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Media Influence Has Led to Public Acceptance of Torture

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"The portrayal of torture in popular culture is having a significant impact on how interrogations are conducted in the field. U.S. soldiers are imitating the techniques they have seen on television."

In the following viewpoint, author and journalist Maura Moynihan argues that portrayals of torture on television and in advertising have desensitized Americans to torture. In particular, she singles out media campaigns by the George W. Bush administration, the television drama *Dexter* about a serial killer, and fashion shows in which models were dressed as torture victims. Moynihan argues that these media images make torture by the US government more politically popular and damage society.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to UCLA's Television Monitoring Project, how have the characters who torture on television changed in recent years?
2. What advertising campaigns does Moynihan point to as including torture imagery?
3. How does the Human Rights Watch believe images of torture will affect the United States' image around the world?

In his first days in office [in early 2009], President Barack Obama took a pen and signed executive orders halting the use of torture, shutting Guantanamo [a US prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, which has been criticized for failing to give inmates due process] and banning secret CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] prisons overseas, as he vowed to fight terrorism "in a manner that is consistent with our values and our ideals."

The Popularity of Torture

Shortly thereafter, a poll showed that Americans did not overwhelmingly support the president's rejection of the [George W.] Bush administration's use of torture as an instrument of the state.

In their zeal to legalize torture and trounce the Bill of Rights, the Bush team crafted a media campaign to sell the "War on Terror" as a righteous quest retribution for 9/11 [2001 terrorist attacks] inciting fear of future carnage to justify violating the Geneva protocols [international agreements banning torture] and the U.S. Army Field Manual. While the Bush torture policy made stunning progress through the courts and the legislature, with the Patriot Act [of 2001, which gave broad powers to the government] and the Military Commissions Act of 2006 [which authorized trials by military commissions rather than courts]; there followed an increase in the normalization of torture images in popular culture, a growing acceptance of violence as effective, routine.

When photographs of torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib [a US military prison in Iraq] appeared in 2004, Bush's approval ratings sank, yet torture themes multiplied in film and TV. From 2002 through 2005, the Parents Television Council counted 624 torture scenes in prime time, a six-fold increase. [University of California's] UCLA's Television Violence Monitoring Project reports "torture on TV shows is significantly higher than it was five years ago and the characters who torture have changed. It used to be that only villains on television tortured. Today, 'good guy' and heroic American characters torture and this torture is depicted as necessary, effective and even patriotic."

Primetime Torture

Human Rights First has just released a short film entitled "Primetime Torture" that examines how torture and interrogation scenes are portrayed in television programming. A retired military leader interviewed for the film says, "The portrayal of torture in popular culture is having a significant impact on how interrogations are conducted in the field. U.S. soldiers are imitating the techniques they have seen on television because they think such tactics work."

Lately it seems that three out of five offerings at the local Cineplex are tales of clever and nimble torturers and serial killers. This mass marketing of the murderer, sadist and child molester endows the deviant with a fictitious intelligence [and] the pretense of a rich and complex "inner life," a particularly annoying Hollywood buzzword. Such characters aren't presented as perverts, rather, they're complex geniuses, creative and tormented, ever misunderstood. It must come from the suits, who study box office returns for the "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" franchise. Whereas actresses frequently complain that the only roles available are for killers or tarts, actors bemoan the dearth of "serious" movies amid piles of scripts about guys shooting off guns. They'll play the killer if they have to, it's work.

Showtime has launched a hit series called *Dexter*, "America's Favorite Serial Killer; He's Got A Way with Murder." The star, Michael C. Hall, has become a pin-up icon in men's magazines, where he speaks rapturously in interviews about the joys of portraying "a serial killer with a conscience," in that he only kills bad people, or anyone he finds irritating. There's a *Dexter* screensaver, board game and Facebook site, where you can "Dexterize" your friend's profile. Huh?

In the Bush years torture images migrated from Hollywood to fashion and advertising. Last season a TV commercial featuring lesbian-bondage-torture imagery got heavy rotation on prime time. A sleek and luscious model is strapped to a restraining chair, encircled by another model wielding a hair dryer like a weapon, whilst growling, "In." A new color print ad in women's magazines shows a ferocious SWAT team breaking into a bathroom, hoisting bottles of toilet bowl cleaner like clubs. I guess it's supposed to make you feel "safe."

Torture Chic

In 2007 a fashion blog proclaimed: "Torture is the New Black," when John Galliano's 2007 runway show male models wore hoods, nooses, handcuffs, and had their bodies painted with gashes, cuts and cigarette burns. Then *Italian Vogue* ran 30 pages of color photographs by Steven Meisel, depicting models elegantly clad in Dolce & Gabbana, Prada and more, being interrogated and beaten by policemen with clubs, knives, guns and attack dogs. Many fashion writers embraced "Torture Chic." Joanna Bourke, a professor at Birkbeck College, observed that the images served "the interests of the politics of torture and abuse. There is a vicarious satisfaction in viewing these depictions of cruelty in the interests of national security."

Human Rights First offers ... recommendations to "creators of popular culture who are writing scenes about interrogation." These include:

U.S. interrogators say that not only is torture illegal and immoral, it is also ineffective as an interrogation tactic because it is unreliable. Moreover, evidence gained through torture is inadmissible in court and therefore unusable for prosecuting alleged terrorists or criminals.

Torture, as it is performed by American characters on television, regularly produces reliable information and quite quickly. When writing about interrogation, writers might consider creating scenes that more accurately mirror reality: showing that torture often incapacitates suspects (or kills them); that innocent people are often mistakenly tortured; or that victims of torture provide false information. On television today, torture has few consequences for the torturer and the tortured ... it would be difficult, if not impossible, for those who torture or are tortured to resume normal life quickly as they do on television.

Remember that American popular culture is exported widely around the world.... With the abuses at Abu Grahیب and Guantanamo fresh in people's minds, exporting the glorification of torture by American military and police personnel further tarnishes America's image in the world.

Fans of *Dexter* and 24 [a television show well-known for featuring torture] have become artificially desensitized to torture, having never experienced it themselves, or seen a friend or relative whipped, burned, frozen or starved.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan once wrote: "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself." In his 1993 essay "Defining Deviancy Down" he observed Americans "must be wary of normalizing social pathology that leads to trauma ... we are getting used to a lot of behavior that isn't good for us."

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