

## MOVIES

In a brutal world, why do we like violent entertainment?

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There is a scene in "Oldboy" -- the dank revenge thriller from South Korean director Park Chan-wook currently in theaters -- that rankles the nerves.

A man is tied to a chair, his head strapped back and jaw secured open thanks to an inventive use of duct tape. The man's tormentor stands before him, eyeing the clawed end of the hammer head. What happens next is an act of brutality that sends the victim staggering off with a bloody rag in his mouth in search of a good dentist.

In a film resplendent with stylized, pulp-gothic violence, this depiction of torture is arguably one of the most unsettling moments in the movie. And all in the name of rowdy, good-time entertainment.

Despite the cringe-inducing, dream-plaguing nature of the scene, for a certain segment of the moviegoing audience (this reporter is guilty as charged) there is also something intensely and morbidly fascinating about cinematic torture.

"Scenes of torture are more compelling than those shoot-'em-up scenes of carnage, which are usually shot at a distance and more about the dispatching of evil," says Cynthia Felando, a lecturer in the film studies department at the University of California at Santa Barbara, whose research centers on violence in film.

"Torture becomes so intimate and so personal," she says. "It's almost like pornography in that way."

Extreme measures

And just as pornography has gradually moved into the mainstream in recent years, so has a genre of highly graphic filmmaking often referred to as extreme cinema.

Movies that fall into this category include "Oldboy"; another work from the same director called "Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance" (2002), which contains a torture scene involving electricity; the difficult-to-watch Japanese film "Audition" (1999) from director Takashi Miike, infamous for its final 30-minutes of dismemberment and eyeball acupuncture; and from France, Gaspar Noe's "Irreversible" (2002), with its extended depiction of rape. They are all a form of moviegoing as endurance test.

So why are audiences simultaneously drawn to, and seriously disturbed by, gruesome portrayals of torture?

Felando theorizes that the answer is not rooted in the actual images of physical violence. "There is something so compelling about the psychosis driving those scenes. They tend to take place in close-up and are often about a conversation. There's a lot of dialogue -- not the quips you would get from an Arnold Schwarzenegger or a Bruce Willis. There's often this element of 'How much

can they withstand before they lose touch with who they are -- their psychic identity?' which can be a much scarier concept than the violence."

In other words, depictions of torture have an uncanny way of tapping into our most suppressed fears, which Felando says might explain "that attraction-repulsion syndrome; because the scenes are of a longer duration, it gives us time to ponder ourselves."

According to Lester Friedman, a cinema studies teacher at Northwestern University, this is where it gets really interesting.

"There are two ways to identify with what's going on in a torture scene," he says. "You put yourself in the place of the victim, and there is this idea that the act of suffering can ennoble a person. Or, the less talked about, more disturbing element is when there's identification with the torturer. I think that kind of identification has to do with power and control -- of not being the one out of control, even when that control evinces itself in these terrible acts.

"The question," he adds, "and I don't think it's something we consciously think about when we're watching a movie, is under what circumstances could this befall me? If I had the choice of inflicting suffering or receiving it, which would I choose?"

With its flashy, superstylized treatment of violence, "Sin City," Robert Rodriguez's adaptation of the Frank Miller noir-drenched comic book series, is also awash in blood and gore. It includes two scenes of torture which, because of the cartoonish, non-realistic nature of the visuals, surprisingly don't register as such.

"There are so many references to torture in that movie, but they are so fleeting and at such a distance," Felando says. "I kept waiting for [the equivalent of] the ear-cutting scene from 'Reservoir Dogs' and it never comes," she says, referencing director Quentin Tarantino's debut feature. (Tarantino, incidentally, is credited as a "guest director" on "Sin City.")

### Palatable gore

It is one of the more palatable forms of cinematic torture in a current movie. "My wife hates violence," Friedman points out. "She's a physician and sees enough of it every day in real life. But when she found out I was going to see 'Sin City,' she said, 'Oh, I really wanted to see that. I don't think I'll be bothered by it.' And I was floored by that reaction. You could argue that we've become more sophisticated, or this is a reflection of reality, or our sensibilities have been dulled."

Fritz Allhoff, a senior research fellow with the Institute for Ethics at the American Medical Association, has another theory. "A lot of evolutionary biologists have posited that we take some sort of pleasure from seeing somebody's suffering. The idea of schadenfreude."

And maybe it's even baser than that, he says. "I think there's this dynamic of, we don't normally have access to these kinds of images, and I think people do have a thirst for a portrayal of these events. What the heck do we care -- someone's going to draw the picture for us and we just want to see it."

Of course, Americans have, in fact, had access to real-life images in the form of Abu Ghraib, the American-controlled prison in Iraq where the torture of Iraqi prisoners was documented, snapshot style, by American soldiers.

"If you listen for the echoes [of current events] I think you can hear them in pop culture," Felando says. "There do seem to be these reverberations in the last few years. What's interesting is if you look at a movie like 'Three Kings,' Mark Wahlberg undergoes a scene of torture by electric shock, and it was the antithesis of the first Gulf War as we saw it on TV, as it was sanitized for us at home."

Is the link really that overt? "I'm a firm believer that popular cinema often takes the anxieties -- and the hopes -- of a time period and puts a gloss on them," says Caroline "Kay" Picart, an associate professor of English at Florida State University who specializes in film studies, "and the result is a masking and unveiling of our collective cultural anxieties."

"Plus," she says, "there is this whole notion of catharsis, a release of tension. There's probably a fascination with confronting how effectively you can grapple with that."

So as torture becomes an increasingly prevalent discussion in terms of American foreign policy, it also seems to be creeping in to more and more films in an anaesthetized form. Park and Miike, along with Chinese filmmaker Fruit Tan, have teamed up to film "Three . . . Extremes," a horror trilogy that promises verisimilitude to the nth degree.

It's a trend that is crossing cultural borders. A number of Asian filmmakers have elevated the depiction of torture into a kind of a fetishized art, which has clearly had an influence on directors such as Tarantino, who in turn is an influence factory all his own.

#### Guilty pleasures

"Personally, I really like violent things," Allhoff says. "I'm trying to figure out why. I think that torture as depicted in film can often be terribly poignant, for lack of a better word. Yes, these are powerful scenes and often developed for their emotional value. Yes, we like to watch them, then feel guilty for having enjoyed them."