A Means to an End: Challenging the Notion of ‘torture porn’ in the French Film Martyrs

— Erin Harrington —

For the last decade, the horror genre has been populated with films more realistically violent and graphic in their gore than almost anything else fictional and legal. Films featuring brutal murders, dismemberments, debasements and tortures have flourished, bringing torture from the paracinematic fringe into the mainstream. As these films have become more prolific, the intensity of their images has increased as filmmakers seek to outdo one another. While Anglophonic films dominate what is known as the ‘torture porn’ genre, they have been joined by a small but significant group of French horror films that have stood out for their bleak, gritty presentation and their realistic and sadistic violence. A recent addition to the genre, the controversial French film Martyrs (dir. Pascal Laugier, 2008) sits as both an excellent example and a critique of the genre. While it is extremely violent and unapologetically nihilistic, it can also be read as a challenge to audiences, for through its careful use of subjectivity, its aesthetic choices, and its focus upon the mechanics of torture, it asks us exactly how far we are willing to go in our quest for cinematic excess, and to what end.

Martyrs tells the story of two young girls, Lucie and Anna, and it follows their friendship as it transcends trauma, madness and death. Lucie, aged ten, is found near a abandoned abbatoir after she had escaped from unknown captors; she exhibits the signs of severe malnutrition and brutal, violent mistreatment, but has in no way been sexually assaulted, and her captivity and injuries are a mystery. In children’s home she is befriended by Anna, the only person with whom she feels safe, yet whilst there she is tormented by a mysterious emaciated woman who hacks and slashes at her wounding her gravely. Fifteen years later, a clearly deranged Lucie breaks into a scene of Sunday morning familial bible by invading a house then brutally yet emotionally killing the middle-class nuclear family living there. Anna arrives
to assist with the clean up, revealing that Lucie has become sufficiently convinced that the husband and wife lying dead in the house were the same couple who so terribly tortured her as a child. Despite this, Lucie’s perception and mental clarity, accidentally finds a hidden door that reveals a clandestine basement containing a set of clinical torture chambers. While the film’s opening is somewhat formulaic, from the moment of Annas’s descent the film couples a labourious and deliberate pace with a register that is nihilistic, philosophical and steeped in trauma. She discovers and frees a brutish woman (la capricieuse, the torture victim) who has a sensory deprivation mask bolted to her skull. The victim is not dissimilar to Lucie’s apparition, who is revealed to have been one of Lucie’s fellow captives, a woman Lucie discovered while escaping but whom she could not save. After trying in vain to help clean the woman’s wounds, Anna finds a key and is watched by members of a black-belt sect who kill the tortured woman and detain Anna — their hair and manner of dress alludes strongly to Nazism, and their interests align obliquely with the work of Josef Mengele, a physician with the SS most notorious for his work in performing grisly experiments upon the inmates of Nazi concentration camps. Anna meets the sect’s leader, a man named Marcel Mademoiselle, who tells her about their decades-long project: to inflict such enormous, systematic suffering upon young women that they move past ordinary consciousness and see what lies beyond death — the choice of women is not about sex, rather they seem to be more ‘emotional’ to the torturer. Anna is imprisoned and, in twenty minute long sequence of ‘rolling blackouts’, she is subjected to callosum, humiliation and yet despicably torture at the hands of the house’s new inhabitants, a fair haired woman and her husband who are nearly identical to their predecessors. Eventually, after ‘losing herself’ at the behest of her inner dialogue with the dead Lucie, she finds a place of horrific enlightenment. Mademoiselle asks her if she sees this ‘other world’ — a state only a handful of previous victims have attained — and Anna recounts her visions to her. At dozens of sex membranes conjugate in the house to hear the historic news, Mademoiselle returns to the bathroom, where she instructs her assistant to ‘keep doubting’ what comes after death — then she shows herself. The film ends with an image of Anna, who has been played alive and hung before beat lamps. The camera lingers on her horrific face before an intertitle appears, describing the original definition of ‘murder’ as some one who ‘has been witness.’

Mademoiselle is one of a series of Francophone films that have been loosely grouped under the banner of ‘New French Extremity’ or ‘New French Extremity’. The term originates in a 2004 article by Alain Strassman, the editor of French Cinema which notes: ‘One can see that there is a new genre in French cinema, a genre that is both a return to the roots of French cinema and a departure from it fundamentally’. This is a film that is not only about the extreme, but about the way that extreme acts of violence are portrayed. The film is not about the extreme, but about the way that extreme acts of violence are portrayed. The film is not about the extreme, but about the way that extreme acts of violence are portrayed. The film is not about the extreme, but about the way that extreme acts of violence are portrayed. The film is not about the extreme, but about the way that extreme acts of violence are portrayed. The film is not about the extreme, but about the way that extreme acts of violence are portrayed.
of graphic violence in all forms of American (indeed, Western) films, not just horror films, marks the escalation of violence in films and that these films interrogate the place of violence in American society and culture. Within this framework, torture porn films explore the varying motivations and justifications for violent actions, but perhaps also serve as a psychological 'pressure valve.' Hostel director Eli Roth champions the appeal of extreme violence as a coping mechanism, describing the heroes he received from soldiers in Iraq who said that Hostel was one of the most popular films on military bases: 'They explained it to me. They go out in the field, and this guy told me about a day when they literally, during the day, went out and saw someone with their face blown off. And then at night they watch Hostel, and they were screaming — they were terrified. And what they said was that when you're on a battlefield, you're not allowed to be afraid. ... They're seeing these horrific images, and they are not allowed to show any fear. ... When they put on Hostel, it says for the next ninety minutes, not only are you allowed to be scared, you're encouraged. It's totally acceptable for you to be terrified for this period of time. And they let it all out. And they all get together and they scrawl.'

The violence of torture porn must also be considered in part as a reaction to and critique of the self-referential postmodern teen horrors of the 1990s, as epitomized by Wes Craven's Scream (1996) and including such 'horror-lite' series as Urban Legend (1998), I Know What You Did Last Summer (1997) and poorly received additions to existing franchises such as Halloween H20: 20 Years Later (1998) and Wes Craven's New Nightmare (1994). The 1990s and early-2000s also saw the horror market being influenced by foreign horror films, particularly those from Japan, with 'J-horror' titles and series such as The Ring (1998–2002; remake 2002–03), Dark Water (2002; remake 2005) and The Grudge (1998– 2003; remake 2004–09) being transposed into American settings or featuring American protagonists. Unfortunately the supernatural themes of these films, while certainly chilling, did not always survive their cultural translation and the Anglicization of J-horror resulted in a dilution of the films' scares. In contrast to the gory, carnivalesque horrors of the 1980s, the aura of the twenty-first century's mainstream Anglocentric horror genre had lost much of its subversive edge.

The torture porn subgenre became prominent in the early twenty-first century and has been extraordinarily successful financially for such studios as Saw producers Lionsgate. For the sake of analysis, Anglocentric torture films can be divided into three loose categories: firstly, 'torture for the sake of it,' or films that take great interest in the spectacle of torture, including the Saw and Hostel franchise and the cannibalistic House of 1000 Corpses (2003), and controversial Japanese film Audition (1999). Secondly, 'torture for the sake of it,' or films that take great interest in the spectacle of torture, including the Saw and Hostel franchise and the cannibalistic House of 1000 Corpses (2003), and controversial Japanese film Audition (1999). Secondly, 'torture for the sake of it,' or films that take great interest in the spectacle of torture, including the Saw and Hostel franchise and the cannibalistic House of 1000 Corpses (2003), and controversial Japanese film Audition (1999). 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around and penetrates the body in procedural forensics television programmes such as those in the CSI (Crime Scene Investigation) franchise. These films can be seen as continuing in the traditions of the Grand Guignol theatre of Paris, which specialised in 'pathetic' horror shown that were heightened, gory, melodramatic and exploitative. They are evocations in glorious Technicolor.

Martyrs displays an aesthetic shift that reflects its unusual tone. At first it falls within the gritty, documentation style of filmmaking – the first two-thirds of the film, in which Lucie goes on a rampage in the house, and in which Ana sees the tortured woman in the basement, are shot in a way that very calmly walks the visual language of the horror film, utilising point of view shots and extreme close ups as to lead the eye and heighten suspense. The film borrows from the visual language of supernatural Japanese horrors in the way that Lucie hallucinates companion creature skitterers and eats just out of frame, and this tortured, contorted appearance is, initially, the film's most obvious source of fear and dread. The clinical blue and white colour scheme employed within the large family home indicates a sophisticated, unemotional realism, while also alluding to the clinical torture chamber below and standing in contrast to the dirty, frenzied Lucie. While the film's aesthetic is effective with its bleakness, washed out palette and its extremely violent content, it does not offer much of a departure from other such violent, violent films.

It's the film's final third, however, that marks it as a blinding intercrogation of the genre and its audience, particularly in its twenty minute torture scene. The fifteen short shots that make up the sequence, divided by a lull in the film, create a more unsettling effect and the impassible passage of time, are a filmic innovation that takes us into darkness and uses it as a weapon against us, asking us to bear the burden of her trauma. The camera is impassive – not documentary, not shocking. There is no panic, no particular film in these scenes. We are shown, very matter-of-factly, how Ana is shackled, confined, finds food, roughly washed, shaved, and repeatedly beaten. She is treated with freedom, beaten again, and shown that she has no choice but to submit. Her captors are distant, taking no obvious enjoyment in their work, for it is cold-blooded and ruthlessly driven by an almost scientific regard – indeed, one remarks to the other in the same sort of tone of voice with which one might discuss the weather that Ana is 'holding up remarkably well'. It is a sequence designed to incite a growing dread and to distance the viewer from commonly employed aesthetic conventions of the horror film. We are not invited to peer closer and see further, in contrast to the psychologically stifled extremes of the Satanic cult – rather, we want to stop. The film itself is a form of torture and, paradoxically, the final sequence in which Ana is shaming and hung before the blood-lust is almost a relief as, like Anna, we know the end is near.

Our suffering, like Anna's, is a means to an end, and in this way the figure of the scold's beater, Mademoiselle, acts as another stand-in for the audience. While Hantel II has been read as a critique of 'the absurd logic of a late-capitalist, consumerist culture', Martyrs presents Mademoiselle and her act as a group of people who are on any hand have the financial means to get anything that they want with impunity, but who on the other hand do not and cannot know the secrets of what comes after death. To find this they inflict and witness countless acts of depravity – not out of malice, but out of curiosity. The scene in which the sect members gather to hear Mademoiselle deliver Anna's testimony shows them to be 'ordinary' people, excited and scared about the impending revelation: as with the happy, middle-class family at the film's outset, there is nothing to mask them as monstrous. This is both an allusion to the questions surrounding the rise of Nationalist, as referenced by the decidedly Ana of many of the sect members, and a Rigoletto to the audience – these are 'normal', relatable people in search of what lies beyond the bounds of comprehension.

Studies on the reception of horror film have for decades asked what it is that makes a horror audience 'tick', and while it is beyond the scope of this paper to dig deep into the psychological pull of horror, it is not unreasonable to assume that pleasant curiosity is one part of the audience in part drives such subgenres. Torture porn films have responded to the desires of their audience by engaging in a form of one-upmanship, increasingly challenging boundaries by producing films with more gore, more bloodshed, and more inventive ways to die or remain. In the days of media ubiquity, the sorts of cinematic atrocities that have been previously banned from our screens or restricted are now readily available, legally or otherwise. What is the end point, and how far will it go before audiences are satiated? What is it that audiences are hoping to witness? Martyrs provides us with the image of a possible end point, and rather than offering up fresh ideas, it delivers a story of horrific trauma and abuse; asking us whether or not we are looking for it really something that we want to know.
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