japanese horror director Takashi Miike, and the second has a cameo by Ruggero Deodato, director of *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980).

Importantly, it is also positioned as a film series about something that 'really happens'. Such torture tourism exists, Roth claimed in the promotion of the first film, and the films exploit the fear that anybody, even those who are completely normal in every other way, can participate in it or become its victims. So Roth is keen to position his movies as closely related to real-world violence, either as a way to make a comment or simply as a way to give his films the aura of authentic danger.

The most obvious political context for the *Hostel* series is, of course, the American war in Iraq. By 2005, when the first movie was released, this war, which had once been represented as a walloping and instant success, had become a horrific and intractable counterinsurgency war. And what is *Hostel* if not the story of an overseas vacation gone horribly wrong?

In an interview on the DVD of *Hostel*, Roth mentions al-Qaeda beheading videos as a preoccupying influence: he writes from what scares him, he says, and he said that he was particularly frightened by the idea of being trapped in a room with no escape other than a gruesome death by torture. And he's right, of course, that there is something very scary about inescapable captivity and violent death. In the same interview, Roth says that the world feels less safe for Americans now that George Bush has made Americans unpopular by initiating a horrible war, and he says that he wants to exploit this unease in *Hostel*. So Roth's intention is to take that fear of death by torture, drain the politics from it, and exploit it as a primal human fear.

Now, I don't think it's really possible to drain the politics from this. More importantly perhaps, I think there is something very telling about this idea of the possibility of an apolitical response to a snuff propaganda video.

Hostel is a reaction to the gruesome and frightening escalations of the war on terror, but primarily this reaction manifests itself through a fantasy of American victimhood which obscures the role of the Coalition forces as perpetrators of colossal systematic violence. I don't want you to think that this is whataboutery or whataboutism. I just think it is very telling that the insight that Eli Roth takes from the war in Iraq is the idea that it is a shame that Americans can't have nice holidays anymore because foreigners might want to hurt them.

This is especially interesting given that one of the most significant scandals of the war on terror took place in 2004, around the time that the first movie was being written and produced. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal revealed that American forces had been systematically abusing and humiliating prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison, a concrete dungeon famous for torture and execution under Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime. Sheaves of photographic evidence showed military police mugging for the camera while forcing prisoners to masturbate, or grinning vacantly in front of the dead bodies of murdered prisoners. Famously, Sabrina Harman mentioned that the reason she posed with a smile and a thumbs-up in front of a dead prisoner was simply that she didn't know what else to do with her hands while she was being photographed. This echo of souvenir photography is one

of the reasons that many people found the photos so chilling. Torture tourism is in some ways as apt a description of the Abu Ghraib scandal as it is of the theme of *Hostel*.

[Susan Sontag](#) and [Slavoj Žižek](#) both wrote particularly interesting pieces responding to the Abu Ghraib photographs at the time.⁹ Both of them argued, differently of course, that the depravity that they depicted showed that there was a certain sexual brutality ingrained into American culture. Žižek, for instance, argued that the photos were reminiscent of hazing rituals. Interestingly, Rush Limbaugh, the conservative talk radio host who would become so ardent a fan of Donald Trump, dismissed the outrage about the Abu Ghraib abuse by saying that the photos simply looked like “[good old-fashioned American pornography](#)”, in his own way confirming Sontag and Žižek’s analyses.¹⁰ Torture porn films were quite often positioned by their defenders as articulating this same insight about the sexualised brutality that underlies ordinary life in the USA, as furious ethical responses to the systematic degradation that was revealed by the Abu Ghraib scandal.

And indeed, if you look at the torturers in the *Hostel* series, you will quickly find that they are, apart from their wealth, just ordinary people, moms and dads like the rest of us. The second film in particular is interesting in this respect, as it pays closer attention to two American friends who have jetted off to Slovakia in order to torture and kill. Todd, the more confident of the two, tries to invigorate his reluctant friend Stuart by saying that torture and murder are commonplace wherever in the world there is no law. His examples are Chad and New Orleans, which is a direct reference to the anarchy that gripped the city in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In a way, this representation of the wealthy as vacuous, venal, and exploitative is not so different from the way that Sade positions his revolting libertines as icons of the respectable establishment.

The *Hostel* films are also interesting in the context of the post-9/11 torture debate, because they are structured around the central insight that torture is more about power than it is about interrogation or information. Very often, when we see torture scenes in post-9/11 popular culture, they function as plot devices by showing torture as a way of gaining information. As good an example as any is Roth’s 2018 remake of *Death Wish*, in which Bruce Willis tortures a criminal in order to extract information about their plot to kill his family. This has the effect of trivialising torture, but also of showing it as a legitimate form of intelligence work. This is what my book *How to Justify Torture* is about. So, it is valuable, in a way, that the *Hostel* series provides a counterpoint of sorts to this, showing torture as something that is motivated by the desire to exercise power or to indulge a sort of dark desire rather than in any way anything to do with establishing the truth.

Quite what desire the urge to commit torture is connected to is another interesting element here. This may have something to do with the term torture porn. It was quite widely argued that in addition to visually fetishizing physical violence the films have a pornographic structure. Film scholar Aaron Michael Kerner, for instance, in his book *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11*, writes that splatter films are similar to pornographic films because “in both cases, there is the ratcheting

⁹ Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others”. *The New York Times*, May 23, 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html> Slavoj Žižek, “What Rumsfeld Doesn’t Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib”. *In These Times*, May 21, 2004. <https://inthesetimes.com/article/what-rumsfeld-doesn-know-that-he-knows-about-abu-ghraib>

¹⁰ Susan J. Brison, “Torture, or ‘Good Old American Pornography?’”. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 4, 2004. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/torture-or-good-old-american-pornography-24110/>

up of tension that eventually ends in the discharge of bodily fluids.”¹¹ This is an attractive metaphor, but unfortunately any close analysis of the actual fabric of the movies doesn’t really bear it out. There is no torture scene in any torture porn film as sustained or detailed as any sex sequence in any visual pornography, and tempting as it is to compare special effects to cum shots, they don’t really work like this visually or structurally. Perhaps the strongest similarity with pornography is the fact that Roth claimed that he was influenced by a contemporary trend in American porno in which girls were tricked into being filmed for sex, but this is more to do with his themes of exploitation, humiliation, and captivity than it is with any formal analogy between pornography and horror.

There is an interesting thematic similarity, though. We’ve already seen that the first film positions victimhood and death as the male equivalent of female sexual receptivity. The boys sexually objectify women and transactionalise their sexual encounters with them, and then end up the commodified objects of a similar, darker, financial transaction. If we are generous, we could claim that Roth is doing this to make the feminist point, reminiscent of second wave feminists like Susan Brownmiller, that male sexual exploitation of women is torture. I would argue, though, that the role of this comparison between torture and sex in *Hostel* actually functions to exploit male fear of physical intimacy.

To take the fate of the first torture victim, Josh, as an example, his relationship with his torturer is presented as a form of seduction with a three-act romantic structure. The torturer, an older European man, places his hand on Josh’s thigh the first time he meets him, in a gesture of unwelcome intimacy that makes Josh yell at him. They encounter one another again some time later, and Josh apologises and returns the hand on the leg in a gesture both of reconciliation and intimacy. In their final encounter in the torture chamber, the torturer grips Josh’s leg meaningfully before he proceeds to hobble, execute, and dissect him. I wouldn’t say that this is a deep insight into the constitutively violent nature of male desire, or a critique of the mutual implication of power and sexuality that structures heteropatriarchy. I would say that this is a good example of good old-fashioned homophobia in which young misogynist men fear that a desire that resembles their own will be projected onto them by predatory homosexuals.

So in conclusion, I want to return to this point that the *Hostel* films are a fantasy of American victimhood that circulates in a period in which the American military was actively extending violent power across the Middle East, in Africa, and in Afghanistan. In some ways military filmmaking likes to focus on the suffering that invading soldiers feel when confronted by the harshness of the wars that they themselves are prosecuting. There’s a great [Frankie Boyle joke](#) that I’m sure you know, to the effect that Americans will invade and destroy your country, then return twenty years later to make movies about how it made them feel sad to do it.¹²

Narratives of defeat or peril or victimhood are central to imperial ideology, particularly in phases of imperial decline or during unpopular wars. There is a similar victim complex at play in *Hostel*, I think, and this is my biggest takeaway from it. For all of Eli Roth’s claims that he’s trying to say something beyond politics about human nature, or about the character of the human desire to inflict

¹¹ Aaron Michael Kerner, *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11: Horror, Exploitation, and the Cinema of Sensation* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), p. 13.

¹² David Swanson, “Laughing Our Way to Destruction”. *Truthout*, Sept. 17, 2014. <https://truthout.org/articles/laughing-our-way-to-destruction/>

pain, I think that his remarks about a depoliticised response to beheading videos are the most significant. For me, *Hostel* is a testament to the American fears of backlash, of vulnerability, and of helplessness that were coming about as a result of the escalation of the war in Iraq.

So this concludes the first episode of Dr Smash's film club. Thank you for listening – and thanks to everybody at Repeater Radio for helping me out with it. It wouldn't be a podcast without some self-promotion, so please visit my website atadamswriting.com, and if you like my theme music and the obnoxious noises I've made in between sections, please check out milkandmedicine.bandcamp.com and I will see you next time.

[“Postmodernism means never having to say you're sorry... and I just think... It's like the seventies never happened.”](#)