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Introduction: 'Welcome to Your Worst Nightmare'¹

'Revolting...repellent' (N.a. 2008b), 'poisonous' (Sarracino and Scott, 2008: 219), 'perverse' (Slotek, 2009a), 'terrible...ugly' (Phelan, 2011), 'vile...distasteful' (Graham, 2009a), 'rancid...joyless' (Hornaday, 2008a), 'salacious' (Kinsella, 2007), 'mean, dingy' (Lacey, 2007), 'grim' (Kendall, 2008), 'nasty' (Cochrane, 2007), 'queasy...nauseating' (Bradshaw, 2007), 'woeful...despicable' (Tookey, 2008b), 'repugnant' (Holden, 2008), 'spirit-sapping' (Booth, 2008), 'astonishingly depraved' (N.a. 2007b), 'deplorable...tasteless...sleazy and gratuitous' (Puig, 2008).

These are some of the hyperbolic terms used to describe 'the 21st century's vilest new genre: torture porn' (N.a. 2007a). It is hard to imagine that fictional films could warrant the loathing instilled in these adjectives, and resultantly in the term 'torture porn' itself. Following David Edelstein's 2006 *New York* article 'Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn',² the label has been applied (often retroactively) to more than forty horror films made since 2003. Based on critical responses, one might mistakenly believe that torture porn is wholly irredeemable rather than being 'one of the major cultural cornerstones of the decade', as Tara Brady (2010a) has it. How torture porn came to be characterised as unacceptable and whether the subgenre deserves the remonstrations it has received are key questions that this book will address. Taking stock of what 'torture porn' signifies is crucial, since the trend and the term continue to impact on how contemporary horror-fiction is understood more broadly.

Although it will be argued that torture porn films have been unfairly dismissed in press discourse, this book does not seek to erase 'torture

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porn³ or 'rescue' films from that category. 'Torture porn' is a shorthand label that brushes over the subgenre's diversity, but numerous productive tensions emanate from collecting texts together under a single banner. Labelling texts 'porn', for example, is a process of demarcating the borderline between what is 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' in popular culture. Since torture porn films are both illegitimated by reviewers and yet also legitimated by their relative financial success, 'torture porn' discourse highlights confusions regarding how taboo is defined at present. Rather than using 'torture porn' to dismiss these films as critics predominantly have then, this book engages with torture porn, exploring wider conceptual meanings that spring from grouping these films together.

The vast majority of torture porn's detractors have failed to adequately engage with the subgenre's content. Some of the subgenre's most profitable films have been addressed, but those responses are commonly superficial. Rather than dealing with torture porn itself, the subgenre's belittlers instead tend to replicate various prejudices about popular violent cinema, duplicating established rhetorical paradigms. 'Torture porn' misrepresents the films themselves then, but the label has also been utilised to incriminate the subgenre's filmmakers and fans. These imbalances will be redressed by analysing 'torture porn' discourse, torture porn films, and the broader contexts implied by referring to horror movies as 'extreme' or 'pornographic'. The book is divided into three parts that correspond with these aims. Part I is diachronic. The category 'torture porn' will be explored by probing how torture porn is situated within critical and generic contexts. Press responses to the subgenre will be inspected in these chapters. Part II is theoretical. 'Torture' provides a primary focus for this part, and moral philosophy will be used to illuminate aspects of torture porn's narrative content. In these chapters, the films themselves will be analysed. Part III is synchronic. Here, the term 'porn' is examined via an investigation into the subgenre's sexual content. Chapters 8 and 9 will then contextualise that evaluation, illustrating how extremity manifests in contemporaneous pornographic and non-mainstream horror films, where sex and violence are blended much more literally than they are in torture porn.

Chapters 1 to 3 will outline what is meant by 'torture porn', exploring issues that arise from using a category-label as the primary means of understanding these films. 'Torture porn' discourse discloses less about the films themselves than it does about critical responses to popular horror more generally. Chapter 1 will investigate torture porn's generic lineage. Critics and filmmakers alike directly compare torture porn to the slasher subgenre, for instance, but do so for very different purposes.

Torture porn's filmmakers regularly refer to slasher films to demonstrate their genre knowledge, making favourable comparisons between their films and earlier famous horror movies. Pundits have used the same comparisons to denigrate torture porn, painting torture porn as inferior to past 'classics'. The latter term is not only utilised to refer to influential movies, but also to broadly distinguish between contemporary horror and genre films made more than 30 years ago. This mode of argumentation duplicates the same rhetorical devices that critics employed when disparaging contemporaneous popular horror films in the 1960s and 1970s.

Resultantly, torture porn's opponents present the subgenre as wholly different to 'classics', and yet the films are also presumed to be identical enough that paradigms established to denigrate earlier horror movies can be applied to torture porn. This confusion derives from a failure to distinguish between (a) continuities within the horror genre, and (b) continuities within critical reactions to horror. Derogatory responses remain remarkably consistent, despite the genre's continual evolution. Torture porn clearly inherits traits from its generic predecessors, but critical narratives do not adequately account for torture porn's particular configurations and attributes. A tangential paradigm ('porn') has been applied to expound changes within horror, but the resulting amalgam is undermined by its imprecision. 'Torture porn' discourse is inconsistent because objectors have utilised the porn-horror combination to fit various conflicting agendas and diverse propositions about what makes horror 'pornographic'. Despite these idiosyncrasies, several dominant trends emerge consistently within 'torture porn' discourse. Those commonalities descend from conceptual presumptions about what porn and/or horror are, rather than from the films themselves.

Thus, Chapter 2 will appraise press reviews and commentary in order to decipher torture porn's alleged characteristics and the terms on which the subgenre has been illegitimated. Torture porn is surmised to lack substance because the films are putatively constituted by violence. Of particular affront to these reviewers is the mainstream acceptability of such depictions. Critics bemoan torture porn's presence in the multiplex, suggesting that these films should be marginalised. Their complaints about torture porn ultimately express unease not about filmic content, but about how taste boundaries are regulated.

Referring mainly to press articles, DVD commentaries, and briefly to online fan forums, Chapter 3 will explore another off-screen factor that has shaped 'torture porn': how filmmakers and fans have been addressed in and have responded to complaints about the subgenre. Filmmakers

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have primarily defended their films by distancing themselves from ‘torture porn’, or by vindicating their violent imagery. This is unsurprising given that reviewers tend to deride torture porn filmmakers by branding them untalented, irresponsible, and even deviant. Horror fans have similarly been dubbed immature, unintelligent, or perverse for watching torture porn. Fans have also therefore typically dissociated themselves from ‘torture porn’. Many horror fans have co-opted ‘torture porn’ to refer to films that they dislike, consolidating the label’s pejorative connotations. Others concur with pundits’ shared, nostalgic view that liking torture porn amounts to not understanding what authentic, ‘classic’ horror (and horror fandom) is. Fan, filmmaker, and critical discourses converge on the point that torture porn qua ‘torture porn’ is contemptible, supporting the notion that ‘torture porn’ is a consistent category, even though these films, fans, and filmmakers have been brought together by an artificial rubric. Surface coherence masks the inconsistencies within ‘torture porn’ discourse, and those tensions are Part I’s nucleus.

In Part II (Chapters 4 to 6), the films themselves will be examined with the intention of challenging the presumptions outlined in the opening chapters. Chapter 4 will redress two common critical suppositions. The first derives from defences that treat torture porn as an allegory for the Bush Administration’s War on Terror. Numerous scholars have used the allegory interpretation to prove that torture porn films are politically charged cultural artefacts. However, that reading has been reiterated to the extent that the approach ties torture porn into a very specific politico-historical juncture. Cumulatively, those allegory interpretations imply that torture porn is stimulating chiefly – or perhaps *only* – because of the immediate political context. To read torture porn merely as a reflection of its contemporaneous context is to divest the subgenre of its potential long-term meanings. Subsequent chapters in Part II will counter those restrictions, and moral philosophy is used to expand the debates.

The second assumption addressed in Chapter 4 is narratological. Detractors have claimed that torture porn is sadistic, alleging that the films are mainly focused on torturers’ pleasures. This supposition again arises from pre-established discursive narratives. Slasher films, for instance, have stood accused of fostering sadistic pleasure because they regularly include camera shots that emulate antagonists’ first-person perspectives. Numerous critics have vilified horror films for encouraging audiences to ‘identify’ with killers, suggesting that first-person camerawork facilitates sadistic attitudes. This established critical paradigm has

been transposed onto torture porn without examining the subgenre's content. As Chapter 4 will illustrate, torture porn narratives are aligned with sufferers' perspectives much more consistently than they are with torturers'.

Leading from these discussions regarding torture's narrative contextualisation, character positions will be deliberated in Chapter 5. Torture is typically imagined to be a two-party struggle involving a torturer and a tortured individual. Torture porn's violence is consistently less clear-cut, involving a third participant: a witness. Moreover, characters slip between these three positions: tortured protagonists become torturers, witnessing itself becomes torturous, and so forth. Concentrating on morality, the analysis will demonstrate that torture porn is not constituted by mindless sadism. Complex ideas such as justice, choice, innocence, guilt, blame, and retribution are dramatised and scrutinised via torture porn's representations of violence. This discussion will be developed in Chapter 6 by exploring the relationships between diegetic space, power, and morality. Torture porn's torture occurs in circumscribed vicinities. The characters' power-relations are revealed via their grappling for spatial control as much as they are by torture itself. Abductees' commitments to moral principles are impugned as a result of their imprisonment. In order to survive, prisoners must resist their captors and attain control over their circumstances. However, doing so customarily involves hostages becoming violent aggressors or forsaking others in order to ensure their escape from the torture-space. The slippages discussed in Chapter 5 are thus implicated in characters' contestations over spaces.

Despite prevailing assumptions to the contrary then, torture porn's character dynamics are intricate. The narratives disturb the dichotomous logic that underpins pejorative responses to torture porn, whereby torture is envisaged as a two-party interrelation in which positions (tortured and torturer) and intentions (innocence and sadism) are fixed. Binarism is equally evident in responses to gender and sexual violence in 'torture porn' discourse. Torture porn's men are customarily presumed to be sexually violent agents who victimise women. This supposition again stems from a lack of detailed engagement with the films themselves. There is, for example, far less nudity and sexual violence in films that have been dubbed 'torture porn' than the label connotes. Accordingly, in Part III (Chapters 7 to 9) torture porn's complex representations of sexual violence and gendered power will be scrutinised, as will implications that arise from casting mainstream horror films as 'porn'.

'Torture porn' implies generic hybridity and so cannot be deciphered by looking to the horror genre alone. Edelstein coupled 'torture'

with 'porn' to posit that violent multiplex horror-fiction had become obscenely gratuitous. However, this view does not account for collusions of horror and pornography outside of the multiplex setting. In Chapter 8, two branches of pornographic film that more overtly fit the complaints levelled at torture porn will be discussed. Khan Tusion's *Meatholes* films are utilised as a case study via which to explore manifestations of degradation, sex, and violence in extreme porn, a subgenre that also peaked in popularity during the 2000s. In the chapter's latter stages, films such as *Texas Vibrator Massacre* and Zero-Tolerance's *Saw*-based porn-spoof will be used to exemplify how horror motifs and candid sexual depictions comingle in contemporary horror-porn. Parallel amalgamations of genitally-explicit imagery and violence will be probed in Chapter 9. Torture porn may have stolen the limelight, but hardcore horror filmmakers have bridged the gaps between pornography and horror more literally than their mainstream foils by merging the narrative facets and aesthetic practices of both genres. Torture porn directors such as Eli Roth have declared that their portrayals of graphic violence 'push the envelope', but numerous micro-budget horror filmmakers have utilised sex–violence combinations to maintain their status as more 'extreme' than their commercially profitable counterparts. Despite having received virtually no scholarly attention to date, this concurrent movement sheds light on torture porn's ostensible 'extremity', and the meanings of 'torture porn' as a categorising term.

The book's three parts are focused on three respective key concepts: category, morality and extremity. It might initially appear as if applying these concepts entails marking out dichotomous separations. Categorisation involves differentiating between items that are included or excluded from a category. Ethical evaluation is similarly underpinned by an ostensibly oppositional separation between 'right' and 'wrong'. Assessing extremity is a matter of distinguishing between 'extreme' and 'non-extreme' or 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable'. These binary models are constituted by entirely separate poles. However, the overarching concepts reveal that these apparently distinct binaries share commonalities. For example, although categorising torture porn involves distinguishing torture porn movies from other films and other forms of culture, that process equally requires *comparing* torture porn to those other cultural forms. Without such comparisons, it is not possible to distinguish what belongs to the category.

Hence, the concepts (category, morality, extremity) articulate relationships between seemingly dichotomous poles. Morality, for instance, encompasses both 'right' and 'wrong', bridging between the two.

Attempting to engage with dichotomies without considering relationships at the conceptual level is to risk (a) eliding the broader commonalities that define the dichotomy, (b) over-emphasising the apparent differences between objects, and (c) failing to understand how apparently dichotomous relationships are formed and change over time.

Consequently, unless overarching conceptual frameworks are accounted for, distinctions become too sharp. Dynamic relations are reduced to seemingly unchanging, fixed binaries. Torture porn's detractors commonly neglect the conceptual, relational mode. Resultantly, 'torture porn' criticism is mainly focused on the immediate present and fails to adequately account for torture porn's organic development over time. Moreover, torture porn's hecklers also tend to universalise their evaluations about the films and their worth, but offer little detail to substantiate claims. The outcome is a series of confused, ill-founded accusations that do not portray the subgenre accurately. To counter those flaws, torture porn's content must be attended to in greater detail. Particularities will be related to the conceptual frameworks to assess torture porn's wider, long-term meanings. Those meanings are dynamic. The analysis herein is submitted with the proviso that the conceptual terrain is ever-shifting, and the meanings evoked here cannot be final. Some generalisation is involved in such analysis in order to flag patterns. The act of describing equally entails fixing meaning in the present. The dissection of torture porn offered in this book is a snapshot of fluctuating meanings and fluid conceptual relations.

Having established what is to follow, some caveats are necessary. Imposing subgenre labels risks lapsing into spiralling distinctions that quickly become impracticable. For instance, in his attempt to discuss sex-horror blending, Thomas Sipos (2010: 26–8) refers to 'splatter porn', 'erotic horror' and 'non-horror splatterporn' as distinct subgenres. While some delineation is necessary when handling (sub)genre, such hyper-specialised distinctions are usually unproductive: new, increasingly specialised micro-categories must be created when films do not quite 'fit' existing labels or when movies traverse subgenre boundaries. Torture porn is not a fully discrete subgenre, even according to the press's limited usage. Torture porn intersects with other genres including the thriller (*Unthinkable*), and art-drama (*Antichrist*), as well as other horror subgenres such as rape-revenge (*I Spit on Your Grave*), home-invasion horror (*Cherry Tree Lane*), and the slasher (*The Watermen*). Hence, categorisation itself is queried in this book rather than seeking to impose criteria that encapsulate torture porn's facets. The analysis thus begins with properties shared by films that have already been dubbed 'torture

porn'. When widespread traits are discussed, they are so (a) to handle these texts in a productive manner by opening up debate, (b) to connect torture porn to its genre lineage, and (c) to understand the contexts that situate 'torture porn'.

The chapters will detail those common traits. To retain the popular sense of what constitutes 'torture porn', three pivotal qualities are utilised as indicators for grouping these diverse texts. Torture porn films (a) were made (roughly) after 2003, (b) centralise abduction, binding, imprisonment, and torture (mental or physical), and (c) broadly belong to the horror genre. The latter is most problematic, since discerning the difference between 'horror' and 'thriller' or even 'drama' is no simple matter. Here, the term 'horror' is used with the assumption that the category cannot be perfectly delimited. Horror, as the genre-label is utilised in this book, implies that the narrative under inspection thematically prioritises protagonists' fear and/or suffering for emotive affect. That is, torture porn's protagonists overtly respond to torment with terror, outrage, or disgust, and the emphases placed on those emotional states suggest that the narrative is encoded to inspire trepidation, tension, or revulsion for the audience.

Torture porn's key attributes derive from commonalities found within 'torture porn' discourse. Those same facets equally apply to dozens of films that have not been dubbed 'torture porn' by the popular press, many of which are also discussed in this book. Major theatrical releases (including *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning*) will be analysed alongside lower budget non-theatrical features (*Flesh*, *TX*, *Dark Reality*, and *Stash*, for instance). The 45 films the press have (to date) regularly labelled 'torture porn' are included, but so too are more than 90 additional films that have been neglected in critical appraisals of torture porn. Any discussion of torture porn in this book refers to the extended subgenre definition. References to the press's 45-film torture porn canon will be explicitly distinguished.

Torture porn initially gained attention from the mainstream press due to its relative success in the multiplex. Non-multiplex films have been included in order to reflect the subgenre's continued proliferation on the DVD market since 2007. Numerous DVD distributors have clearly aligned their films with the subgenre. Even if the term 'torture porn' is avoided, comparisons to box-office hits are commonplace, manifesting in the DVD packaging of *The Tortured* ('[f]rom the producers of *Saw*'),⁴ *The 7th Hunt* ('[f]ans of the *Saw* movies will love this!'),⁵ and *Live Feed* ('*Hostel*... with snakes!').⁶ These marketing strategies feed from torture porn's popularity. Therefore, such DVD releases should be accounted for in attempting to understand torture porn.

Other provisos regarding what this book does *not* aim to do are necessary. Torture porn's global, transnational nature is not probed here. The majority of films referred to are American, because Anglo-American press critics – who coined and propagated the term – mainly dub American films 'torture porn'. Scholarly responses to torture porn are equally biased towards American production and reception. No distinctions are made between films of different national origins in this book. Movies filmed in and co-produced between Asian, Australian, European, North American and South American countries are included since these countries have all produced horror films that fit the 'torture porn' paradigm. Additionally, it is important to recognise that torture porn is not only the product of American concerns. Roth has contended that *Hostel* was a response to Abu Ghraib, yet the transnational dialogue evident among torture porn's filmmakers demonstrates that *Hostel* is not just relevant in the US context. Pascal Laugier has perspicuously presented his film *Martyrs* as a response to *Hostel*,⁷ indicating that *Hostel's* themes resonate in European torture porn. Furthermore, Takashi Miike's cameo in *Hostel* attests to the influence of pre-9/11 Japanese horror on *Hostel*. The transnational flow is multi-directional. *Saw* is evoked in the Japanese marketing for many UK and US torture porn films, including *Broken* (renamed *Jigsaw: Dead or Alive*), *Steel Trap* (*Jigsaw: Tower of Death*), and *Are You Scared?* (*Jigsaw: Game of Death*), for instance. Thus, it is insufficient to think of torture porn as an American subgenre per se. However, that complex topic will not be dwelt upon here, since exploring torture porn's global shape would itself require a monograph-length study.

Similarly, it is beyond this book's scope to dissect distinctions between horror, porn and 'art' film. 'Torture porn' has been applied to non-English language 'art' dramas such as *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, as well as the work of European auteurs Lars von Trier (*Antichrist*), Michael Winterbottom (*The Killer Inside Me*), and Michael Haneke (*Funny Games*). Critics' attempts to decide if these films count as torture porn have inspired lengthy debates over directorial intention and artistic merit in the press.⁸ The terms 'art' and 'torture porn' have been used respectively to defend or vilify these films. The same discussions are absent from press reviews of horror genre-pictures such as *The Devil's Rejects* or *Turistas*, which have been roundly dismissed. The disparities between Anglo-American reviewers' treatment of popular American horror and 'world cinemas' – despite similarities in content – speak volumes about the presumed cultural value of these texts. 'Torture porn' discourse concretises the double standards in operation, and would benefit from in-depth analysis in that respect. In order to debunk the

hierarchical bias present in those press discussions, films that straddle 'art' and 'torture porn' – such as *The Book of Revelation*, *Irreversible*, and *Senseless* – are included as examples of torture porn.

Although this book briefly touches on torture porn fandom by utilising press articles and printed interviews, it is beyond this book's purview to offer empirical research. To assess consumption with enough validity would again require a separate, devoted study. Torture porn films are primarily discussed as narratives in this book in a bid to counter the dearth of detailed filmic analysis in 'torture porn' discourse. The analyses offered are informed by deontology and feminism, which are respectively harnessed to grasp themes that are integral to the debates surrounding torture and porn: morality and gendered power. While this book does some work to investigate these films outside of the prevalent War on Terror allegorical interpretation then, dozens of other angles remain untouched. Detailed explorations of new redneck-cannibal torture porn crossovers, or of class in British 'hoodie' torture porn films are just two approaches to the subgenre that would prove fruitful. This book can only scratch the surface of the material available for evaluation. The central aim here is to stimulate debate regarding this rich subgenre.

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