

DR SMASH'S FILM CLUB, EPISODE THREE (FEAT. TOYGRIND)
PIKACHU, TORTURER: POLICE BRUTALITY AND FAMILY
ENTERTAINMENT

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EPISODE THREE (FEAT. TOYGRIND):

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POLICE BRUTALITY AND FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT

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Hello and welcome back to Doctor Smash's Film Club, the Repeater Radio show where I, Alex Adams, take an in-depth look at the many manifestations of political violence, most often torture, in popular culture.

In my book *How to Justify Torture* I described a certain aesthetic and cultural framework or pattern in which torture is presented as moral, as effective, and protective. Taken in sum, this way of representing torture presents us with a potent justificatory rhetorical framing of police brutality and imperial violence. Even though it's incoherent, its affective power makes it very effective, to the extent that torture scenes in novels, films and TV series function as plot devices because they have been so successful at framing torture as a useful way of acquiring accurate, actionable information.

In some ways, the texts I looked at for the book were quite predictable. I looked at *24*, *Dirty Harry*, comics franchise media like *Daredevil* and Frank Miller's *Batman*, and the novels of Tom Clancy, Alan Dershowitz, and Andy McNab, among others. But one of the more surprising things I learned in the months after finishing the book is that the justification for torture that I described and critiqued in it is not only found in texts for adult audiences that are positioned as in some way serious, dark, gritty, or realistic. Perhaps naively, I hadn't looked at family entertainment.

The films I'm going to survey today fall into the category of family entertainment – even children's entertainment – and they show that the aesthetic and political coordinates that articulate justifications for and make dark jokes about torture, are found throughout a much broader range of storytelling than may at first be expected.

The films I'm going to look at also complicate the theoretical framework that I've used in this show so far. In episode one, I looked at Eli Roth's series of torture movies *Hostel* (2005-2011) and examined the debate about whether or not it is critical or celebratory of torture. Of course, films aren't as simple as that. Cultural productions are often political in a range of complex, shifting, and unintentional ways, and a reading of their socioeconomic and political contexts can reveal a range of unexpected meanings and effects that are not reducible to whether or not something is 'for' or 'against' torture. When put into dialogue with the representations I discuss today, it's easier to understand the so-called 'torture porn' horror films as part of many interacting cultural currents, including slapstick and gross out comedy.

So, without any further prevarication, I'd like to begin today with a look at a scene in Disney's 2016 family animation *Zootopia*, which was released in the UK market under the alternative title *Zootropolis*.

It's Weasleton. Duke Weasleton. And I ain't talkin', rabbit. And ain't nothin' you can do to make me.
Ice 'im.

[screams] You dirty rat. Why you helpin' her? She's a cop!

Ice this weasel.

All right, all right, please, I'll talk, I'll talk!



The question addressed by the plot of this film is simple: how can a small country rabbit learn to make her way as a big city cop? The answer, of course, is by embracing police brutality in collusion with the mafia. In the clip we've just heard, that I've shortened a little for convenience, a young bunny who is training to become a member of the Zootropolis PD realizes that she has to get her hands dirty if she wants to get the job done. She grabs her weasel informant off the street, and takes

him to the house of her mafioso friend, whose polar bear henchmen hold him over a pit of ice, threatening to freeze him to death if he doesn't talk.

In a 2020 article called "[Wait, There's Torture in Zootopia?](#)", political scientists Erin M Kearns and Casey Delahanty write the following.

In an animated film, this scene may seem like an innocuous plot device to move the story forward. Yet it also serves two other functions: it suggests that torture is an effective method of extracting information and it normalizes this violence for a young audience in a way that may prepare them for darker depictions of torture—often involving humans—as their media consumption evolves toward more adult-g geared content.¹

This is true enough, but I think it stops a little short. It is true that torture interrogations are routinely shown as effective, and that this myth of effective torture makes it possible to use torture scenes as plot devices. Likewise, the inverse is true – that is, the use of torture scenes as plot devices reinforces the myth of directly effective torture. But there is something more interesting about the role of humour, play, and socialization into carceral ideology that needs exploring here.

Before I unpack this much further, though, I want to play you another clip, this time from the 2019 Pokemon animation *Detective Pikachu*. Pikachu is played by Ryan Reynolds, also notable for his performance as Marvel's *Deadpool*, an ex-marine who uses extreme violence and sassy humour to fight crime. Pikachu and his human accomplice capture a Pokemon called Mr Mime, whose defining characteristic is that he believes things are really happening if and when they are mimed. If you mime throwing a ball, he will catch it, and if you mime a cage around him, he'll believe he is a captive. Likewise, if you mime covering him in petrol and lighting a match, he will believe you're about to burn him to death.

Listen up. We got ways to make you talk. Or mime. Gas! You're pouring gasoline! Oh, that went dark fast. I like this, I like this very much. That's right, Mr Mime. [laughs] You're about be Mr Melt unless you start talkin'.

So what you have here in this scene is perhaps even more gnarly than *Zootropolis*. In order to extort some information from Mr Mime, Pikachu and his pal commit a mock execution and the film plays it for laughs.

What these scenes show is that a torture scene is not necessarily a horrifying tableaux featuring chainsaws, traps, cannibals, screaming, and bloody, explicit violence. At its most basic, an interrogational torture scene is one in which physical or psychological pressure is exerted on someone in order to get specific results, and of course, coercion is so thoroughly ingrained into the structure of popular storytelling that this happens so often that we frequently fail to realize that the knockabout scenes we are watching are in fact torture scenes. Here, our cartoon heroes commit torture in order to solve problems and gain information, like many other cop characters who use

¹ Casey Delehanty and Erin M. Kearns, "Wait, there's torture in Zootopia?": Examining the Prevalence of Torture in Popular Movies. *Perspectives on Politics* 18: 3 (2020), p. 835. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719005012>

violence to solve problems in popular culture more broadly. But here it is also presented in a jokey way with flamboyant creativity.

So, there are two main things I want to say about these scenes. First, children's literature and young adult fiction are understood by its scholars to have a socializing function. This isn't to reductively claim that fiction and film for younger audiences are always necessarily educational or indoctrinatory – simply that stories are often a very important aspect of the ways that we, as young people, encounter moral and political ideas about right and wrong, virtue and evil, friendship, love, adventure, personal growth, and even grief. As a consequence, they can be extraordinarily morally and ideologically influential. Consider, for instance, to take examples from the popular TV of my own youth, the environmentalism of *Captain Planet* or *Fern Gully* (1992), the militarism of *GI Joe*, and the explicitly educational emphasis of *Sesame Street*, all of which in different ways made their moral and political positions abundantly clear to their viewers at the same time as they were entertaining and enjoyable. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the extent to which the characters, institutions, and logics of the Harry Potter series saturate some forms of liberal discourse. They appear for some people to have fundamentally framed their understandings of the structure, meanings, and interactions of political forces, to the extent that the greatest slur they could use against President Trump was to refer to him as Voldemort.



So, whilst it's unhelpfully simplistic to say that children's fiction or family entertainment is a form of ideological priming or indoctrination, it is true that these texts can exercise a profound influence on us. After all, if literary and cultural texts aren't understood as political at least some of the time, then they sometimes aren't, in any real sense, about anything at all. That is, political meaning is very often fundamental to literary and cultural meaning.

In this context, then, the normalization of interrogational torture in kids' movies is troubling because it represents the integration of a sympathetic representation of police brutality into our ordinary, everyday regimes of family-friendly meaning.

Formally, of course, these scenes are forms of play, dynamic physical scenes that have a similar structural function to musical numbers, sex scenes, car chases, or other gymnastic and spectacular elements of cinema. Most of all, though, they are jokes, and jokes are one of the most potent and interesting forms of political communication. Vibrant, elastic, pregnant with social and political

meaning, humour can be as much a vessel for anti-establishment critique as it can be a tool of power, and in this instance it is used to immunize the justification of torture against critique.

Jokes make things more palatable, easier to understand. Here, the jokes function to dehumanize the victim of torture and make their mistreatment seem normal, acceptable, and a matter of entertainment. In the course of this, they make torture seem like a short-circuit to plot development and meaningful, true information. The joke is that torture works.

Presenting things as a joke also makes them harder to critique, as it forces you the critic into the position of what Sara Ahmed famously calls the killjoy. She writes about the ethical duty to be a killjoy in the context of feminism, and argues that feminism is at its most urgent and important when it is inconvenient and challenging, when its ethical demands disrupt ordinary interactions and organisational procedure. The difficulty of feminism is the responsibility it places upon us to spoil the fun, to resist the pressure to be likeable and to play along with sexist joking or to participate in the perpetuation of antifeminist structures of harm.

Something similar happens to people who critique humour, too. Don't you know that Pokemon isn't real, that Mr Mime doesn't exist, that it's just a cartoon made to sell video games? Pikachu's defenders can say that the torture scene is just a joke, and that people who object to it on ethical or political grounds are politically correct woke wimps who should be ignored, pretentious snobs who just want to ruin everybody's enjoyment of harmless humour, those who would censor our freedom of speech. That is, my critique of these jokes as discursive artefacts which can have the potential political effects of legitimizing or trivializing police brutality is spoiling the fun by taking it too seriously. But we should always remember that humour is serious, fun is serious, and the interleaving of militaristic and fascist ideas into popular entertainment is perhaps at its most pernicious when it is presented as something harmless, cuddly, and enjoyable.

Prepare for torture! Which I do! All right, are we comfy? Doesn't matter!
This... Is... Torture!

This is another example of a torture joke, this time from *Minions*, the 2015 prequel to *Despicable Me* (2010). When the three main minions displease their master, a supervillain who has overthrown the British monarchy, she throws them in a dungeon where her husband subjects them to torture. He stretches them on the rack, hangs them, and threatens them with all manner of baroque, bloodcurdling implements. The joke is that the teflon-esque minions are amusingly impervious to the violence, that nothing hurts them, and that the minions and their torturer end up snapping polaroid selfies together. This scene is one of the movie's many scenes of slapstick play, but it is also a profoundly knotty representation of torture, at once depoliticizing and swollen with critical potential.

First of all, this section of *Minions* is set in late 1960s London, and it articulates a picture-postcard vision of fun, cool, swinging Britain, complete with a laddishly relatable Queen Elizabeth. Ironically enough, this was a time at which Britain was actively prosecuting colonial wars, the practicalities of which often included internment and punitive torture. As Ian Cobain writes at the conclusion of his book *Cruel Britannia* (2012), torture is "as British as suet pudding and red pillar-boxes".² And this scene in *Minions*, which locates a torture dungeon inside the basement of

² Ian Cobain, *Cruel Britannia: A Secret History of Torture* (London: Portobello, 2012), p. 309.

Buckingham Palace, can indeed be read as an oblique acknowledgment that torture is the hidden secret at the heart of power. Perhaps *Minions*, with its jokey scene in which no information is gained but a great deal of fun is had, articulates the insight that extreme bodily force is the guarantor of political authority, and that the torture machinery of Empire, though out of sight, springs into use at a moment's notice. Perhaps.



Perhaps, though, the most interesting aspect of the brief torture scene in *Minions* is that it provides a garish, medieval vision of what torture looks like and what it requires. Torture is often considered to be a matter of terrifying contraptions and complex apparatus, of chainsaws and gears and hot iron pokers, when in fact much of the torture that takes place in the world is low-tech and simple. Indeed, the notorious five techniques that were devised by the British for use against IRA prisoners were expressly designed to inflict maximum pain and distress without using any ghastly technology or leaving any lasting marks. Torture by contemporary democratic states, including the CIA's post-9/11 torture regime of non-scarring torture, known as clean, deniable torture and euphemized as enhanced interrogation techniques, most often involves sensory deprivation, starvation, and sleep deprivation, that is, forms of duress which leave no lasting external marks. And yet in the contemporary popular imagination, torture remains pyrotechnically medieval. This contributes to the misunderstanding that torture needs to be bombastic and elaborate, and that if it doesn't involve hideous cast-iron devices it somehow isn't torture.

So, this little scene actually carries a great deal of weight and articulates a great many myths and ideas about torture.

Before I talk to my guest this week, I want to acknowledge that it is not only heroes who torture, and that torture in family entertainment is not simply a matter of depoliticizing jokes and justification. In 2014's *Paddington* the torturer is a villain.

Let me tell you about my code. When somebody doesn't give me what I want, I remove their body parts. I start with the nasal hair – ow! – and

then I move onto something juicy. That's my code, and I always stick to it.
Do you always stick to yours?

[whimpering] It's not even really a code.

No?

It's more a set of guidelines than a binding ethos.

Then tell me. Where did you take the bear?

Windsor Gardens.

Thank you.

Here, the villain of the piece, a taxidermist played by Nicole Kidman who wants to kill the blameless, cuddly Paddington, tortures a cabbie played by Matt Lucas for information about the whereabouts of everybody's favourite marmalade-scoffing bear. It is true here that her resort to physical extortion is an index of her evil, and forms an important part of her characterisation as the villain of the movie. For torture is often used to demonstrate the sinister credentials of bad guys in films. So we don't see torture celebrated here. But it is still shown as effective. Even in the gesture that condemns torture as grotesque, scary, and evil, the film rearticulates the dangerous myth that torture is swiftly effective.



Paddington also provides a sanitized liberal vision of Britain, this time set in the 2010s. Paddington, an unrefined but very sincere and charming refugee from Peru whose imagination is filled with beautiful images of London as the centre of the world, is accepted into the bosom of a nice affluent white bourgeois family called the Browns. Ironically enough, this wholesome tale about the generous British embrace of the needy was released the same year that then-Home Secretary Theresa May introduced the 2014 Immigration Act, which formally codified into British law the [Hostile Environment](#) policy that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition had been enacting since 2012 at least. Once again, we see that Britain's romanticized self-image is at odds with its actual lived existence. If Paddington actually smuggled himself into Britain aboard a boat, he'd quite

swiftly find himself in an immigration detention centre waiting to be forced onto a deportation flight in the middle of the night.

So the final part of this episode is a conversation with my guest, [Thew Adams](#). He's my brother and he is a professional YouTuber, and we sat down to talk about the Transformers franchise. This franchise is interesting for me, because fundamentally it is a story about an endless conflict. The franchise's two warring factions, the heroic Autobots and the evil Decepticons, have been at war for thousands of years, and as the franchise has developed the nature of this war has developed too, from a conflict over access to the fuel resource Energon into a conflict over the meaning of freedom itself. Its allegorical potential, then, is considerable, and a huge variety of incarnations of the Transformers story have addressed its themes from a range of perspectives. In our conversation, we spoke about the development of the Transformers story over the last forty years, and spoke about the ways that different artists and filmmakers have engaged with its themes of conflict, power, and authority.

AA: So this is my brother Thew. For those of you who don't know, Thew is a Transformers fan content creator with a YouTube channel called Thew's Awesome Transformers Reviews where he reviews toys and gives opinions on Transformers lore, media, and collector culture more generally. Is that a fair summary of what you do, Thew?

Thew: I would say pretty much that's what I do. Er, I'm your brother and I'm out of my depth on this podcast.

AA: Love it. Before we get into the questions, it says here, er, can you give me a concise definition or summary of Transformers for those people who don't follow it? I mean, most people will probably know that there's, like, transforming robots and cars and planes and dinosaurs and stuff, but what's the universe of Transformers?

T: Essentially, Transformers is a property that's been around since the early eighties. I think the broader impression of Transformers is that it's a thing that was around in the eighties, then disappeared, and came back sort of in the late 2000s with the Michael Bay films, but actually it's always kind of been around in one form or another, whether it was the original series or the follow-up *Beast Wars* – Latter-day there's been different iterations of it in the comics media and there've been sort of reboots that have always managed to incorporate its core elements while keeping it fresh and bringing in sort of a new audience.

AA: Yeah.

T: But the themes have always been very similar, it's always been a very sort of clean cut good versus evil narrative. The original conceit of it is cooked up in order to sell toys, with the Autobots fighting for freedom and all that's good and just throughout the universe, but the Decepticons are their sort of counterpoint who just want to take everything over, steal all the resources, and rule with an iron fist. But in more recent years the lines have sort of blurred, they've been exploring themes of civil unrest and inequality. But they haven't shied away from exploring why these factions sort of came into being, and they've taken a more socially aware tack that perhaps the Autobots were the de facto rulers, sort of the government, the police, the bourgeoisie, and the Decepticons kind of rose up against them from the worker class to claim a form of equality...

AA: Yeah.

T: ...and establish a new sort of paradigm, but that – that movement often gets co-opted by thugs and becomes a tyranny in itself.

AA: So, what you're saying is that as the franchise has grown up with its viewers, it's added layers of meaning to, to that antagonism. So it's not just 'the goodies are goodies because we say they're goodies', it's like, actually we've had to establish that Optimus Prime is the leader of the resistance.

T: Well, that's exactly it, yeah, the Autobots more frequently these days end up as the sort of outnumbered and outgunned resistance faction struggling to stick with their morals and sort of retain that high ground in that sense.

AA: I'm thinking of the – I mean maybe we're jumping ahead a bit here – but I'm thinking of the Netflix *Siege* cartoon, and Megatron's not just an autocrat or whatever, he's actually the leader of a – of I guess what we would call like a populist, fascist revolution, you know, which has crushed what the old power structures were, and then Optimus Prime and his cadre of rebels are, like, trying to re-establish fairness where Megatron has taken it away as he's become like a, sort of fascist demagogue.

T: Its kind of the default version of the current Transformers setting, which is that Megatron has amassed this populist following and Optimus Prime is trying to cling to the old, good ways of sort of ensuring that everybody can thrive and not just one specific group. So that lets us root for them, even though it's never explicitly defined what happened.

AA: The revolution or whatever is left very vague.

T: Yeah, there are sort of elements that are drip-fed. Like we know that there was a big assassination of the previous leader, but we don't know what led up to that, and one of the pivotal plot points in the *Siege* story is that Optimus Prime won't sign Megatron's peace treaty. But we don't know what it says, we don't know what Megatron wants – we're to assume that it's bad, because he's the baddie, but that sort of rigid moralising from Optimus Prime sets up the Autobots as a sort of fatalistic death cult. But another interesting part is that a lot of the Autobots aren't fully on board with Optimus's plan either, and they do call him out on it and he just can't accept any other point of view. And I think that's kind of an interesting take on it. Um, shall we get into depictions of Optimus Prime over the years? [laughs]

AA: No, we can if you want. Because one of my next questions was, is it fair to say that the themes of Transformers move with the times? So, in the eighties maybe it was drawing on the idea of like resource wars, and then when you've got the Michael Bay movies, again, it's like you were saying, it's moving into that sort of more morally uncertain ground. And what Optimus Prime is sort of fighting for is 'freedom for all sentient beings'. Rather than being 'we can't let the Decepticons have all the Energon', it's more that there's like an ideological conflict there. Again that's quite sort of sloshily defined. I think this question of Optimus Prime, how he develops...

T: Yeah.

AA: ... from the kind of jovial fatherly figure in the eighties to...

T: Well that's it, it's impossible to succinctly sum that up because he is one of the only constants throughout every version of Transformers. There have been hundreds of Transformers stories and Optimus Prime is always central – almost always. In terms of sort of high-level depictions of him, the original one, like you say, was quite jovial and fatherly, he was the sort of John Wayne 'dad character', and that does come across in a lot of the character's wisdom and his leadership values. But, yeah, to come to the Michael Bay (laughs) films, a lot of that is lost...

AA: Yeah.

T: ... in the sort of swaggering Hollywood nonsense that, it's quite sort of, uh, authoritarian in its tones. One of the themes throughout the Michael Bay movies is it's always very pro-America, very pro-military.

AA: Yeah, because it's not like 'pew pew pew pew', now, it's exterminate...

T: Yeah, it's 'no mercy', 'bring the fight to them', Optimus Prime is, noticeably says 'I will kill you all' quite a lot in these films.

AA: Okay, so that's quite an interesting kind of historical trajectory.

T: Yeah. But then they rebooted the whole franchise with the *Bumblebee* (2018) film, which is...

AA: That was more family friendly.

T: It was yeah, it's actually – it's actually I'd say probably the best one, it's really good fun. Because it understands what Transformers needs to be, it has the right sort of family-friendly tone, it's more of a love story between a sad girl and her space robot.

AA: Okay.

T: Oh, there's a torture scene in that film, I forgot.

AA: That's interesting, so...

T: I forgot all about that.

AA: ... so is it the Decepticons...

T: They just batter him into unconsciousness. (laughs) It's – it's not very pleasant.

AA: No, it's interesting because there's... Already in the episode what I'm talking about before we get to this conversation I guess, is that there's different ways of representing torture in kids' films. And there's a bit in [*Detective*] *Pikachu* and a bit in *Zootopia* or *Zootropolis* where there's good guys torturing villains in order to get information and that's kind of played off as a bit of a joke but also used as a plot device. But then on the other hand in *Paddington* (laughs) um, there's a scene where the baddie does some torturing, but kind of the point is that she does still get information out of the guy, so it does work as a plot point, but the – it's kind of there to show how evil the

baddie is. So it's interesting because essentially torture has the same effect, but dependent on who's doing it...

T: Yeah, yeah, that's interesting. The Decepticons are sort of posing as friends to the, uh, US military so that they can access their intelligence network.

AA: Okay so there's a double agent thing?

T: Yeah, they pose as being friendlies and that Bumblebee is the evil ratbag that they've got to stop. (laughs) It is, when they torture Bumblebee, it's a horrific moment, because he's smaller than them, he's pathetic, he's already injured, so it's just gratuitous and it's awful, and it's depicted as a bad thing done by bad people for bad reasons. And in the end they don't get any information anyway. So it's shown as being quite useless. So I don't know if that's... Oh my God, can we talk about *Transformers 2* [*Revenge of the Fallen*, 2009] ? There's a moment in *Transformers 2* when Megan Fox's character is being stalked by a Decepticon who is a tiny little weaselly – he's the size of a child, this thing, it turns into a remote control car, it's very small and depicted as being quite fearful and pathetic, but it's working for the Decepticons so 'it's a baddie'. So what happens is Megan Fox captures this thing and burns its eye off with a blowtorch.

AA: Okay, so the girl is torturing a...

T: Yeah, yeah that's right. And it's played off as being a hilarious jape, because this thing is funny and it speaks like Joe Pesci, it's framed as being a funny scene but, you know, from that poor thing's point of view it's horrendous.

AA: I mean I remember [Megan Fox being very critical of Michael Bay](#) because she was saying that all he wanted her to do was, you know, wear a skimpy top and be attractive and there was nothing else that he really wanted from her.

T: Oh, basically yeah.

AA: Yeah. So kind of the point of the character in that scene is that she's cute and that she's torturing the little beastie. It's interesting how the torture scene is kind of sexualised and made into a joke at the same time. But does she also, like, get what she wants?

T: Well, yeah, I mean she's not like playing it up as a sexual, sort of, act or anything, but she does get what she needs. Because she physically overpowers this creature because it's tiny and pathetic. So she throws it in a toolbox and just takes it with her on an adventure, and when she finally lets it out, it starts humping her leg and falls in love with her.

AA: So it's almost as though at the same time as she's battered it into submission, she's kind of seduced it in a way, even though she's...

T: She didn't actively try and...

AA: It's had the effect of seducing the character.

T: Yeah, basically, she doesn't actively try and do that, I don't think, but that is what ends up happening, yeah.

AA: I was interested in that scene because you were saying that the Michael Bay films started out as being very much family-orientated, didn't they? I mean they got darker over the course of the series, but to begin with there was lots of, like, humour, and...

T: That's right. Well, the first one, Steven Spielberg was involved. So there are moments of, like, actual warmth and genuine wonder in that film. But the second one was a huge drop-off, it's incredibly vulgar and stupid. When our hero characters are introduced, there's the initial action scene with some Transformers blowing some stuff up and whatever, but then when we cut to the family characters, the mum and dad and Sam, who's the de facto protagonist, when they're introduced the very first thing you see is two dogs humping. *That's* the establishing shot (laughs).

AA: (laughing) okay, so it's got that – it's got that vein of quite coarse humour through it anyway, but then also...

T: I want to say it's out of place, but it's not really. This squiggling wretch of a thing being horrifically mutilated, but because it's being done by a character we're supposed to like it's played off as funny.

AA: Okay, so I think we've pretty much touched on most of the things I wanted to talk about but the last thing I wanted to ask you about I think is... okay here's the question. I know there was some controversy about Prowl, the police Autobot, in the context of Black Lives Matter last ...

T: Oh gosh, that was um, yeah, that was a little bit complicated. Essentially there's the ongoing IDW comics series of Transformers and they sort of position themselves as quite socially responsible, they have a lot of LGBT representation in a lot of the stories, including in Transformers, they've opened up a lot of those doors. But essentially what happened with the Prowl thing was, there was an issue that came out, uh, right at the height of the George Floyd protests, which unfortunately (laughs)... it was... A lot of it was timing as well, there was a lot of delays due to the COVID situation as well, so this issue was slated for the first half of the year and it ended up coming out in June, which was right when the George Floyd protests were kicking off. But in said issue, the storyline is that Prowl has to take his little task force and sort of squeeze some information out of some people, and he ends up roughing up a suspect in custody... which was (groans) just not cute, it was a really bad look.

AA: Yeah, that's a – yeah, that's really unfortunate, particularly as Prowl's, he's one of the kind of archetypal original heroic...

T: That's right, yeah, he's always been part of the brand, and he's the one who turns into a police car, and his depictions recently have been increasingly sort of morally grey, he's more willing to bend the rules to get what he needs and serve his own ends through whatever means. And it was just sheer sort of dumb bad look – bad luck, and it was a bad look – but it was dumb bad luck that that issue dropped when it did, because we're still nominally supposed to sympathise with him. It is questioned in the text of the story itself whether what they're doing is acceptable, but it was just I – I don't know if they meant to hit it when it was so hot.

AA: Yeah. So it's interesting that on the one hand you've got these very, I guess, militaristic and conservative high-profile movies, but then you've also got the kind of comic franchises which have a much more kind of varied and inclusive approach and remit, and as you were saying LGBT...

T: Yeah, yes there are. For one thing they've introduced a lot more girl characters, because one of the things about Transformers, especially if you watch the early series, you will notice they are all dudes apart from, like, two or three characters. So they've tried to ramp up sort of female representation in there, but also there are a lot of same-sex relationships, there are canonically transgender characters. So it's a lot more inclusive than it used to be, which is, it can only be a good thing, which is nice.

AA: Yeah, that's good, I mean that's kind of nice to hear I think. But then it's interesting that that's the one that gets in trouble...

T: Yeah...

AA: ...That kind of has that really unfortunate misstep. Because it's not so much that there's anything wrong with telling that story, it's just that the way you do it...

T: Well, that's it, and that wasn't the only issue with that particular story as well, because as part of the story there's a protest outside of Cybertron City Hall saying that the government aren't doing a good enough job and there's somebody holding up a sign that says 'No Justice No Peace' – 'No Justice No Rule', I think it was, but it's the same thing. So that I think stoked the fires...

AA: Yeah, because it's trying to be – in a way it's trying to do the right thing.

T: Yeah, it's trying to tell the right story, just not necessarily (awkwardly) at the right time. I don't know, they did kind of address it, they all addressed it, the publisher, the author, and the artist who included the sign, they all sort of addressed it and said, 'Yeah, that wasn't what we were going for, sorry'.

AA: Right, okay. It's nice to hear that there's some accountability with the artists there.

T: Yeah, yeah, it's just good to see that they were responsive to criticism, and uh, they addressed it and they didn't sort of dismiss it. Yeah, I think it's nice to see creators take responsibility, you know.

AA: Yeah, rad. Is there anything else you wanted to add or say on the, I guess the topic of politics in Transformers but also specifically with relation to this question of authority and violence and torture? I mean, you said you were reading...

T: [*Transformers: Autocracy*](#), yeah. It's kind of the most notable example of Transformers trying to address the societal divides within its text. Basically, it depicts Optimus Prime as a cop, essentially, serving a completely totalitarian government, and he comes to realise why the unrest has come to be, and it paints an interesting picture in that the Decepticon movement has been ignored for so long that it's basically everybody now except the cops. The whole populace is on the side of what the Decepticons want, which is just 'Tories Out', basically.

AA: I like it, yeah.



Transformers: War For Cybertron: Siege, episode 3.

T: There's another note I've made here, coming back to *Transformers: Siege*, there is a very sort of basic depiction of torture in that. It's, again, perpetrated by the baddies on somebody in order to get information, he lies to them so they'll stop torturing him, so they don't get the information and then they just kill him. It's a bad thing that gets no results and just ends up perpetrating or perpetuating more death and suffering.

AA: Yeah, okay. That's quite cool, I quite like that, because that's one of the things I look for in like, popular cultural texts. Because you see anti-heroes and grimdark Jack Bauer figures having to 'do what it takes', and it's really nice to see a representation of torture that doesn't engage the question of 'does it work', it's just...

T: Yeah. This is horrible, and it doesn't work, and it's done by horrible wankers, stop it.

That's a great note to end the interview on, I think, because sometimes it's difficult to articulate my position more clearly and effectively than that.

I'd like to thank Thew for that chat – we spoke about a lot more than I had time to include here, of course. You can find his channel at Toygrind.com, and follow him on Twitter at @Toygrind.

So now I'd like to wrap up. What can we conclude about torture in family entertainment? First, we can definitely say that it is as varied and prominent here as it is in entertainment for more adult audiences. Family entertainment may not exhibit the same degree of horror or detail, but many of its ideological characteristics remain similar, particularly the ways in which torture is used as a story device to provide characterisation, plot detail, or even comic relief.

Second, I want to return to the question of socialization. It is useless to deny the presence of political ideas, discussions, and discourses in texts for younger readers. Clearly stories socialize us, and we

should be critical of the ways they encourage us to think about violence. But it is also clearly reductive to claim that stories simply brainwash or indoctrinate us. At their best, they help us think. One of the things I enjoyed taking from my conversation with Thew is the way in which some Transformers texts encourage us to see torture as a gruesome, indefensible fascist excess – that is, *Transformers: Siege* encourages us to see torture critically, for what it is.

The representation of torture can't be reduced to a matter of glamorization or endorsement, although this is of course a possible political effect of certain representational styles or traditions. Film is wonderful because it can also be used to critique political institutions, tendencies, and practices, although we should heavily caveat that this too is a complex and problematic process.

So, this concludes the third episode of Doctor Smash's Film Club. Again, I'd like to recommend that you visit my website atadamswriting.com for more information about me and my work, and if you've enjoyed the theme music or my musical interludes, do check out milkandmedicine.bandcamp.com. Thank you for listening, and I will see you next time!