

*“Entertaining Torture: The Politics of Torture as Inflected in Three Genres”*

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**INTRODUCTION**

This paper compares the politically-inflected thematization of torture in two genre-driven television series and a film sub-genre – *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), *24* (2001- ), and torture porn (2004-2007). It relates the logic of torture in these fictive treatments to larger debates about Abu Ghraib and the morality of torture circulating in public discourse.

*Battlestar Galactica* implicitly draws parallels to current political realities, largely from a leftist perspective, including the issue of torture, its questionable effectiveness, and its association with sexual violation. Striving for an uncharacteristically high degree of realism, as it “reimagines” not only the 1970s series for our times but also the sci-fi genre’s capacity for political relevance, the program depicts torture as brutality. In contrast, *24* is widely interpreted as tackling these issues from a rightist perspective. It repeatedly exploits the ticking bomb scenario: if you only have 24 hours to stop a mortal terrorist attack, the state should be able to use torture. The series legitimates the morality of torture and depicts it as action-oriented thrill.

Torture porn, a sub-genre of horror, centrally figures scenes of torture, confinement, and surveillance. These graphic films frame torture as a spectacle for recreational terror, while tapping into anxieties about the threat of victimization and a sullied sense of national identity in the wake of Abu Ghraib. They serve the historical role of horror to provide a safe haven for indulging anxiety and ambivalence.

Though filmgoers have been reluctant to embrace Iraq-themed movies, even those that have garnered glowing critical reviews, the programs and films discussed here have been financially successful, in some cases major hits. Restaging the political dynamics of terrorism, torture, and national identity in science fiction, action, or horror format allows the material to maneuver past audience aversion to more realistic depiction of these issues. Specifically, here I will address how genre provides the aesthetic distance necessary to avoid alienating audience while engaging the issue of torture.

### *Torture as Heroic*

*24* is a FOX action series about counterterrorist agent Jack Bauer's struggle to prevent a catastrophic terrorist attack on US soil. The signature trait of the series is that events transpire in real time, with the 24 episodes of the season depicting 24 hours of a single day, the time allotted to resolve the crisis. Though some terrorist strikes are successful, Bauer can usually, in action-thriller superman mode, avert the boldest terrorist threats including the detonation of nuclear bombs, and the unleashing of bioweapons. He does so by using any means necessary, including torture. The first season debuted shortly after Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>, but its groundwork was laid prior to that day. From season 2 forward, torture became a central and recurring spectacle of the program, tied to the "time is running out" generic device of the thriller, the real-time format of the show, and the ticking bomb scenario.

The series combines several elements to render the regular and graphic use of torture more palatable to viewers when committed by counterterrorist agents, Bauer in particular. The narrative goes to great lengths to depict the counterterrorist unit's sense of urgency as the clock ticks down. Playing on the videogame aesthetic, they race to resolve

a series of crises, to advance the puzzle-solving process, to capture the terrorists before they can inflict mass-scale murder, to win the game. Since time is of the essence, as the digital clock counting down the hour repeatedly reminds us, immediacy is highly prized. Methods must be effective and quick. Torture on *24*, at least when performed by Bauer, is almost always effective and relatively quick, inflicting little if any long term damage. This dynamic takes precedence over concerns about civil liberties and alienates the viewer from the pain being inflicted on the suspect. Thus, it reinforces the perspective of the torturer, who remains distant from the pain he inflicts.

Secondary characters sometimes raise moral objections to torture, but the show never seriously engages these objections, nor does it depict torture backfiring (Mayer). Instead, it allows characters, and more importantly, outcomes on the ground, to reiterate that torture saves lives. This is a consistent feature of the action thriller, which does not worry about legal niceties, but does worry about averting disaster.

The action-thriller coding of the program, the twists and turns of uncovering a conspiracy, the overarching sense of jeopardy, all convey a sense of amped up fun to the viewer. It is within this context that torture joins the repertoire of violent confrontations common to the genre. Together these elements provide not only Bauer, but also the viewer, with a moral alibi to condone the torture, as we condone the killing committed by state agents as necessary to the larger purpose, and to enjoy the program, including its more flinch-inducing moments.

The audience's comfort with torture is contingent on the misconceptions *24* promotes, that torture quickly and reliably secures intelligence, that there is no other way to extract the information, and that securing intelligence is torture's primary purpose.

Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, describes torture as a complex system that hides behind the pretext that torture is motivated by the search for intelligence when its real purpose is to project an image of power for a teetering regime (28).

*24* sanitizes Bauer's use of torture by making it quick and effective, almost surgical in its precision and measured character. It lacks the lengthy timeline of real-world torture. Bauer has mere minutes to extract information and stops torturing as soon as that information is forthcoming. This differs from the real-world situation in which torture extends for days, weeks, months, and years. In the system of torture, even the interrogation is primarily a way of wounding, and the forced confession – whether true or false is irrelevant – is its poisoned fruit, meant to anguish the victim with a sense of having betrayed everyone and everything that matters to him/her.

By clearly aligning Bauer's use of torture with the greater good, *24* defines Jack's power as torturer "in terms of his own vulnerability and need" which is nothing short of the nation's vulnerability and need (Scarry 58). He is forced to take extreme measures and to pay the cost, as evidenced by his anguish when he lashes out at terrorist Sayed Ali, "I despise you for making me do this" during the (feigned) execution (via video feed) of Ali's child ("7 pm" 2.12). In narrative terms, Jack's suffering serves to expiate the sins he commits to keep us safe. Jack feels distressed so that we do not have to.

Furthermore, the interrogation is important because it serves to negate the agony the torturer is inflicting by insisting on the urgency and significance of his questions (Scarry 29). The questions are there, in part, to alleviate the torturer's conscience. *24*, working within the parameters of the action genre, has offered reassurance, not just to the

audience at large but to policy makers like US Dept. of Justice lawyer, John Yoo, that torture is the right thing to do, while packing an action-oriented thrill.

The embrace of torture on *24* is rooted in the worldview of its executive producer, creator, and showrunner Joel Surnow, a self-described “right-wing nut job” and friend of the Bush White House, who believes torture works and supports its use. In stark contrast to the moral certainty of *24* is a series that probes moral ambiguity. *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-09) which reimagined the 1978-79 television series, is described by its liberal-minded creators, Ronald Moore and David Eick, as being about our post-9/11 reality and the Iraq War.

***It's Not Enough to Survive, One Has to be Worthy of Surviving***

*BSG* is set in the aftermath of a genocidal surprise attack against the human Colonials by the Cylons, a robot race created by the Colonials to serve them, but who rebel against their masters when they develop self-awareness. Some models look like people, made of flesh and bone, and it is they who infiltrate the Colonial worlds to sabotage their defenses and render them vulnerable to a cataclysmic nuclear attack. The battleship *Galactica* survives and leads a small fleet of civilians in search of a new home, with the Cylons in hot pursuit.

The science fiction format gives the program license to speak critically since sci-fi is deemed a speculative form at a remove from reality. To enhance sci-fi's capacity for political relevance, Moore and Eick grounded the program in naturalism at the level of both production values and subject matter. The program relies extensively on hand-held camera techniques to forge a documentary feel, and the writers work real world political issues into the script. The emotional palette of the series is dark, as it deals not only with

torture but also genocide, suicide bombing, religious fanaticism, and life under occupation. The long-term toll of the attack on the characters is injurious and deep-seated. At times they seem to be in the throes of posttraumatic stress.

Airing on SciFi, a cable channel, *BSG* is a serialized drama with an ensemble of morally ambiguous characters whose arcs reveal over time the back-story, motivations, and identities of both Cylons and Colonials, allowing for a more nuanced treatment of the conflict. In a departure from generic norms, the series shifts the emphasis from plot-driven to character-driven narrative. The series depicts not only the Cylons, but also the Colonials exercising extreme measures such as suicide bombing and torture.

In season 1 when a humanoid Cylon, Leoben, is discovered aboard the fleet, Lt. Kara Thrace is sent to interrogate him and learns that he planted a nuclear warhead, which is set to go off in a matter of hours (“Flesh and Bone” 1.8). Motivated by this ticking bomb, she continues her interrogation and has him beaten by soldiers and waterboarded. Showrunner Ron Moore has acknowledged that this episode, which first aired December 6<sup>th</sup> 2004, was influenced by the accounts of abuse at Abu Ghraib that came to light that year. Thrace justifies her torture to the President: “It’s a machine, sir. There’s no limit to the tactics I can use.” But over time, as her torture fails to break him, his suffering breaks her tenacious grip on the belief that he is only a thing, the very thing that allowed her to torture him in the first place. In the end Leoben admits that he fabricated the bomb threat to prolong his life. But had he been telling the truth, torture would not have changed the outcome; the bomb would have gone off.

Torture on *BSG* is consistently shown as morally repugnant and ineffective. During the second season, the *Galactica* encounters another surviving battlestar, the

Pegasus, who have onboard a Cylon prisoner, Gina (“Pegasus” 2.10). With the authorization of Admiral Helena Cain, men of the Pegasus crew have serially raped and beaten Gina into an abject state, “swallowed alive by the body” (Scarry 50). Echoing the words of Thrace, Cain’s second in command exclaims, “You can’t rape a machine...” (“Resurrection Ship Part II” 2.12). In a more truthful turn, Cain justifies the torture, which yields no intelligence, as revenge for the hundreds of crew members she lost when their defense capacity was hamstrung by Gina’s sabotage. Here the *raison d’être* of torture, to bolster a regime of power in the aftermath of a devastating defeat, is outed.

The series’ willingness to depict rape as a method of torture becomes even more difficult to watch when Sharon, the Galactica’s Cylon prisoner, a richly fleshed out and well-liked character, is about to be “interrogated” by Pegasus men, without the consent of Galactica’s Commander. Until now in Galactica custody, Sharon has been treated humanely and has in turn provided valuable intelligence. Before the attack is interrupted, Sharon is choked, struck, and pinned to a bunk to be anally raped. Ron Moore explains why they opted to ratchet up the duration and graphicness of the rape-torture scene: “We wanted it to be clear...how ugly this was...the brutality of it...the violation of it...”<sup>1</sup> Moore did not want to depict torture as something that could be excused.

*BSG* shows the sexualized character of torture, which even when it does not involve rape per se, often involves symbolic forms of sexual degradation. As Susan Sontag argues in “The Photographs Are Us: Regarding the Torture of Others,” violence and sex are routinely conjoined in the torture practices of Abu Ghraib.

*BSG* depicts the human struggle with the less heroic face of violence. It stages the torturer’s inability to recognize the subjectivity or suffering of his/her victim in a self-

critical light. It suggests the cost of this brutality to the society that sanctions it. The mercilessness of the Cylon attack primes the Colonials for reprisals, and the knowledge that the enemy is not human seems to license any act. But in the end, the Cylons turn out to be not that different from us, for better or worse. And the price of brutality is shown to be too costly. On *BSG*, the capacity for evil is not limited to our enemies or to a few “bad apples.” It is part of what we do in the name of war. And in the end, it comes back to bite us. As Commander Adama puts it, “It’s not enough to survive. One has to be worthy of surviving” (“Resurrection Ship, Part II” 2.12).

### *Let’s Play a Game*

Torture porn refers to a popular cycle of horror films released largely between 2004 and 2007 (McKendry) that centrally figures scenes of torture, confinement, and surveillance aimed at American characters, often set abroad, most of whom die. Dubbed in 2006 by David Edelstein, these films frame torture as a spectacle for recreational terror (Pinedo), while tapping into anxieties about the threat of victimization and the looming importance of torture in public discourse.

The horror genre’s use of torture as a dramatic device predates this cycle, which harkens back to the grindhouse films of the seventies, though torture porn intensifies the varieties of torture portrayed, as well as its graphic detail. Though it is a historically recurring phenomenon for a genre that strives to “go too far,” to raise the ante on violence, its current escalation has been fueled by the availability of raw online violence footage featuring digital video of crimes or atrocities taken from cameras or phones and posted to sites like liveleak.com (Tait). For those who do not seek out such sites, the disclosure of abuses at Abu Ghraib and the accompanying photographic evidence was

widely publicized in 2004. A sullied sense of national identity emerged in the wake of these revelations, and in the intervening years, evidence has emerged that, far from a rogue operation, this was standard operating procedure for the military, sanctioned by the White House, and perpetrated not only in Iraq, but also in Guantanamo (Cuba) and Bagram (Afghanistan), though Abu Ghraib remains the synecdoche for torture.

As torture came front and center in the post-9/11 discussion of terrorism, torture porn films were among the first to approach torture, wrapped in the conventions of the horror genre: the bad place, graphic violence, impenetrable monsters, a high body count. In addition, the subgenre makes torture enjoyable through the use of a gaming aesthetic particularly in the *Saw* films (2004-present) where people are abducted and held captive, rigged to a timed deadly mechanical device and either quickly given a choice of performing acts of self-mutilation to escape, or left to investigate their environment for clues that will lead them to puzzles to solve before the clock runs out. The gamemaster, who intones, “Let’s play a game” to his victims, purports to be teaching people to appreciate life.

The films, shot on HD, use minimalist sets and a gritty aesthetic to “limit visual complications, making sure the eye focuses on the torture [undistracted by] complicated background images” (McKendry 7). The films contextualize violence in the familiar and reassuring formats of the horror film and the videogame, making it accessible for viewers to enjoy. Again, this is not completely new either. In 1990 Vera Dika characterized the slasher film as a rule-guided game and argued that its popularity could not be attributed to the violence alone without regard to its playfulness.

Though it is possible to read the disjuncture between what Jigsaw says and does as echoing US political leaders who claim to be acting to protect us through the use of torture, while generating more anti-American violence with their policies, the *Saw* films are not among the more politically-inflected ones. For that we have to turn to *Hostel* (2005) and *The Hills Have Eyes II* (2007).<sup>2</sup> I will only have time to discuss the former. In *Hostel*, young, predominantly male, white tourists in Eastern Europe are abducted and tortured to death by men willing to pay. Americans fetch the highest bids. Eli Roth, its politically conscious director, sees the film as narratively acting out American antipathy abroad, and aesthetically as resonating with online terrorist videos depicting the decapitation of Western abductees like journalist Daniel Pearl. Roth's reference to execution videos posted on extremist websites and reposted on cult sites, links changes in the horror film to changes in government policy during the Bush administration. As the gloves have come off US military policies about torture, the horror film's torturers have donned plastic gloves to keep their grip on knives, hammers, axes, power drills, and other implements as they become slippery with blood.

### ***Conclusion***

Mainstream public discourse about torture is translated into popular culture in ways that reinforce or reframe it. *24*, *BSG*, and the torture porn cycle ran largely during the second Bush term, which was characterized by a pandering press, loath to risk White House retaliation and the label of "unpatriotic" by asking hard questions. The Bush administration stifled open debate about government-sanctioned torture practices. It was popular culture, protected by the smokescreen of genre, which raised the issue more frankly.

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*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> DVD commentary for the extended version of "Pegasus."

<sup>2</sup> In *The Hills Have Eyes II*, a group of National Guard trainees prepare for deployment in Afganistan by drilling in the New Mexico desert. There, they are systematically picked off or abducted and raped by mutants (victims of government nuclear bomb testing) hiding in the hills, which are strewn with a warren of caves that the mutants navigate to appear, strike, and escape. The ill equipped soldiers are not as familiar with the environment as the mutants, who fight like a guerilla force.

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