



Film still from *Martyrs*, dir. Pascal Laugier, 2008
Courtesy Everett/Headpress

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 Anglophone 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)¹ 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 an abandoned abbatoir after she had escaped from unknown captors; she exhibits the signs of severe malnourishment and brutal, violent mistreatment, but has in no way been sexually assaulted, and her captivity and injuries are a mystery. In a 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 bliss 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 convinced that the husband and wife lying dead in the house were the same the couple who so terribly tortured her as a child. Despite this exorcism of trauma, Lucie is still haunted by her emaciated creature, a manifestation of her rage and her grief who 'conducts' her terrible acts of trauma-induced self mutilation, and, seeing no other alternative, she violently kills herself.

At this point the film's tone changes. Anna, still doubting 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 Anna's descent the film couples a laboured and deliberate pace with a register that is nihilistic, philosophical and steeped in trauma. She discovers and frees a brutalised woman (*la supplicée*, 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 falls asleep, and is awoken by members of a black-clad sect who kill the tortured woman and detain Anna – their fair 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, an aging woman called 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 'responsive' to the torture. Anna is imprisoned and, in a twenty minute long sequence of 'rolling blackouts', she is subjected to callous, inhumane and yet dispassionate 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. As dozens of sect members congregate in the house to hear the historic news, Mademoiselle retires to the bathroom, where she instructs her assistant to 'keep doubting' what comes after death – then she shoots herself. The film ends with an image of Anna, who has been flayed alive and hung before

heat lamps. The camera lingers on her beatific face before an intertitle appears, describing the original definition of 'martyr' as someone who bears witness.

Martyrs is one of a series of Francophone films that have been loosely grouped under the banner of 'New French Extremism' or 'New French Extremity'. The terms originate in a 2004 article by *ArtForum* writer James Quandt, who writes, 'Bava as much as Bataille, Salò no less than Sade seem the determinants of a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement.'² The films to which he refers are not horror films *per se*, rather the boundary pushing work of such art house provocateurs as Catherine Breillat and Bruno Dumont, and films such as *Irréversible* (2002) and *Baise-moi* (2000). Recent horror films such as *Haute Tension* (2003), *À l'intérieur* (2007), *Frontière(s)* (2007), *Ils* (2006) and the Belgian *Calvaire* (2004) can also be aligned with this category, in large part due to their abrupt and gritty violence and their exploration of psychopathology.

It is worth noting that these Francophone horror films need to be considered within the context of the Anglophone horror tradition. While it may seem from an outsider's perspective that there has been a 'new wave' of these gritty, violent and nihilistic films coming from France, the director of *Martyrs*, Pascal Laugier, has remarked that French horror movies are still very much a niche market – the producers find it very difficult to receive funding, French audiences seem to be largely resistant to genre films let alone horror films, and box office returns are low. 'The only reason we keep doing them,' he says, 'is because of the foreign market.'³ For example, website *Box Office Mojo* indicates that only 11% of *Haute Tension's* box office takings came from cinemas in French-speaking countries.⁴ Further, the writers and directors of these films have been directly influenced by the American horror canon, perhaps due to the lack of a (post)modern tradition of horror in France – Alexandre Aja, director of *Haute Tension*, cites the films of Wes Craven, John Carpenter and Tobe Hooper as his influences,⁵ and *À l'intérieur* directors Alexandre Bustillo and Julian Maury looked to North American horror villains Pinhead (*Hellraiser*) and Michael Myers (*Halloween*) in their conception of their film's antagonist.⁶

Martyrs and many of the recent spate of French horror films sit at a point of intersection between the films of the New French Extremity and what has come to be defined within Anglophone horror as 'torture porn' – a term that

was coined in a 2006 article in *New York Magazine* by film critic David Edelstein, who refers to such films as Australian outback horror *Wolf Creek* (2005), *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), the burgeoning *Saw* franchise (2004–10) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). He writes, 'explicit scenes of torture and mutilation were once confined to the old 42nd Street, the Deuce, in gutbucket Italian cannibal pictures like *Make Them Die Slowly*, whereas now they have terrific production values and a place of honor in your local multiplex.'⁷ These are films that revel in displaying the limits of what a body can endure, that in some (but not all) cases are more about constructing increasingly inventive and sadistic ways to inflict harm upon the victim in the hunt for the ultimate 'kill shot' than they are about coherent narrative.

Torture porn has a fascination with the boundaries and limits of the human body, delighting in confronting the audience with images of gleeful viscerality and scenes of abjection that both compel and repulse – intestines spilling from stomachs, bodies torn and broken, the breaching of bodily borders, the exploration of fleshy liminality. It is related, at least in its intent, to the 'cinema of attraction' of the early 1900s – films that revelled in spectacle and exhibitionism, delighting in their ability to 'show things', even when this disrupted or compromised a fictional diegesis⁸: consider, for instance, the detailed explorations of Jigsaw's traps in the original *Saw* or some of the elaborate 'kill scenes' in later *Saw* films, showpieces which arrest the action of the film to exist as performances for both the diegetic and non-diegetic audiences – it is not uncommon for victims in these elaborate death scenes to look out into the audience while they struggle or scream for help. Torture porn films ask what can be inflicted, and for how long, in a dual exploration of the resilience and fragility of the human body. These films can be understood as exercises in endurance in terms of what the characters suffer and what the audience can bring themselves to watch.

Despite allusions to carnality, torture porn looks more toward excessive violence than sex. The term torture porn, or its related term 'gorno' (a portmanteau of gore and pornography), certainly casts aspersions on both this style of film and its audience, and is regarded with suspicion by filmmakers; *Hostel* (2005) writer-director Eli Roth, for instance, feels that the conflation with pornography discredits his work, arguing that the terms say more about Edelstein's attitude to horror than it does about the films themselves.⁹ Nonetheless the term itself has become entrenched as the descriptor for millennial splatter films, and it is a revealing shorthand, for these films' images of death and depravity are

there to titillate and cause a reaction as much as they are to advance the narrative or make a philosophical argument. This is usually done in a spectacular fashion, rather than on a primarily sexual level – although such films as *Hostel: Part II* (2007) certainly make the most of casting attractive young women and dispatching them in a show of blatantly sexualised exhibitionism, and are advertised in such a way that there is a lascivious promise of nudity or overt sexual content. However, even this appeal to voyeurism is more complicated than is often acknowledged, as the ideological project of *Hostel* can be read as a statement about the morality of the flesh trade by asking how much money people are willing to pay to do whatever they like to another person, be it within the context of sex tourism in Amsterdam at the outset of the film, or the tortures inflicted upon unwitting young tourists by paying customers at the film's Elite Hunting 'lodge'.

What unites torture porn films is their nihilism. They offer little in the way of positive resolution and leave the viewer with a sense of malaise and unease, and the feeling that whatever was wrong with the world at the film's outset has not been and perhaps cannot be contained or neutralised. They generally have unhappy endings, a convention that became prominent in the gritty, apocalyptic horrors of the 1970s like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), in which there is very little resolution and the film's antagonists remain unpunished. Those films that *do* end with positive outcomes for their characters either leave the way open for sequels, remain ambiguous, or come at such a cost that the victory is pyrrhic. The ending of *Hostel* is typical of the genre – the lead character Paxton, after having escaped the European torture factory and taken revenge upon those who had hurt he and his friends, is left in a position whereby he has become exactly what he had been fighting against: a cold-blooded killer. This is emphasised in the film's portrayal of murder, for despite the graphic atrocities committed at the Elite Hunting complex, the only times we see people being killed onscreen are at the hands of Paxton during his escape; further, by the time this happens, we are wholeheartedly in support of his bid for freedom and his acts of revenge – ironically damning us, as audience members, as complicit in his actions.

Films reflect and react to the times in which they are produced, and torture films in particular interact with narratives about torture in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay – indeed, Reynold Humphries posits that since 11 September 2001, 'torture has become a fashionable topic, giving new relevance to the complex problem of sadism.'¹⁰ Douglas Kellner likewise argues that the escalation

of graphic violence in all sorts of American (indeed, Western) films, not just horror films, mirrors the escalation of violence in Iraq, and that these films interrogate the place of violence in American society and culture.¹¹ 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 letters he received from soldiers in Iraq who said that *Hostel* was one of the most popular films on military bases:

[T]hey 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 they 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, they're not allowed to be afraid. ... They are seeing these horrible 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 is socially acceptable for you to be terrified for this period of time. And they ... let it all out. And they all get together and they scream.¹²

The violences 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 epitomised 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 existent 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; remade 2002–05), *Dark Water* (2002; remade 2005) and *The Grudge* (1998–2003; remade 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 transition and the Anglicisation of J-horror resulted in a dilution of the films' scares. In contrast to the gory, carnivalesque horrors of the 1980s, by the turn of the twenty-first century the mainstream Anglophone 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.¹³ For the sake of analysis, Anglophone 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* franchises, the carnivalesque *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), and controversial Japanese film *Grotesque* (2009). Secondly, 'man's inhumanity to man', which removes the theatricality of the torture film in lieu of more intimate and disturbing appraisals of abuse and morality, such as the film adaptation of Jack Ketchum's *The Girl Next Door* (2007), *Wolf Creek* and Rob Zombie's Peckinpah-influenced sequel to *House of 1000 Corpses*, *The Devil's Rejects* (2005). Thirdly, vicious remakes and 'reboots' of 1970s films such as *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *Halloween* (2007), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), and *The Last House on the Left* (2009), which may not have torture as their *raison d'être* but nonetheless feature extreme and confronting violence, a curiosity about how people can become monsters and a fascination with the mechanics of death.

Each of these loose categories frames violence in a different manner. The approach favoured by films dealing with inhumanity is amorality – a film such as *The Girl Next Door*, in which a teenage girl is tortured and killed by neighbourhood boys at the behest of her aunt, shows the worst of humanity, acting as a portrait of murderous psychopathy; so, too, is the abrupt, meaningless violence of *Wolf Creek*, or the sadism of the Japanese horror *Grotesque*, in which a young couple are captured, tortured and killed for no reason other than the titillation and sexual gratification of their captor. In comparison, some 'torture for the sake of it' films like the *Saw* series are supramoral, situating themselves above or beyond a 'normal' moral code, operating by their own rules and not necessarily out of base cruelty, and remakes of 1970s films such as *The Hills Have Eyes* or rape-revenge film *The Last House on the Left* posit at least some of the films' excesses as an example of vigilante justice.

Many of the Francophone films, while drawing upon the visual language of the Anglophone horror, frame extreme violence as the unnatural conclusion of a psychological need or use it to explore the psychological and social underpinnings of sadism, and in doing so go some way to justify their excesses. *Haute Tension*'s slasher-killer is a woman literally madly in love with her (heterosexual, female) best friend; *Calvaire*'s protagonist, a travelling entertainer called Marc, is beaten and forced to become the 'wife' of a country innkeeper who was abandoned by his actual wife, before being sexually assaulted by many of the men of the small backwoods village; and *À l'intérieur*'s antagonist is a woman

driven mad by the loss of her unborn child in a car accident. Although extremely violent and visually stylised, *Martyrs* sits in opposition to the worst extravagances of the torture porn genre. Its themes of sadness, trauma, historic abuse and friendship frame the acts of brutality as a valid and necessary part of the story, rather than visceral popcorn fodder.

Torture films offer different approaches in their treatments of subjectivity and identification. In some cases we are asked to identify with the victims, such as the hitchhikers in *Wolf Creek*, as young people who have done nothing wrong; in films such as *Hostel* we see travellers who are in many ways loathsome and the worst of 'youth abroad', but nonetheless relatable and recognisable. In contrast to the paint-by-numbers teens who met their ends in such early slasher films as *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980), we are often invited to care about the characters, their histories and their feelings, and to suffer with them.

In the *Saw* films, however, distance from the majority of the characters is required, and we are asked to identify with the remaining characters in conflicting and incompatible ways. The victims are largely people being tested or punished for crimes or wrongs they have committed, or for flaws in their character. The films' logic is that by putting people's lives on the line and asking them to perform the abhorrent tasks required of them to escape – such as extracting a key from the chest of a still-living person, or sawing off one's own foot to escape a manacle – they will have a greater appreciation for the value of life. A conversation between the series' antagonist Jigsaw and his protégé-to-be in *Saw V* focuses on Jigsaw's idea that everyone deserves a chance for 'extreme rehabilitation'; in response to his acolyte's brutal, stylised execution of an abusive husband, he admonishes him by saying 'killing is distasteful to me – there is a better, more efficient, way', and thus frames his own atrocities as the apogee of self help whereby the phrase 'no pain, no gain' takes on a sadistic zealotry. In keeping with this logic the films' abductees are framed as flawed, amoral and self-involved. Of the films' many prisoners, one is a heroin addict, one an alcoholic, one an attempted suicide (despite having a 'good' life), one a corrupt real estate bureaucrat, and one a police officer who planted evidence to secure arrests – their reasons for selection become more convoluted as the series continues and the narrative loses coherence. Nonetheless, we are asked to if not identify with them, then at least appreciate the skewed logic of Jigsaw's personal crusade.

Conversely, the success of *Martyrs* relies wholeheartedly on the audience's identification with the protagonist, Anna, for even though the story initially centres on Lucie, Anna

acts as the audience's proxy. Our understanding of Lucie and her traumatised madness is framed by Anna's thoughts and opinions, particularly in her early friendship with Lucie and her ongoing doubt about Lucie's experiences. With her, we discover the horrors of the seemingly innocuous family house, the true purpose of the torture and the nature of the sect behind it, and the dawning but inevitable knowledge of what is about to happen to her. Our experience of the film's atrocities is both tempered and exacerbated by Anna's compassionate, nurturing nature, and she is set apart from the self-interested people who usually populate the genre. She cares for Lucie in childhood and adulthood; she tends to the horrific wounds of the mother of the murdered family, and even tries to set the dying woman free before being intercepted by Lucie; she attempts to care for *la supplicée* by dressing her wounds and removing the mask from her skull. Her despair mimics ours as she realises that sometimes there is too much harm done to be able to make it better, especially once it becomes clear that her lack of self-interest is the reason for her capture.

The effectiveness of any horror film rides on the strength of its aesthetic choices, and Anglophone torture porn films tend to take one of two approaches to their visual style, colour palette and cinematography. Many of the 1970s remakes, as well as those films dealing with 'man's inhumanity to man', tend towards a bleak, documentarian style that occasionally approaches the aesthetic of *cinéma vérité*. *Wolf Creek* is notable for its parched, bleached digital cinematography, which aligns the desolation and enormity of the Australian outback with the hopelessness of the captive travellers. Similarly, *The Devil's Rejects*' gritty visual style, achieved partially through the use of blown-up sixteen millimetre film stock, is juxtaposed against the gleeful, anarchic carnival kitsch of its prequel, *House of 1000 Corpses*, and in doing so both allude to 1970s exploitation films and place emphasis upon the cruelty of the protagonists by framing their crimes as inhumane rather than spectacular. By grounding their images in a style that viewers associate with 'realness' and authenticity, the emotional impact of the films is heightened. Other films, such as the *Saw* sequels and *House of 1000 Corpses*, achieve a stylised, elaborately staged spectacle of gore that makes use of an oversaturated or highly skewed palette. These films tend towards a theatrical presentation, cannily utilising the horror genre's entire arsenal of editing tricks and techniques in the way that they manipulate the action, the suspense and the overall image of the film. They make use of kinetic, frenetic camera movement and editing, at times reminiscent of the ways in which the camera moves

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 'naturalistic' horror shows that were heightened, gory, melodramatic and exploitative. They are eviscerations in glorious Technicolour.

Martyrs displays an aesthetic shift that reflects its unusual tone. At first it falls within the gritty, documentarian style of filmmaking – the first two thirds of the film, in which Lucie goes on her rampage in the house, and in which Anna frees the tortured woman in the basement, are shot in a way that very cannily milks the visual language of the horror film, utilising point of view shots and extreme close ups so as to lead the eye and heighten suspense. The film borrows from the visual language of supernatural Japanese horrors in the way that Lucie's hallucinated companion-creature skitters and runs just out of frame, and this tortured, contorted apparition 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, moneyed minimalism, 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 bleached, washed out palette and its extremely realistic violence, it does not offer much of a departure from other such gritty, violent films.

It is the film's final third, however, that marks it as a strident interrogation of the genre and its audience, particularly in its twenty minute torture scene. The fifteen short scenes that make up the sequence, divided by a blackness that marks both unconsciousness and the impossible passage of time, are a filmic innovation that takes our identification with Anna and uses it as a weapon against us, asking us to bear the burden of her trauma. The camera is impassive – not documentarian, not probing. There is no panache, no particular flair in these scenes. We are shown, very matter-of-factly, how Anna is shackled, confined, force fed, roughly washed, shaved, and repeatedly beaten. She is taunted 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 Anna '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 adolescently gleeful extremes of the *Saw* series – rather, we want it to stop. The film itself is a form of torture and, paradoxically, the final sequence in which Anna is skinned and hung before heat lamps 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 sect's leader, Mademoiselle, acts as another stand-in for the audience. While *Hostel II* has been read as a critique of 'the amoral logic of late-capitalist consumer culture',¹⁴ *Martyrs* presents Mademoiselle and her sect as a group of people who on one 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 mark them as monstrous. This is both an allusion to the questions surrounding the rise of Nazism, as referenced by the decidedly Aryan cast of many of the sect members, and a riposte 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 assert that blatant curiosity on the part of audiences 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 providing films with more gore, more bloodshed and more inventive ways to die or maim. In a time 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 guts for thrills, it delivers a story of historic trauma and abuse, asking us whether or not what we are looking for is really something that we want to know.

1. Pascal Laugier is a French director and screenwriter. His feature film debut as a writer and director came in 2004 with the French-Romanian horror *Saint Ange* (aka *House of Voices*); *Martyrs* is his second film.
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Contact:
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School of Humanities
Department of Art History and Theory
University of Canterbury
Private Bag 4800
Christchurch 8140
New Zealand

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