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Films of Moral Struggle

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Ethics of Spectatorship: *Zero Dark Thirty* v *Standard Operating Procedure*

Both *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Standard Operating Procedure* flood their viewers with disturbing images of torture. The abusers exonerate themselves because they believe that committing violent acts against others will help the United States accomplish peace in the long run. *Zero Dark Thirty* embraces the “eye for an eye” mentality, telling us that the United States took the right moral approach in using torture to track Bin Laden, arguing that the ends justify the means. More interestingly, *Standard Operating Procedure* refrains from making a moral decision for its audience, but instead drops spectators within the ethical context and takes a step back. By the time the credits start rolling, we have begun to wonder where we stand on the issues presented, what we would do in those situations, and where we draw the line in regard to our personal morals in light of a grander system of ethics.

While torture films such as *Standard Operating Procedure* drew a lot of criticism for failing to make a clear moral message about how the soldiers should have acted, Shohini Chaudhuri found this to be a positive decision on Morris’ part (19). She believes that films should construction an ethical universe for spectators to place themselves in, rather than tell them exactly what to believe. Morals exist within the realm of a person’s own beliefs and choices, whereas ethics have a greater concern for placing the person in a specific universe and then examining how morals change depending on the context. If the film took the moral high ground, the viewers would find themselves trapped into that belief. No greater understanding would be gained. Instead, by examining the ethics of spectatorship, a person can see how flexible morals

become when you are not being told exactly what to believe by a certain system in society. The freedom to decide yourself unleashes your truth. Chaudhuri notes that the film gives a great sensorial experience to viewers, stating, “What most debates about the aestheticisation of violence miss...is that *all* images aestheticise, mediate, transform. A non-aestheticising alternative does not exist; rather, the question is *how* the images transform” (9). She discusses the importance of proprioceptive and synesthetic mapping, which further places us within that environment, making us complicit and forcing us to examine our beliefs. When Morris shows ants crawling around on skin, we wince and feel the bites. When we see the eyebrow being shaved, we cringe at the razor and the rippling skin and falling hair create discomfort. Morris used visuals that attacked the audience from multiple different senses, making us feel the horror that the victims of torture underwent. All of this combined creates that universe for the spectators and, because Morris does not add a heavy-handed moral message to the visuals, but merely lays out the facts as he sees them, the spectators have room to process their own feelings and reactions and interpret how their moral code fits within this ethical framework.

I agree with Chaudhuri that instances of torture should fall into this realm. It is too easy to witness acts of torture, framed with a strong moral bias, and align ourselves with whatever stance the film takes because we respect its authority. When we do so, we continue to conform ourselves to the systems that raised us without even considering an alternate world. Instead, the ethics of spectatorship allows us to experience that alternate world and find our own truths within that. We are not removed from the terror but placed directly in it. We see how our support of such systems contributes to horrifying actions. We experience the humanity of groups of people who have been painted as our enemy. It flips the world around for us, which should be the effect of any good documentary film.

In her article, "Torture Documentaries," Julia Lesage notes, "Inflicting violence upon another's body may have several foundational causes...that which we reject from our self-concept (as the masculine self-concept rejects the internalized feminine) is still part of us. As a consequence, we may react negatively and against a whole class of 'abjected' beings in order to keep them safely outside" (p 6). This point is central to our understanding of discrimination and the presence of torture in our world. Both in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Standard Operating Procedure*, officials from the United States of America act under the government to obtain information, by any means necessary, from prisoners of war, all of whom are labeled "terrorists." They are different. They have darker complexions, a different language, and a different religion from the members of mainstream American society. For this reason, they are foreign and frightening. All of these details conglomerate and push the prisoners further and further away from the officials understanding of the accepted norm, dehumanizing them. This dehumanization is crucial (Chaudhuri 10-11). Without it, the torture could not occur.

In *Zero Dark Thirty*, Maya's first encounter with torture involves a prisoner hanging from the ceiling by ropes, wetting his pants as a result of the intense stress placed upon him. He will continue to undergo various forms of torture until he tells his interrogator what he wants to hear. If he says anything other, or he claims he does not know, the interrogator tortures him more for lying. When he sees Maya, he expects a bit of feminine compassion and he beseeches her to help him, but Maya's only response is, "You can help yourself by being truthful." This lack of compassion finds a cousin in a scene in *Standard Operating Procedure*. Sabrina, one of the soldiers, describes that they had a friendly relationship with one of the inmates, giving him nicknames and joking around with him. Still, that offered him little mercy. Their friendly relationship meant nothing when it came to the torture the prisoner endured. They put him on a box and covered his face, furthering his dehumanization. Then they hung electrical wires around

his wrists, warning him that if he fell off the box, dozed off in any way, he would be electrocuted. The soldiers figured it was not so bad because no real electricity ran through the wires. They forgot the effects of psychological terror. In both scenes, the audience finds themselves in the position of the voyeur, looking on as the atrocities take place, unable to stop them. As Chaudhuri contends, the Brechtian approach that believes this voyeuristic nature removes emotions from the critical reception of the film is false (5). In fact, seeing the sadistic nature of the people on the screen can actually heighten the emotional response, calling on the compassion of the viewers. In my experience, the ethical tone made it so that, while I know as an American these terrorists are supposed to be my enemy, I root for them because I hate to watch them suffer. When we discover that the man on the box was innocent all along, I am angry that he was punished for no crime. When the interrogator in *Zero Dark Thirty* bribes the prisoner with good food and receives actual information, finding reward not from torture but from recognizing his prisoner's humanity, I feel vindicated. Unfortunately, I do not think that these films are locked into that compassionate viewership. Some viewers may share the sadistic pleasure that the original soldiers derived from the torture. When a film lacks a clear moral message, viewers can process it any way they choose, and in some cases, may even miss the broader moral questions altogether because they do not want to bear that responsibility. A person with similar viewpoints to those characters could easily align themselves from those stances and even miss the ethical nature of the film entirely.

I think this ambiguity does provide some limitations on the efficacy of ethical spectatorship. Some people need to be explicitly told what their morals should be, or they will not even think of it. I would hope that is a small percentage of the viewers though, and I still think that ethical spectatorship offers more possibilities than limitations, inherently. By looking at the ethics instead of the morals, the universe is broadened, and preconceived notions are

broken down. This ethical universe offers a whole world of possible ways to look at issues, transforming the viewer. It does, however, make the issues more morally ambiguous, and by taking an ethical rather than moral approach, the filmmaker limits their own ability to push a certain message. This limitation on the filmmaker gives more freedom to the viewer's interpretation, so it requires a lot of trust in the audience. Without being told what their moral approach should be, the messages of films can be taken in many different directions, and viewers can walk away uncertain about the point of the film because the filmmaker offered no concrete moral code. It is difficult to say in any case that there should be an 'always' or 'never' when films must imbue morals into their text because issues continue to evolve, and exceptions can work very well in some cases. I think though that issues such as sexual abuse and rape and child abuse should have a moral perspective because I do not think there is any context where those crimes should be considered okay. Even torture I struggle with because, though I appreciate how the ethical universe allows us to recognize our own responsibility in being a part of systems that use torture, knowing that certain viewers can watch these films and take the sides of the torturers does not sit well with me. I believe that no context makes violence against others permissible, so if that is the effect of ethical spectatorship, there is more work that needs to be done.

Works Cited

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