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From Torture Porn to Torture Reform: Excessive Violence and the Promise of Change in *Saw* and *Spiral*

Abstract

Cruel, graphic, unrelenting, and bleak: *Saw* and its sequels are routinely approached as typical of *torture porn*, that extreme horror subgenre that emerged in American cinema in the early 2000s that centers the flailing, hacked-at body over narrative. This article reappraises the term torture porn, arguing that, in the essay where he coins the term, critic David Edelstein centers the body as a registration site for moral uncertainty when faced with images of violence. Pushing against impulses that fixate on the wounded and dying body in so-called torture porn, I analyze the *Saw* films and focus on the most recent installment of the franchise, *Spiral: From the Book of Saw* (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2021), to argue that the reformative politics of these films can be read in their narrative structure. Moving from a vision of individual self-improvement in the face of death to the violent sacrifice of an individual for the possibility of systemic overhaul, these films operate in a milieu of normalized violence, and are ultimately concerned with the (im)possibility of change.

Softly rebooting and redirecting an enormously successful franchise still in its stride, *Spiral: From the Book of Saw,* directed by Darren Lynn Bousman, opened in American theaters in early Summer 2021. Set in the unnamed city that played host to the horrific Jigsaw murders in *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and its sequels, *Spiral* follows socially outcast and disillusioned cop Zeke Banks (Chris Rock) and his rookie partner William Schenk (Max Minghella) just as a set of apparent copycat murders begin. Originally slated for a Summer 2020 release and delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, *Spiral* was met with a less than enthusiastic critical response: while dealing with the timely theme of police brutality, it was criticized as a cliché-ridden addendum to an already bloated franchise, a regrettable continuation of so-called *torture porn*'s flagship series. Rather than conceding to the argument that *Spiral* is an unremarkable or even regrettable entry into the *Saw* canon, I instead approach the film as an opportunity to reappraise enduring arguments that have followed the *Saw* films since the mid-2000s. By returning to the origin of the term *torture porn* – a much-cited 2006 article for *New York Magazine* by film critic David Edelstein – I consider how the afterlife of this generic category has shaped discourses about extreme violence in film.

In so doing, I push back against readings that propose a direct link between bodily responses to images of violence – i.e., cringing, putting hands over one's eyes – and a coherent moral project, and consider how such claims feed into the all-too-common, gingerly technologically determinist reflex that screen violence causes real violence. Such positions assert that films like *Saw* draw audiences in with a spectacle of violence that is only tangentially concerned with narrative, which here is understood not only as diegetic plotting but also as a question of historical specificity. Instead of centering my concerns on the flayed and flailing body to argue that spectacles of violence in torture porn films are always in excess of narrative, I assert that the *Saw* films operate in a milieu of normalized rather than exceptional violence, one that should be assessed with careful attention to the narrative stakes of the films. I situate *Spiral* as a reorientation of the *Saw* franchise that moves away from a bleak, perpetual present and into the possibility of a reformable future to demonstrate how these films are about managing expectations and the futility of personal political projects.

Torture Porn

What is torture porn, that cruel, graphic spectacle

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that emerged in mainstream horror cinema in the years following 9/11? Namechecking *Saw*, *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005), *The Devil's Rejects* (Rob Zombie, 2005), *Wolf Creek* (Greg McClean, 2005), *Irrèversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002), and *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) as films that operate in a moral grey zone where the brutal, drawn-out execution of sympathetic characters takes center stage, David Edelstein's disapproving identification of explicit tendencies in horror cinema has become notorious. Perhaps benefitting from a catchy new name, a slew of American "torture porn" films were released, including *Saw* and *Hostel* sequels, in the years following Edelstein's article. His descriptive use of *torture* self-consciously points to a hot-button issue of the early-mid 2000s – the moral fallout following the revelation that prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay were subjected to state-sanctioned practices of torture by otherwise "manifestly decent men and women."[1] Yet the limits of his definition are far looser. While pressing questions about the ethics of torture appear to do Edelstein's heavy lifting, the question of what constitutes pornography is addressed only in parentheses: "(the spurt of blood was equivalent to the money shot in porn)."[2] With porn as such up for debate, Edelstein implicitly follows Justice Potter Stewart's notorious adage: by not actively defining what precisely is pornographic about torture porn, Edelstein suggests that he knows it when he sees it, albeit only "through [his] fingers."[3] Edelstein's choice of *porn* could be read cynically: in tacking *porn* onto *torture*, Edelstein parlays a moral panic over American interventionism into a moral panic over American media consumption. It seems for Edelstein that, as entertainment forms, both extreme violence and pornography push the limits of what can be enjoyed guilt free. Edelstein's gesture to the pornographic also does something else: it doubles down on the body, and in particular, on how the body becomes a legible site for pleasure and pain. The hazy horizons of torture porn render it transposable, seductive, and difficult to get rid of.

The broad stakes of Edelstein's article have informed the discourse on so-called torture porn itself. At once expansive and brief, torture porn is the generic designation that could: credited with establishing a field of thought, the contours of which are often left unexamined. Edelstein's picks for the inaugural torturous cohort already introduce generic uncertainty, with Gaspar Noé's *Irrèversible* and Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* sticking out as incongruous bedfellows alongside his other choices. Edelstein's wide net begets a degree of confusion, with torture porn treated as both stepping in line with the wonts of provocative sex and violence in arthouse European film and as an evolution of mainstream American horror cinema. In a 2009 article for *Cinéaste*, fellow critic Christopher Sharrett figures torture porn, and particularly the *Saw* franchise, as another step in the wrong direction for North American horror cinema, away from the subversive cultural commentary of the 1960s and down an increasingly reactionary path of excessive violence. Aaron Michael Kerner and Jonathan L. Knapp couple torture porn with extreme cinema but do not quite equate the two, noting that they "seem to work in a related way, in that they revolve around the spectacle of bodies convulsing with spasms of pain,"[4] yet are distinct because torture porn always simulates its violence, and the victims of said violence skew male. They propose that in these (loosely defined) genres, narrative is subordinate to the sights and sounds of violence to which audiences may have some affective response – usually disgust. In a review of Kerner and Knapp, Troy Bordun notes that they frequently confuse and conflate subgenres, slipping between torture porn and arthouse cinema, as well as extensively recapping films that they allege have little narrative substance.[5]

In his own work, Bordun argues that there is no equivalence between torture porn and extreme cinema, or indeed between extreme and new horror cinema (he cites *The Hills Have Eyes* [Alexandre Aja, 2006] and *28 Weeks Later* [Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2007] as examples of the latter). Instead of Sharrett's vision of North American horror cinema history, he puts together a completely separate genealogy for extreme cinema: the *new* of *new extremism* relates not to the novel but rather to the "more graphic depictions" emerging at the tail end of the 1990s when "compared to its transgressive cinema predecessors such as Bertolucci, Nagisa Oshima, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and many others."[6] The clarifications Bordun is pushed to make about the limits of the genre are cued up by Edelstein, whose article is routinely taken as a precise identification rather than what it is: "[giving] a name to his worries"[7] and tentatively weighing in on emergent media forms. Adam Lowenstein takes a comparable stance, arguing

torture porn "does not exist" – that is, has never been a stable generic category – and proposes via Tom Gunning that films like *Hostel* should instead be termed "spectacle horror."[8] Between these different readings of torture porn, thought in combination with other facets of (horror) cinema, these authors return to the problems of the graphic sights and sounds of ravaged bodies. Whittling Edelstein down to his bare bones, his primary concern is the utility of the violence in his chosen films, and the question of whether screen violence compromises the ethical identity of the watching subject.

Taking this thread, Edelstein makes recourse first to Mel Gibson's Christ epic, then to novelist Will Self's argument for "moral displacement" in modern cinema. In Self's essay, the moral responsibility he feels when watching fictional violence is explained through the body: like Edelstein, Self watches *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) and *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995) through his fingers, "as if my flesh were some psychic screen, able to filter out the enacted pain."[9] Edelstein takes Self's squeamishness as tantamount to accepting responsibility for the violence that Tarantino or Scorsese are "*foisting*"[10] upon him, and reroutes Self's argument through Gibson's evangelical blockbuster. Such a reading implicitly accepts a Christian moral frame: that suffering flesh can be taken as an exchange for sins. Gibson surely can't claim responsibility for such an impulse, although his gory restaging of the primary text of the Western moral framework hammers home the body-moral continuity that Edelstein, via Self, locates between feeling queasy and some form of guilt.

Closing out his thoughts on screen violence, Self pivots to two examples of what he calls "inadvertent snuff film[s]:"[11] the first, disgraced Pennsylvania Treasurer Budd Dwyer, who shot himself live on local television in 1987; the second, the much-repeated CCTV footage of Liverpudlian toddler James Bulger being led away by his murderers, two ten-year-old boys, in 1992. For Self, these moments accidentally capture the "pure form"[12] of what the auteurs of extreme violence try – and Self implies, fail – to reproduce. I can see why Edelstein turns to Self's argument for "moral displacement:" Edelstein and Self's positions both marry simulated and actual violence to argue for an ideal viewer with a centered moral fortitude, a fortitude always at risk of attack from violence in popular media and always embodied in twisting stomachs and wringing hands. The weakly technologically determinist position that they maintain – that depictions of violence on screen are a direct challenge to the ethical subject, who must writhe and splutter in response to images, lest their moral framework be compromised – are gently periodized yet rehearse what, in the latter decades of the 20th century, arguably became an evergreen position: that watching violence makes you violent. What their impulse also points to is a question of futility when faced with spectacles of actual and simulated violence, of a torment that gets stuck in the cringing body and cannot escape.

Torture Narrative

When Edelstein complains about the moral deficiency of torture, what I believe he is pointing to is a social problem: that these spectacles of violence do not have a social message and provide no solution or closure for the abundance of pain and anguish that they depict. The excessive violence on the screen – from which these authors can shield their eyes – is useless: their wincing has no obvious purpose, no end point, no pedagogical value. How can such a waste be managed? In other words: how might these scenes of violence be reincorporated into a productive community relation, be changed somehow to express a coherent moral project? Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux rally against Self and Edelstein's impulses. They argue that it is imperative to move our critical attention beyond the spectacle of violence, concentrating instead on cultures of violence that render individuals, communities, and the promise of a livable future disposable for the sake of revenue. Conceding that "[v]iolence is easily condemned when it feels exceptional,"[13] Evans and Giroux push for a more sustained engagement with their subject: "Rather than recoil in horror or exempt ourselves from further reflection," they say, "we must ask ourselves more searching questions about the normalization of violence and how it relates to prevailing rationalities of the times."[14] That is to say, moving beyond modular instincts and taking violence in all its forms as an insidious, amorphous element of social life.

The accepted relation between the (social) body, moral indiscretion, and lessons to be learned is expressed within arguably the most popular film on Edelstein's list, one that has spawned seven

sequels and counting: *Saw*. Beginning in 2004 with the quaint story of two apparent strangers waking up chained to pipes in a derelict bathroom, each *Saw* film features characters who find themselves in traps from which they have a limited amount of time to escape before being killed. Presided over by terminally-ill engineer mastermind John Kramer (Tobin Bell), also known as The Jigsaw Killer or simply Jigsaw, the victim of each trap is chosen for not valuing the gift of life, a charge made manifest through various acts of misconduct. Drug addicts, rapists, uncaring doctors, prostitutes, corrupt detectives, debt collectors, health insurance providers, private investigators, and drunk drivers make up some of the roster of Jigsaw's victims. The traps are often personalized, and the chosen punishments – debt collectors instructed to cut off a pound of flesh, voyeurs told to gouge their own eyes out, liars who have "burned" those they have met forced to climb into a lit furnace – are hardly subtle. Throughout the franchise, the dour Jigsaw is joined by a rotating cast of protégées, not all of whom conform to the principles of his trap-setting. While Jigsaw's traps are always beatable – with the intention of convincing those who survive to accept that they have been wasting their lives and commit to reforming their behavior – those built by his heirs Amanda and Hoffman are increasingly brutal and inescapable. Sharrett argues that Jigsaw's ethical raison d'être is an "inane moralizing that tries to provide intellectual cover" for the "gory tableaux" of the films.[1513] Contrary to this, I argue that the "inane" moral mission of Jigsaw is a constitutive element for the proper functioning – i.e., escapability – of his traps, as well as the broader narrative structure of the series. Whereas John Kramer's Jigsaw expects individuals to pull themselves up by their *boots-traps*, as it were, for Amanda and Hoffman – a recovering heroin addict and a crooked cop, respectively – there is no escape. The system works how it works: terminally.

While torture or spectacle is taken as the self-evident context for analyzing *Saw* and its follow-ups, I orient away from this reflex, away from the bodily trappings of many previous analyses and towards narrative framing and the function of the notorious traps. In line with Evans and Giroux, I hold that in the insistent return to the contorted body as the site of examination for *Saw*, critics have been distracted by spurts of blood and squeals of anguish. Decrying the story-elements of the *Saw* series as either unnecessarily complex or negligible, the narrative grammar of the franchise is typically undertheorized. Kerner and Knapp follow Linda Williams' work on body genres to posit that in the violence of *Saw*, "the spectacle that is in 'excess' of the narrative is actually integral to the system through which the films function."[1614] With no evident recourse to narrative theory, they address the question of what narrative might be (as Edelstein does with pornography) only in brackets: "in many instances extreme cinema is not governed according to narrative conventions (narrative arcs driven by character motivation), and instead emphasizes spectacles."[1715] On torture porn specifically, they say that such films "are little more than a string of violent vignettes with hardly a shred of narrative motivation."[1816] This parenthetical definition of narrative appears to be paraphrased from Williams, who summarizes Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger's account of Classical Hollywood Cinema as "efficient action-centered, goal-oriented linear narratives driven by the desire of a single protagonist, involving one or two lines of action, and leading to a definitive closure."[1917] Williams' argument about body genres is built out of Robert Altman's critique of this "linear, progressive form of the Hollywood narrative" that cannot incorporate non-linear excesses, like spectacle.[2018] This is a definition that Kerner and Knapp seem to take as immutable, working from the basis that narrative can be discerned in fully legible character actions that propel a story forward, but not in the kinetic, Rube Goldberg style traps for which *Saw* is famous.

Turning to Matt Hills' work on *Saw* and post-9/11 horror, Kerner and Knapp concede momentarily that (their understanding of) narrative is not always secondary to spectacle. Hills argues that "contra the torture-porn characterization, which implies that the 'numbers' of graphic bodily spectacle are the attraction, the *Saw* franchise is powerfully focused on narrative machinery. Its moments of heightened, artificial spectacle are also exaggerated moments of narrative crisis, enforced life-or-death choices made against the clock."[2119] Hills proposes that, in respect to *Saw*, a more appropriate name might be "torture narrative" or "torture story." Although gesturing to Hills, Kerner and Knapp do not acknowledge that his perspective on narrative is different from their own. Hills conceives the narrative of the *Saw* films

not as a linear progression but as a temporal and moral puzzle: What is happening to who, when? Is Jigsaw morally justified in his project? Less an identification of narrative than of plotting, Hills pushes us to consider how in *Saw* a "micro-narrative staging of moral order occurs at the artificial level of each trap, implying diegetically that zones of cultural disorder, chaos, and corruption surround these manic, ostentatious attempts to fix meaning and moral order."[2220] From this account of Jigsaw's project, I propose that his desire to reform others is a narrative impulse, yet he himself perhaps falls into the same ideological trap as Kerner and Knapp. In trying to motivate single characters through his own, idiosyncratic methods, Jigsaw loses sight of a bigger narrative picture. *Spiral*, on the other hand, orients away from the individualist tendencies of the previous films and towards an argument for large scale institutional reform.

Torture Reform

While earlier *Saw* films tended to focus on individual moral failings, *Spiral* tackles police negligence and brutality as an institutional failure. After a police officer murders a key witness to an incident of police sponsored violence, Detective Zeke Banks chooses to testify against the officer at trial. Banks is swiftly outcast by his peers as a consequence, to the extent that his calls for backup while on patrol go ignored and he suffers near-fatal gunshot wounds in the field. Following his brush with death, Banks chooses to work alone. However, after a drug bust gone awry, he is ordered by his Captain to take on a new rookie partner, fresh-faced William Schenk. Banks and Schenk are sent to investigate the scene of a grisly accident, where a homeless man has been hit by a subway train. They soon discover that the dead man is in fact a fellow police officer, and the crime scene indicates that he was the victim of a Jigsaw copycat. The copycat killer begins delivering a series of clues to Banks in neatly wrapped blue boxes, while continuing to target police officers. Three officers are killed over a period of a few days, including Schenk, who is skinned alive and left hanging from a meat hook in a butcher's shop. Over the course of the film, Banks searches for the killer, as well as for his estranged father, a highly regarded former police Captain (Samuel L. Jackson). Banks is ultimately captured and awakens handcuffed to a radiator in an abandoned warehouse. Banks manages to free himself, only to find his former partner, the officer he testified against, chained up in front of an industrial glass crushing machine positioned to shoot broken shards into his back. Banks tries and fails to save him, and is then confronted by Schenk. Having faked his own death, Schenk reveals that he is the son of the murdered witness and has come to exact his revenge on the police force that killed his father, using the threat of pain and death as incentive to end police corruption. Schenk then presents Banks' own father, who has been suspended from the ceiling and drained of almost all of his blood. Explaining that corruption proliferated under the elder Banks' tenure, Schenk allows the younger Banks to release his father with the promise that he will join in the mission to clean up the city's police force. Schenk calls 911, telling them that there is an active shooter situation and to deploy a SWAT team. The SWAT team accidentally triggers a pulley that once more suspends the tied-up senior Banks like a marionette, leading the team to mistake Banks Sr. for the shooter and gun him down. The now fatherless Banks screams in despair, as Schenk disappears down an elevator shaft.

Spiral has been described derisively as a *Se7en* rehash: a disaffected veteran cop joined by a rookie to investigate a series of morally (mis) guided murders. [2321] Yet such a reading – which focuses squarely on generic conventions and scenes of bodily pain – neglects the ideological underpinnings guiding the reorientation of *Spiral*. *Spiral* takes the plot beats of a *Saw* movie but replaces vigilante justice, the aspirational maiming of individuals who have not appreciated their lives, with an investment in top-down structural change and progress through institutional overhaul. This reorientation can firstly be read in color grading: the distinctive fetid green pallor and slimy post-industrial detritus of the *Saw* films are missing from *Spiral*. It seems that there has already been a change of scene, a newer, saturated color palette, a step on and away from terminal grimness. The mise-en-scène of *Saw* pre-*Spiral* is sufficiently homogenously bleak such that great portions of later films are convincingly revealed to have happened a decade in the past, prior to the events of the first film. These flashbacks offer different perspectives on the same story: a dying man's thirst for retributive justice. By repeating a diachronic/synchronic bait and switch, the series – from the

first film in 2004 up until 2017's *Jigsaw* – carves up the *Saw* narrative carcass from all angles: time does not move forward, no aspect of storytelling is wasted. Victims are put into traps (Hills' micro-narratives) and timed – 60 seconds before your jaw is ripped open! – but their conditions never change, never progress; Jigsaw's project of individual reform appears futile as the films loop back on themselves.

Impassioned after his reveal as the Jigsaw copycat, Schenk tells Banks that:

> "John Kramer was right. The spiral [is] a symbol of change, evolution, progress. But why limit that to an individual when you can apply it to a whole system? You got shot for doing the right thing. But let's face it, these cops? They're not going to clean up on their own. But we take a tongue here, a few bones there, they'll come around. We're going to fix a broken department, okay? You and me."

Schenk's description of his plan may seem to match Foucault's famous opening to *Discipline and Punish* of the sovereign displaying their power through the spectacle of public torture and execution; this would, however, be a misreading both of Foucault and of *Spiral*. Rather, I believe, what Schenk proposes is a discrete violence aimed not at maintaining power but rather on catalyzing progress, narrative, and a move towards a better world. The demand that the Jigsaw copycat makes – to be instated as the de facto head of police and rule with impunity – transforms the individualistic bent of John Kramer's Jigsaw into a problem of centralized governance and care for the wider community based on a loose biopolitics (i.e., a determination of who is allowed to live based upon those who must die). The emblem of the spiral, first seen in the series on the cheeks of harbinger ventriloquist puppet Billy, is taken by Schenk as an instructional narrative mechanism: the form of the spiral diagrams out of its centering anchor point, circling itself to integrate an outside and extend its purview. In this manner, Schenk takes the spiral and begins to think dialectically.

"John Kramer was right," says Schenk, but right about what? Right, it would seem, in his belief that change must be enacted. But Kramer focused his energy on the wrong things. As N. Katherine Hayles glosses, "to be effective, narrative requires a sense of how the present relates to the past and future and of at least potentially causal relations between events."[24] Kramer and Schenk both have faith in a vulgar causality: escaping an ironically designed trap will encourage miscreants to change their ways; the looming threat of police officers being killed off at random will ensure future reform. Schenk uses traps which are not designed to be escaped: the individual body is symbolic – a tongue ripped out of a perjurer; the fingers pulled off a trigger-happy cop – intended to propel a backwards police department forward. When police chief Angie Garza is captured and put in a trap where she has the "choice" of either being suffocated by a cascade of hot wax, or stopping the flow by leaning her neck into a razorblade that will sever her spinal cord, does she really have a choice to make? Her death is required, necessary to catalyze the clean-up job. Amanda, who in *Saw* escapes the famous reverse bear trap and becomes Jigsaw's accomplice, is an ostensible success: her brush with death indoctrinates her. Yet her conditions do not significantly change. In *Saw II* (Bousman, 2005), while assisting Kramer undercover in a trap where a group must escape a house filling with a nerve agent, Amanda is thrown into a pit of hypodermic needles by another victim to find a door key. Screaming in pain and writhing around in the pit, she finds the key only to run out of time, and the door locks itself. Kramer's ideological blind spot – targeting individuals for punishment in a violent system from which he offers no escape – goes beyond the narrative-puzzle proposed by Hills. Asking whether Jigsaw is morally justified in his project is usurped by another question: what chance do these victims have of reform if the system of violence does not change? Put another way, has Jigsaw's project always been a waste of time, of resources, of everything?

Some Twitter users have suggested, tongue in cheek, that if they awoke in one of Jigsaw's traps they would "simply die,"[2522] refusing to perform the will to live that Jigsaw demands. I read these jokes as an acknowledgement that the limits of the mortal body are incapable of withstanding acts of violence that insist upon a living a better life, without changing living conditions themselves. The pedagogical, even polytheizing impulses of Kramer

that involve inflicting bodily damage have limited capacity for performing either function. These are conditions of which John Kramer is surely aware: *Saw VI* posits that Kramer was pushed to the edge after his health insurer refused to cover possibly lifesaving treatment for his cancer and told him that he would lose his insurance if he sought the treatment independently. Critic Robert Abele points to Kramer's mishmash desires in a negative review in *The Los Angeles Times* – "Jigsaw wants healthcare reform!"[2623] – and questions whether his methods for dismantling the American healthcare apparatus (maiming a single insurance provider) might alienate otherwise sympathetic parties.

Although the American left has made demands for both socialized healthcare and police reform in recent years, Schenk's project seems far less controversial than Kramer's. The violence of medical debt is much less visible than that of police brutality, the images of which are repeated ad nauseam – indeed, *Spiral* includes some all too familiar dashcam footage, showing an officer shoot a driver at point-blank range – while the violence of healthcare disparity is often suffered privately, behind closed doors. Pondering the reason for and provenance of these new attacks over a meal with Schenk, the younger Banks erroneously states that Kramer had no interest in the police and never targeted them. This goof on Banks' part points to Kramer's incoherent moral logic, his subscription to the bad apple mode of individual responsibility: were those singled out by Jigsaw ontologically or contingently bad? Do bad people become cops, or does police work require or even encourage moral leniency? That the Jigsaw copycat might be attempting anything other than punishing certain bad cops doesn't occur to Banks or to anyone else at the precinct until Schenk directly explains himself. In *Spiral*'s final moments, this question of individual action and accountability versus the excessive force baked into police protocol plays itself out, with the senior Banks mistaken for an active shooter and immediately taken care of by the SWAT team. This set piece rehearses the repeated stories of police brutality towards black men who are assumed to be armed and dangerous, and rubs in the irony, the impossibility of Schenk's vision: that punishing an individual is never enough, but the tides of change must start with the indoctrination of Zeke Banks as a witness to the personal cost of systemic violence. This moment also points us back to Edelstein's initial problem of torture porn: what can be done with excess feeling when confronted with morally dubious acts of violence? Providing no direct answer – *Spiral*'s confusion is anything but didactic – the film ends by passing the baton onto the reeling Banks.

There is an active process of regime change that is narrated by Schenk, posited as a hope for a fairer future. In what would surely be to Self and Edelstein's chagrin, Schenk's vision (like Kramer's) is based on a lopsided moral incompatibility or incoherence. His insistence on integrating (an understandably resistant) Banks into his law enforcement clean-up job points to his systemic thought process: what seems to point directly at an individual expands out, becoming less atomized, concerned instead with what is best for the community the police serve. This project of police reform could be provisionally described as a project of relative autonomy; that is, approaching the corrupt police department as a "moving part" of a non-reducible social totality. But to emerge at this possibility, Schenk pushes Zeke Banks' buttons: a crude pig puppet chides him, asking when he last saw his father; all the eggshell blue boxes filled with severed tongues, police badges and disk drives are addressed directly to him. As he bears witness to more and more acts of brutal violence against his colleagues, Banks is shown trembling, weeping, and finally screaming before the final smash cut to credits.

"You got shot for doing the right thing," says Schenk to Zeke Banks, who he positions as a morally sound witness to extreme violence, one who can again be trusted to "[do] the right thing" and clean up the police force. But the question of what Banks does next is left open, and the material consequences of Schenk's project are left unresolved at *Spiral*'s conclusion. Unlike the twist endings of the other *Saw* films, whose early greenlit sequels dangled the carrot of possible (yet always unfulfilled) resolution, at the time of writing there is no promise of a *Spiral* sequel,[27] a forthcoming rundown of exactly how this reform will play out. Will policing be allowed to go on, business as usual, after the wringing of hands and a state funeral for the slain officers? Or can Schenk's form of direct action and violent coercion bring about real change, through an apparently excessive spectacle incorporated into the unseen functioning of a state apparatus? There is no neat ending, no

narrative closure, only open possibility. As such, it is tempting to return to the spectacle of the body and conclude that narrative was indeed irrelevant. Yet to do so would miss the point, the narrative thrust of reform. We have witnessed the violence, the bloody excess, and understand how it fits in the system. The question now is what to do next.

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Notes

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7 Adam Lowenstein, "Spectacle Horror and Hostel: Why 'Torture Porn' Does Not Exist," *Critical Quarterly*, 53:1 (2011), 42.
8 *Ibid.*, 43
9 Will Self, "The American Vice," *Screen Violence*, Ed. Karl French (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 72
10 *Ibid.,* 75.
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12 *Ibid.,* 80.
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14 *Ibid.,* 20.
15 Christopher Sharrett, "The Problem of *Saw*: 'Torture Porn' and the Conservatism of Contemporary Horror Films," *Cineaste* 35:1 (2009), 32.
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17 *Ibid.,* 5.
18 *Ibid.,* 7.
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