

Revealing Torture

A review of



Screening Torture: Media Representations of State Terror and Political Domination

by Michael Flynn and Fabiola F. Salek (Eds.)

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Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles. . . . He saved hundreds of thousands of lives. . . . Are you going to convict Jack Bauer? . . . Is any jury going to convict Jack Bauer? I don't think so. (Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, 2007, referring to the protagonist of the television drama *24*; "Scalia and Torture," 2007)

At the end of an episode of the Fox Television series *The Following*, rogue FBI agent Ryan Hardy (Kevin Bacon) asks his superior if he can have some time alone with a suspect. Facing a life-or-death situation, the team needs immediate answers. Hardy says, "We're going to have to start doing things a different way."

The "different way" Hardy is referring to is torture. The use of torture to elicit information has become a common Hollywood device that cultivates the erroneous belief that physical and psychological suffering not only yield useful information but can do so

quickly. An “erotically enticing” dramatic tool, torture is simultaneously frightening and fascinating (McCoy, 2006, p. 14). Television programs such as *24*, *The Following*, *Homeland*, and others routinely show torture as an effective and productive method of interrogation used by government authorities.

In the book *Screening Torture: Media Representations of State Terror and Political Domination*, 13 authors explore torture as shown in visual media. Some write from the perspective of individuals who, in addition to their academic credentials, have experience working with human rights and immigration organizations.

Examining representations of torture over the past decade in films (documentary, action, and political) and on television (comedies, dramas), *Screening Torture* traces the increased mainstreaming of torture not only in American visual media but also in films from the Middle East, Latin America, China, Europe, and South Africa. This interdisciplinary collection by journalists, historians, criminologists, media specialists, and psychologists is a comprehensive overview of government policies, first-person experiences, and textual analyses.

The book is divided into four parts. The first focuses on the connection between torture and masculinity, with authors examining the character of Jack Bauer in *24* and the male characters in three Mel Gibson films. In Part II authors examine the connection between torture and sexuality in Chinese filmmaking as well as its reception by viewers in America and China. The films *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* are discussed as examples of historical media that rely on torture to examine sexual power and desire, and a reflection on photography referencing Susan Sontag is undertaken in a chapter on the Abu Ghraib photographs. To conclude the section, Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* is reexamined as an anti- rather than protorture artifact, or what is called “art against torture” (see chapter by Strange, p. 159).

Part III situates the literature in the international sphere with examinations of South African and Israeli films. Finally, in Part IV authors critique the film industry for reinforcing audiences’ preconceived (and erroneous) beliefs about how torture is conducted, who is responsible for it, what official government policies say, and what governments do (which is often in conflict with official policies).

Tracing the representational roots from “torture-porn” slasher films to present-day television dramas, the book examines the proliferation of torture in media (Edelstein, 2006). In the past, torture was primarily portrayed as the act of depraved, psychopathic individuals: Viewer sympathies were situated with the tortured rather than with the torturer.

However, since 9/11, the dynamic has reversed, and torture as a means of eliciting intelligence has gone mainstream. As film critic David Edelstein (2006, para. 2) noted, “I am baffled by how far this stuff goes—and by why Americans seem so nuts these days about torture.” Whether portrayed in comedies, dramas, detective/police shows, or action films, torture prevails as a technique that quickly educes high-quality, trustworthy information;

little to no attention is paid to the physical or psychological consequences to the victim or torturer.

According to the UN Convention Against Torture, torture is “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession” (United Nations, 1984, Art. 1). All forms of torture were banned in 1948 by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The United States played a key role in drafting that document.

Despite prolific, publicly voiced condemnation of torture and international legal prohibitions, the practice prevails. A 2004 *Washington Post/ABC News* poll taken immediately after the Abu Ghraib scandal found that many consider physical and psychological torture as separate. Although 63 percent of the Americans surveyed opposed torture, they supported the use of sleep deprivation, stress positions, and noise bombardment (Morin & Deane, 2004).

In spite of the U.S. military’s admonition in a field manual that “no person in the custody or under the control of DOD [Department of Defense], regardless of nationality or physical location, shall be subject to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, in accordance with and as defined in U.S. law” (Detainee Treatment Act of 2005, Sec. 1003), activities such as water boarding; inducement of hypothermia; deprivation of basic needs such as medical care, water, or food; hooding; forcing detainees to be naked, perform sexual acts, or pose in a sexual manner; electric shock; burning; beatings; and intimidation through using military dogs have been documented in recent years (see chapters by Lazreg, McCoy, and Mestrovic).

Under the G. W. Bush administration, using torture gained the euphemisms “enhanced interrogation” and “Gitmo-ize” (see chapter by Mestrovic, p. 285). *Screening Torture* suggests that these euphemisms were used to veil the acts from the eyes of an otherwise critical public. Methods such as water boarding became key weapons in the military and Central Intelligence Agency’s arsenal (McCoy, 2006, p. 122; Rejali, 2009). In Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, Afghanistan, and Iraq, torture became routinized. Many of the interrogators had little to no training in what was to become standard operating procedure. Thus, how to carry out specific techniques and beliefs about what results to expect were often learned from television shows such as *24*. As evidenced by the quote at the beginning of this review, even Supreme Court Justice Scalia used the program as a frame of reference.

Although women do torture, this book explores the primarily male endeavor, especially how torture is intimately related to definitions of masculinity and exercises in power. Often unfamiliar with and untrained in interrogation, soldiers found themselves in situations in which they were ordered to elicit information from captive Afghani, Iraqi, or other detainees and, due to inexperience, perceived threat, or desperation, resorted to using torture, even if that information led nowhere (as in the “weapons of mass destruction” scandal during the G. W. Bush administration). Many interrogation techniques were Cold War holdovers. Military personnel often drew on media representations for inspiration (see

chapters by Danzig, p. 22, and Berry, p. 86). These fictional models functioned as justification for their behavior.

Known as “convenient truths” (see chapter by Rejali, p. 219), military personnel’s rationalizations for torture came from beliefs that they had seen it used (even if in a movie or on television) and that other governments used the same techniques (even if that information was based on television shows or movies). Throughout these well-written, intriguing, and informative chapters, readers can find support for what torture historian Darius Rejali (2007) has identified as the “five myths” about torture and truth:

1. Torture worked for the Gestapo. [It did not.]
2. Everyone talks sooner or later under torture. [They do not.]
3. People will say anything under torture. [They do, whether true or not.]
4. Most people can tell when someone is lying under torture. [No, they cannot.]
5. You can train people to resist torture. [This is not possible.]

How the media frame and present information can have powerful effects on what audiences think they understand about law enforcement. For example, studies have identified “the CSI effect” (Shelton, 2008). Viewers of the television program *CSI* (and other crime programs) tend to believe that the forensic science shown on the show is actually available to crime labs. Similarly, what might be called “the torture effect” occurs when viewers of media in which torture is shown as an effective and efficient means of gathering intelligence believe it to be true.

As to the quality of information retrieved, Thomas Hobbes (1651/2010, p. 145) wrote of torture in *The Leviathan*, “Accusations upon torture are not to be reputed as testimonies.” When the recipient is in pain, such testimonies “tendeth to the ease of him that is tortured, not to the informing of the torturers.” Furthermore, *Screening Torture* reveals the truth of what John Locke (1689/2009) wrote of in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, namely, that a state that tortures is made up of hypocrites.

So goes the United States. Although the editors state that they aimed for neutrality in the book, the evidence presented by the authors—through careful documentation of laws, policies, experiences, and first-person narratives—reveals that torture was and is used widely and that the media are influential in positioning it in the public mind.

Connections Between Screen Torture and Psychology

Screening Torture is an appropriate and important book for many fields, most particularly media studies and psychology. For decades researchers in both disciplines have identified the effects of violent media on children’s propensity to model behavior they see on

television and in film. The public's acceptance and the military's use of torture as a means of eliciting information are clearly powerful effects of televised and cinematic representations of it.

Although thus far the effects have been primarily negative, exemplified by misinformed audiences who can become desensitized to the violence and violations that torture brings, Carolyn Strange in her chapter acknowledges that film and television could play a positive role in educating viewers: "Film texts, alongside investigative journalism and human rights workers, may play as great a role as lawmakers in questioning the conduct of coalition partners in the war on terror" (p. 159).

The question remains: Why are media so seldom used this way? Perhaps the political outweighs the moral. As Rejali observes in his chapter, "People everywhere prefer imagining torture in ways that leave their lives unchanged and their politics untouched—that is the torture talk we Americans, from left to right, want. Until we want to change, see you at the movies" (p. 235).

The American Psychological Association (2009) has clearly stated that psychologists' participation in torture is unethical, no matter the circumstances. Although *Screening Torture* doesn't address psychologists' participation specifically, it does discuss the psychological impact of torture. Those with interests in psychopathology and media effects will find the book informative, as will practitioners working with individuals suffering from posttraumatic stress syndrome. The internalization of fictional media-generated information has resulted in its reenactment.

The book provides current examples of how film and television contribute to distorted views of torture. It is also a reminder that there are always, as Albert Memmi (1991) noted of colonization, two victims of torture—the tortured and the torturer, who must live with the acts he or she committed against another human being.

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