Torture: Fact and Fiction

By Jennifer Dean


*Screening Torture*, a collection of essays exploring portrayals of torture in film and television after 9/11, includes work by a handful of film scholars (Chris Berry, Elizabeth Goldberg, Livia Alexander) and several academics from other disciplines (sociologists, political scientists, historians, American studies scholars, and psychologists). Many of the pieces compare, on the one hand, the negative representations of torture pre-9/11 and the reality of torture to, on the other hand, the way in which Hollywood and media outlets have presented torture and used it as a narrative device. Often the use of torture is precipitated by the “ticking time-bomb” scenario where danger is imminent and torture is justified because there is no time for subtler means of obtaining information. The most noteworthy essays in *Screening Torture* tell the reader more about the reality of torture than they do about the cinematic representations of it. Perhaps in part because the book’s articles are mostly by “academics whose primary area of interest is not film,” they do little explicating of the particular images and stories of torture appearing in the media, and when the authors do engage in such analysis at times they make problematic comparisons.

One of the ways in which the collection of essays is truly successful is in demonstrating the power of film and television in the public sphere. More than one essay uses the example of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia citing the show *24* as evidence
that torture used in military contexts should not be considered a crime. In “Countering the Jack Bauer Effect: An Examination of How to Limit the Influence of TV’s Most Popular, and Most Brutal, Hero,” David Danzig, co-producer of the documentary *Primetime Torture* and project director for the Primetime Torture Project at Human Rights First, intricately weaves ideas about the actual efficacy of the use of torture with the mythical narrative presented in this series (*24*). Danzig clearly understands the titillation factor that makes torture a popular narrative device notwithstanding its lack of efficacy in the real world. He juxtaposes the experiences of real-life CIA agents and military personnel with observations of how television writers (including former writers of *Hill Street Blues* and *Lost*) have found torture an easy and quick way to move a plot forward. What makes this essay particularly intriguing is the way in which Danzig explains the real world implications of the fictional narratives on the use of torture. Danzig remarks, “Military educators say that *24* is one of the biggest problems they have in their classrooms, because young people preparing for a career in the armed services routinely point to the program as evidence that it is necessary to use torture to save lives.”

The book is divided into four sections: torture and masculinity; erotic depictions of torture (as sadomasochism); state-sponsored torture; and “Torture and the Shortcomings of Film.” Included in the first section is an interesting yet not entirely successful piece on the films of Mel Gibson which claims that, despite critiques concerning the excessive violence in the films Gibson has directed, the films themselves do not promote but rather condemn torture. The author, Lee Quinby, notes that it is the heroes in Gibson’s films who are tortured and who become stronger after suffering from the violence inflicted on them. In the final piece of this section editors Michael Flynn and Fabiola Salek examine three films that they feel promote torture: *Man on Fire* (2004), *Taken* (2008), and *Unthinkable* (2010). The analysis is not particularly original (citing the ubiquitous philosopher Michel Foucault), and as Flynn and Salek themselves note none of these films was critically well-received (although *Man on Fire* and *Taken* were both financial successes), and all three fall firmly into the genre of Hollywood action film, a genre not known for nuance or subtlety. So it seems that they are assessing the obvious when they conclude, “In these films (like many in the post-September 11 period) we witness the recrudescence of the spectacle of torture, the scenes are long, and the fear, desperation, and physical suffering of the tortured are developed with loving detail.”
The second section includes an in-depth analysis by film scholar Chris Berry of the reception of Ang Lee’s *Lust, Caution*. Set in World War II Shanghai, Wong Chia Chi (played by Tang Wei) is convinced by her revolutionary theatre colleagues at the university to have an affair with a Japanese collaborator and high official, Mr. Yee (portrayed by the charismatic Tony Leung Chiu-Wai) in order to assassinate him. Berry examines how different demographic groups in China and throughout the world reacted to the film based on their prior knowledge of the history the film recounts and thus of their understanding of the torture that was part of the story, even though *Lust, Caution* does not depict it. As Berry acquiesces in his introductory analysis, “Before we set out on this exploration of *Lust, Caution* and torture, we need to establish that there is a connection to torture. This is not obvious. The film follows a lethal game of lust—or is it love?—and death.” Berry well illustrates how, despite not showing any torture, for those aware of the history portrayed in the film torture is still present, while for the unaware the film’s eroticism supersedes any allusions to torture.

The subsequent pieces in this section of *Screening Torture* focus, however, on the depiction of torture not as something that supplants the erotic but that is, rather, part of the arousal itself. These pieces analyze iconic films such as Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (about a photographer/serial killer who kills his subjects while filming them so he can see the look of fear on their faces just as they discover they are going to die) and Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (where the government uses torture as a Pavlovian tool to rehabilitate a killer). The essay in this section that, in addition to Berry’s, I found to be most intriguing focused less on film and television representations and more on the depiction of actual torture at the Abu Ghraib prison. In this essay, “Beyond Susan Sontag: The Seduction of Psychological Torture,” historian Alfred W. McCoy brings to light disturbing images from Abu Ghraib that were not shown to the public because—despite the often gruesome and horrific popular illustrations of torture in the media—these photographs were considered too explicit. And this was not Hollywood; these were videos taken of actual events, while they were occurring. McCoy quotes Senator Durbin responding to a closed-door Congressional viewing of the photographs, “It felt like you were descending into one of the rings of hell, and sadly it was our own creation.”

To analyze state-sanctioned torture the third part of *Screening Torture* leaves both the post-9/11 theme and the United States. The essays here look at South African films
(Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg’s “‘Accorded a Place in the Design’: Torture in Post-Apartheid Cinema”) and Israeli films (Livia Alexander’s “Confession Without Regret: An Israeli Film Genre”). Both essays use the source films they explicate to develop critiques of the political realities of the region with which they are concerned. There are limitations in these analyses, however, as the authors use narrative fiction to serve as actual evidence of reality, not acknowledging the differences between, for instance, news and fiction.

Alexander’s essay compares a documentary to a much more complex hybrid form (Waltz with Bashir) without acknowledging what is dissimilar about the two forms. It appears these scholars are falling victim to the same dilemma that Danzig addresses in his piece on 24, failing to make a distinction between fact and fiction, perhaps illustrating the editors’ point about how the media and fictional representation are inextricably linked to the practice of and policy surrounding torture. However, the essayists themselves failing to acknowledge the distinction between fact and fiction is problematic.

This flaw is yet more apparent in “Doing Torture in Film: Confronting Ambiguity and Ambivalence,” an essay by sociology professor Marnia Lazreg in the final section of the book. Lazreg compares and contrasts Gillo Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers, Errol Morris’ Standard Operating Procedure, and Alex Gibney’s Taxi to the Dark Side yet fails to acknowledge that the first of these—despite using documentary and newsreel aesthetics—is narrative fiction, while the second two are indeed documentaries. She writes:

To its credit, The Battle of Algiers on occasion contextualizes scenes that might have been confusing (such as the killing of pimps or the mistreatment of alcoholics by the native population) by narrating the FLN [National Liberation Front] policy of “cleansing” society of drug use, alcoholism, and pimping. By contrast Standard Operating Procedure leaves it up to each participant to create his or her own context for explaining torture."

The Battle of Algiers may be loosely based on memoirs, however, it is fiction. Pontecorvo used scenes of torture in the movie to mirror torture experienced by the French at the hands of the Germans during World War II and to raise ethical questions of the French use of torture in Algeria—and not to argue for the efficacy of torture. But Lazreg, ignoring the nature and historical context of the film, accuses Pontecorvo of overemphasizing the success of the use of torture during the Algerian conflict.

Screening Torture ends with Stjepan G. Mestrovic’s essay “Documenting the Documentaries on Abu Ghraib: Facts versus Distortions.” Mestrovic served as an expert
witness for several of the soldiers tried for the use of torture at Abu Ghraib. His essay provides insight into the cases and the perpetrators of torture. However, the piece is less successful in its analysis of the documentaries on the same subject (Errol Morris’ *Standard Operating Procedure* and Rory Kennedy’s *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*) because Mestrovic clearly has a personal bias and inflicts that bias on the films themselves. As a scholar he acknowledges, “Both films are open to diverse interpretations, especially from the dominant, default perspectives of modernity and postmodernism.” Nonetheless his interpretations are of course colored by his experiences with the filmmakers and with the subjects of the films, and I could not help but feel that in his analysis he was subjecting the filmmakers to the same neglect that he was accusing them of imposing on the military defendants. Mestrovic assumes the filmmakers’ intentions are exploitative, just as the public assumes the military torturers were not victims themselves but the cruel instigators of physical and psychological abuse. Mestrovic does not explore the “diverse interpretations” of these films but asserts:

> The documentaries . . . bear an uncanny resemblance to cruel and unlawful interrogation techniques. Lack of empathy toward the participants is revealed by the complete absence of any context, history, or life-story of any of the participants.

Mestrovic provides that context for the film subjects but not for the films themselves. As with many of the essays in this collection the sociological reasoning is more interesting and more in-depth than the analysis of the media representations.

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*Jennifer Dean is currently working on a documentary on female filmmakers—“The 2nd Sex and the 7th Art” ([www.the2ndSexandthe7thArt.com](http://www.the2ndSexandthe7thArt.com))—while also writing reviews for Educational Media Reviews Online and working on short documentaries and narrative films of various genres.*