Pornographies of Violence? Internet Spectatorship on Body Horror

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Technological innovations have meant that the way images of the victims of war and other categories of body horror are procured and disseminated has changed. Soldiers in theatre may record what they witness, and upload this material online. Terrorist groups have staged the executions of hostages for the camera and distributed this imagery via the internet. Thus, the circulation of body horror is enabled in ways that evade the prerogatives of the mainstream press to produce news which accords with notions of "taste and decency", using practices which protect publics from imagery which may cause harm yet also often map with a propagandist function to conceal the carnage of war from public view. The essay explores online spectatorship which takes place outside that which is deemed appropriate for the publics of news, arguing that we must move beyond the reductive ways in which looking at body horror has been conceptualized. Neither witnessing, as the posited correct form of spectatorship, nor the pervasive pornographic analogy used to render moral judgment on such looking account for the diversity of spectatorial positions taken up by those who choose to look at online imagery of the dead and suffering.

Keywords: Body Horror; War; Internet; Spectatorship; Witnessing

Technological innovations have meant that the way images of the victims of war and other categories of body horror are procured and disseminated has changed. Digital cameras enable soldiers in the field to record what they witness and upload this material to the internet. Insurgent groups have taken advantage of new modes of image distribution to stage the executions of hostages for the camera and distribute this imagery online. A number of websites host this imagery and other categories of body horror. Thus, the circulation of graphic imagery is enabled in ways that evade the prerogatives of the mainstream press to produce news that accords with notions of "taste and decency," using practices which protect publics from imagery which

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may cause harm yet also often map with a propagandist function to conceal the carnage of war from public view. These new ways of providing access to the "real" imply new ways of seeing. What happens to the ethical space around images of pain and death within these new contexts, and how are these new modes of spectatorship to be understood?

This contribution to nascent studies of internet spectatorship (Harries, 2002; White, 2006) addresses the "illicit" looking enabled by new media technologies—the looking that takes place outside the mainstream news makers' control and sanction for public consumption. I examine internet spectatorship of body horror at Ogrish.com, the most popular of the websites which have specialized in providing access to body horror. Ogrish was founded in 2001 and was hosted in the U.S. In October 2006 Ogrish.com was sold and now directs users to LiveLeak.com, an uncensored video hosting site. The member forums have continued to operate as a separate entity at Ogrishforum.com, which currently has over 200,000 members. Ogrishforum.com features user-generated threads of graphic imagery and discussions based around them. In its early years Ogrish was explicitly an underground gore fetish site. The front page displayed a pair of bloody hands, and the site's tagline was: "Can you handle life?" The site offered access to imagery of accidents, suicides, explicit medical material, and war and crime scene photographs. Ogrish became a repository of graphic media during the Iraq war. The site's profile was raised when it hosted the video of Daniel Pearl's beheading in 2002 (Grindstaff & DeLuca, 2004), and Nick Berg's beheading in 2004. Prior to the sale of the site Ogrish archived 19 beheading videos, each of which had been downloaded several million times. The Nick Berg video had been downloaded over 15 million times (Talbot, 2005, p. 2). When an event such as a beheading occurred, the site received up to 60,000 hits an hour, with average site traffic up to 200,000 hits per day (Talbot, 2005, p. 2).

The mediation of body horror on Ogrish and its forums dislocates imagery of death and suffering from moralizing frames, instead offering an array of explicit scenes catering to morbid tastes. This new visibility of atrocity and its subculture warrants investigation. How is graphic imagery made meaningful within these new contexts and wider discourses about these sites? Referring to the images of torture from Abu Ghraib, Elizabeth Dauphinee (2007) argues, "[T]he logic of the visual image risks the final obliteration of the human subject whose world is already undone by the experience of pain" (p. 140). Even within projects intended to politicize the immorality of suffering, pain is fetishized in the "drive to make visible what is essentially *unimaginable*" (p. 140); and regardless of our politics we "cannot escape the voyeurism and the objectification associated with [the imagery's] circulation" (p. 147). Thus, she concludes, there is no ethically pure way to circulate the images; they are a kind of pornography. If the ethical status of graphic images is uncertain even when their circulation is part of an explicitly moral agenda, what can such images stand for in the absence of such an agenda?

In discourses about Ogrish there are competing explanatory frames. The imagery on Ogrish, and the modes of spectatorship it implies, have been deemed "pornographic" within wider cultural commentary; the site is commonly referred

to as a "gore porn" or "death porn" site.[1] Alternatively, images of atrocity are understood to make a call to conscience, to enable the viewer to bear witness to scenes cleansed from mainstream media through repressive standards of taste and decency. In this essay, I will evaluate these competing discourses, advancing the argument that each set of discourses fails to elucidate the range of spectatorial positions viewers take up and their particular ethical dimensions.

The discursive production of body horror as pornography expresses a moral position regarding the circulation of atrocious imagery; however, it elides the diverse character of viewer responses to violence through recourse to a genre preoccupied with sexual fantasy. I outline the plasticity of the pornographic trope and its effacements with reference to imagery of death and body horror in order to make a case for terminology that articulates, rather than displaces, what is at stake around representing the ruined body. I compare discourses of pornography with the core assumptions of the bearing witness position, and in the following section examine the way this looking-as-civic-duty argument has been marshaled in Ogrish's self-legitimation. Changes to the site and its subsequent sale reflect a re-framing of illicit space through disavowing the pleasures of looking at body horror and rendering spectatorship an act of conscience. This re-casting of spectatorship as other than "pornographic" (that is, through the discursive production of the site as an uncensored news site rather than a "gore porn" site) domesticates looking at atrocity, which has been enabled under the conditions of war. This shift in the way spectatorship is framed has rarely been contested in press accounts of the phenomenon, reflecting the ways in which ethical boundaries around viewing graphic footage are being driven back by contemporary online contexts.

The management of atrocious imagery on Ogrish tells us little about the specifics of internet spectatorship of body horror. This spectatorship is explored in the final section of the paper through an analysis of posts to the Ogrish user forums, through which members deliberate on their looking practices. The complexity and variety of these responses highlights the limitations of the pornographic metaphor. Abandoning the pornographic trope is not to dismiss the way in which spectatorship of body horror is a profoundly ethical issue. Rather, as a euphemism the term "pornography" enables us to displace concerns around one set of (eroding) cultural taboos onto another without articulating what is at stake in this new context: the desire for "real" death and gore where Hollywood fantasy will no longer suffice, the desire for "raw" footage outside of what news makers allow, and the desire to evade the moral orientation these formats frequently provide.

The pornographic analogy further elides the meaning making that takes place on the site outside of the frame of pleasure. Some viewers draw on discourses of bearing witness in discursively organizing their responses to horrific imagery, and this form of witnessing is evaluated in relation to Barbie Zelizer's (1998) definition of bearing witness as a collective act beyond looking which enables individuals to take some responsibility for what they see (p. 10). I conclude that, for the majority of Ogrish posters, spectatorship is evacuated of an ethical dimension. However, the bearing

witness position assumes a liberal, pacifist gaze. Other modes of looking are produced, and indeed required, within violent and warring cultures.

Bearing Witness and the Plasticity of the Pornographic Metaphor

Ogrish.com and Ogrishforum.com are websites dedicated to hosting still and video images of death and body horror. The sites have facilitated a subculture of viewers who share a fascination with the morbid, a fascination that is predominantly framed as a desire for knowledge. The transgression of ethical space around death and suffering represented by the sites, which fetishize rather than moralize graphic media, and the imagined perverse motives of viewers, are summed in popular reference to the sites as gore or death porn. In this section I chart the use and limitations of the pornographic metaphor as a means of expressing objections to gruesome imagery and its spectators. I compare this metaphor with the notion of bearing witness, elucidating the central problematic of the atrocious image: explicit media make a particular claim to the "real," yet simultaneously evacuate the subjectivity of the suffering subject, leaving only signifiers of pain, the reception of which cannot be fixed or guaranteed.

The instability of the meaning of graphic images, their reliance on context and the subjectivity of viewers to frame their ethical purchase, means that spectatorship on documentary violence, suffering, and death is understood within the scholarly literature in competing ways. On the one hand, imagery of body horror is understood to make a moral claim on its audience, whereby looking at such imagery is to bear witness to atrocity. This tradition of bearing witness was exemplified by Ernst Friedrich's 1924 *War Against War*, a volume of graphic images from World War I produced to promote pacifism. Images of Nazi atrocities were circulated in the press following the Holocaust, and looking constituted a public duty to ensure such acts could not be repeated (Zelizer, 1998). More recently, Susan Sontag (2003) exhorts:

> Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self righteously. Don't forget. (p. 115)

In the following section, I examine the way this perspective has played a central role in Ogrish's self-legitimation concerning internet access to graphic footage of the Iraq War.

Conversely, viewing imagery of body horror may be rendered as unable to sustain a moral dimension: either over-exposure produces "compassion fatigue" (Moeller, 1999) or looking involves pleasure and is thus pornographic. The pornographic analogy persists in both scholarly and public discussions of body horror, and has become the principle metaphor through which objection to violent imagery is framed.

In his discussion of the aesthetics of documentary photography, Jonathan Friday (2000) describes the morbid attraction to human suffering as "demonic curiosity,"

which he refers to as "a pornographic stare at another man's suffering" (p. 365). This mode of looking is described as structured "by (near) pathological impulse" (p. 366), concerned with morbid subject matter alone and thus divorced from aesthetic appreciation of the representational form. The term "demonic curiosity" posits this desire to look outside of rational or human motivation, instead conjuring the supernatural and rendering this looking excessive—as outside of that for which we can literally account. The same labour of signifying limits to comprehension is performed by invoking the term "pornography" in relation to images of body horror.

Carolyn Dean (2003) examines the development of the convention of describing imagery of death and suffering as "pornography," reflecting "increasing suspicion toward and ambiguity about responses to bodily suffering" (p. 91). Following the First World War:

> [C]ommentators declared that images of the war dead and indeed of the war itself were "pornographic," implying that they no longer always revealed the tragically annihilated presence of dignity but reduced men's sacred bodies to objects of excitement, pleasure, or domination and thereby further violated the dead or demeaned. (p. 91)

The use of pornography as a metaphor for positing the corruption of spectatorship and the impoverishment of public sentiment proliferated in references to representations of the Holocaust. Here the term has been mobilized to express a range of concerns around the corruption of empathy occasioned by atrocity and its representation. Pornography figures the degradation of the victim of brutality (p. 99); it commodifies the Holocaust as entertainment (e.g., through films, novels, and museum exhibits which are imagined to numb or, conversely, titillate audiences; pp. 99–100); it provokes voyeurism and appetite for the consumption of renderings of the Holocaust whose spectatorship marshals erotic and aggressive drives (pp. 101–102); it promotes the "re-desecration" of Holocaust victims through the exhibition of archival "snuff" footage (p. 103), and the literary over-identification with both the perpetrators of atrocity and the victims, so that bearing witness mutates into sadism and the narcissistic appropriation of suffering (pp. 104–105).

Thus, the metaphor of pornography is plastic: it can be used to refer to war or violence itself, the culture which produces monstrous acts and practices, the representational process (as reductive, objectifying, or tainted by a profit imperative), the spectatorial position necessitated by graphic images (or their repetition), or the apathy or appetite of viewers. As Dean observes:

> Pornography figures our relationship to suffering so potently and concisely because it is both full of meaning and an empty category and so is never only a sexual metaphor for political pathology: full because, as we have seen over and over again, its interpretive breadth is dramatic, its explanatory power breathtaking; empty because, as we have also seen, it doesn't really explain anything. (p. 107)

J.M. Bernstein (2004) uses an analogy with pornography to describe a corrupt mode of witnessing atrocity through philosophic and photographic accounts, and the subject position it produces for readers and viewers. He argues that the catalogue of

photographed atrocities in James Nachtwey's *Inferno* invites a pornographic gaze whereby we "are simultaneously fascinated and repulsed, we cannot bear to look and we cannot stop looking" (p. 11). Despite Nachtwey's intention to implicate viewers in his moral project of bearing witness to suffering, Bernstein finds the work pornographic in its "liberal aestheticization of horror":

> If the negative aspect of the sexually pornographic derives from its framing of its recruitment of the female body for the delectation of the male gaze, the satisfaction of male desire through domination of the female, the negative aspect of the pornography of horror turns on something analogous—let's say it involves the framing of devastation for the sake of the moral satisfaction of the liberal gaze . . .
> (p. 11)

The work fails in these terms because it imagines the ruined body without a context to enable knowledge of why or how such atrocity occurred: "By so relentlessly and unblinkingly focusing on these remnants of devastation, our imagination is left nowhere to go but to feed our revulsion and pity" (p. 12).

Invoking the pornographic conceals what there is about looking at suffering that is *not* like pornography. The subjects of "mainstream" pornography generally "consent" to their appearance on screen. Their roles are performed for the camera. The same cannot be said for the victims depicted in documentary footage of death and suffering. Documentary imagery is part of a regime of photographic representation which, while its truth claims have been subject to critique and revision, is linked to a cultural tradition of evidence, bearing witness, and social conscience (Taylor, 1998; Zelizer, 1998). Pornography as a genre is intended to signify pleasure, to invite imaginative fantasies of identification culminating in climax for the participating viewer. To use the term in relation to body horror relies on the contested notion of the sexually pornographic as signifying objectification and the dehumanization of the (feminine) other. In many respects, sexual pornography has been domesticated within Western culture, including the academy, so that the term does not automatically invoke notions of degradation but may signify pleasure, performance, or transgression (Attwood, 2002; Kipnis, 1996; Williams, 1989, 2004). This is not to say that documentary images cannot be used as pornography, or to diminish the profound ethical concerns posed by categories of violent pornography (Boyle, 2006; Brison, 2004)—yet the specific concerns and agendas within studies of pornography are not served by extending pornography as a trope to encompass non-sexualized regimes of representation.

In relation to body horror, pornography substitutes an expression of moral repugnance for elucidation. This transference of meaning from one category of representation to another suggests that body horror and the appetites its spectatorship is imagined to produce have become the category of spectacle that the culture most fears and vilifies. Recognizing the substitution also allows us to see the connection between categories of material that may act on the body of the viewer. Film scholars have addressed these aesthetically "low" genres that "move" the body including pornography, horror, melodrama, and vulgar comedy (Dyer, 1985; Williams 1991). As this work illustrates, each "body genre" acts on the body in

different ways, and thus to conflate pornographic and horror spectatorship is to confound different modes of spectatorship and arousal. Analysis has not extended to consider the effect of documentary footage of violence on the body of the viewer, an issue addressed in the final section of this paper.

Deeming the representation of body horror to be pornographic obscures the moral value in choosing to look or not to look: the framing of looks is cultural labour. While news makers are governed by notions of taste and decency in terms of the graphic imagery they may broadcast or print, and thus tend to conceal the ruined body from public view, war correspondents and media critics argue that the sanitizing of war serves the interests of those who make war. War correspondent Robert Fisk hosts images of the Iraqi dead and wounded on his website, and in this context imagery of the carnage of war is intended to make a moral argument against war. Similarly, James Nachtwey introduces his online galleries at jamesnachtwey.com: "I have been a witness, and these pictures are my testimony. The events I have recorded should not be forgotten and must not be repeated." The viewer is thus invited to bear witness by proxy. In academic accounts Julian Petley (2003) insists that both broadcasters and audiences of sanitized war coverage need to "grow up and get real: Wars involve bloodshed and slaughter, and those involved in them, even indirectly, have a moral and political responsibility to face this simple fact" (p. 83). Similarly, David Campbell (2004) argues that the "blindness produced by a combination of the social economy of taste and the media system of self-censorship constitutes a considerable injustice with regard to our collective understanding of the fate of the other" (p. 71).

These accounts rely on a notion of witnessing that can orient us to the plight of the other and enable us to take some burden upon ourselves for what we see. Of course, seeing does not guarantee that spectatorship will consist of bearing witness, and it is this fear that is invoked by the pornographic metaphor, which conjures a pathological "other" who is gratified by images of suffering and the ruined body. Frequently, invoking the pornographic is a way of conjuring a moral violation, the particulars of which simply go without saying or which cannot be expressed. In what follows, I argue that discussion of violent imagery and the looks it draws requires a discourse that moves beyond the pornographic. While appealing to the pornographic signifies that there is something profoundly moral and political at stake in the meanings of imagery of death and suffering, the term forecloses debate rather than inviting exploration of precisely what *is* at stake in specific contexts.

Ogrish.com and the Domestication of Internet "Death Porn"

Ogrish.com actively sought to shed its reputation as a gore or death porn site, and this process was largely supported by commentary in the media. The term "porn" suggests that body horror sites violate taboos pertaining to the depiction of graphic material and renders moral judgment on this transgression. Pornography is a confounding metaphor when referring to body horror and its spectatorship; it frames looking as incomprehensible on its own terms, borrowing instead a set of moral

associations in which sexual rather than traumatized bodies are at stake. The term "gore" suggests a fascination with the body rendered monstrous through violence; it is a morbid rather than a pornographic allure. In 2006, Ogrish underwent a series of changes in order to discursively produce body horror spectatorship as legitimate and ethical. This process, and press commentary supporting it, reflects a domestication of transgressive looking.

Ogrish's content came from a network of approximately 50 content providers from around the world, including law enforcement, medical, and military personnel, insurgent groups, and photojournalists, who captured footage unsuitable for mainstream outlets (Harkin, 2006a). Because of its extensive network for procuring content, including the use of software that scanned extremist sites for new video footage, material copyrighted by Ogrish has been used by mainstream news organizations. Edited footage of Nick Berg's beheading broadcast by television networks bore the Ogrish watermark, and this publicity contributed to the number of times the clip was downloaded from the site. Both the BBC and CNN have left the Ogrish watermark on footage they have used, while other networks have obscured it. According to one of Ogrish's owners, speaking on Ogrish's first podcast in April 2006, "[A] lot of companies use our footage, and there seems to be some kind of snowball effect going on at the moment … we're not having to dilute our content, but with each passing week more and more of these companies are [approaching us]."

The goal of the site was to become a respected outlet for uncensored news, and this required a significant shift in the way in which the spectatorship on body horror was signified through the culture of the site. Processes of rationalization and legitimation were expressed in the removal of references to "gore" on the site; the term "uncensored media" became preferred. The tagline "Can you handle life?" was replaced with "Uncover reality"—a desire to know replacing a test of machismo. There was no pornography or imagery of animal cruelty allowed in content areas or forums, and posting became subject to stringent rules of conduct. These changes are still in place on the user forums, which continue to feature user-generated threads of video and images. The front page of the site, which carried links to new videos and image, has been discontinued and the function of providing new video material has been taken over by LiveLeak.com, an uncensored video sharing site.

In significant ways the material archived on Ogrish, content that has been transferred to LiveLeak, and the material hosted in the user forums is not news. The same holds true for the video clips that were regularly added to Ogrish's front page, a function continued by the "recent top leaks" section on LiveLeak's front page. However, the discourse legitimizing spectatorship of this graphic footage has relied on the discursive production of this material as both newsworthy and subverting the conventions of mainstream news.

The material hosted on these sites is not news in that it has not gone through the institutional processes that make news; rather, it consists of raw documentary footage. Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) has examined the ways in which the institutional processes of television news-making forge relationships between viewers and the suffering subject on screen. She explains that the mediation of suffering that

news-making consists of "seeks to act on the spectator as moralizing forces" (p. 30). Ideally, the translation of events into news stories will interpellate a cosmopolitan public in a "politics of pity" (p. 31), whereby knowledge of suffering will translate into some form of public conduct, into political action or indeed "any mundane act that addresses suffering as a cause that deserves to be seen and heard by other people" (p. 30). Hence, Chouliaraki argues, the role of news-making is to perform moral labour that enables the viewer to take an ethical stance in relation to the suffering of others. A category of news which fails to do this is "adventure news"—news items that "consists of random and isolated events, and for this reason they fail to make an ethical demand on spectators to respond to the suffering they report" (p. 97). The raw video footage hosted on video sharing sites corresponds most closely to this category of news.

However, it is precisely this lack of mediation and moral framing that the co-owner of Ogrish, and now LiveLeak, has promoted as a strength of his sites—a perspective that has rarely been contested in press coverage of the sites. Both sites have received media attention in reportage on the phenomenon of the availability of soldier-produced footage from Iraq on the internet, and references to the negative potential of such material are rare. Stories run by the BBC (Allen Greene, 2006), *The Washington Times* (Galupo, 2006), ABC News (Silverstein, 2006), *Rolling Stone* (McPherson, 2006), and News.com (Sandoval, 2006) cited Ogrish co-owner Hayden Hewitt's perspective that his site provided an antidote to state propaganda, enabling access to the truth about the experience of war that the mainstream media withholds. These comments were not rebutted, rendering the spectatorship on graphic violence enabled by Ogrish as legitimate and necessary, particularly under the conditions of war.

A rare dissenting perspective was expressed in a commentary by James Harkin in *The Guardian* called "War Porn." Harkin described the imagery of carnage available on sites like Ogrish as a "pornographic nightmare," and claimed that audiences "heighten their sense of reality ... by ogling the videos" (Harkin, 2006b, para. 7). Aside from these comments, media commentary renders Ogrish as staking a greater claim to truth-telling than mainstream news outlets. News-making, a process of selection, crafting, and editing, is rendered suspect and the imperative becomes to look at that which the news will not show. The process of legitimizing the war footage hosted by Ogrish circumvents consideration of the range of materials hosted by the site: no mention is made of archived imagery of suicide and murder scenes, victims of sexual attacks, accidents, beheadings, or people jumping from the World Trade Center. In effect, all categories of body horror become part of the public's right to know, where knowledge is predicated on vision.

The mainstreaming of the forms of spectatorship enabled by Ogrish has continued in its new incarnation as LiveLeak.com. Hayden Hewitt explained on LiveLeak's first podcast that the goal for the site was to be:

> an outlet for everything from light entertainment media to the hardest of hardcore news footage as well. We want to create a site where people can share media ... and

also be as uncensored as humanly possible while still managing to stay online and unblocked. (LiveLeak, 2006)

LiveLeak's profile was raised when it became one of the first sites to host the unedited cameraphone footage of Saddam Hussein's execution and was mentioned as a potential source of unmediated war coverage by Tony Blair in a keynote defence speech:

> [N]ews is no longer something read in dispatches, it comes straight into the living room. Take a website like LiveLeak, which has become popular with soldiers from both sides of the divide in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Operational documentary material, from their mobile phones or laptops, is posted on the site in real time. These sometimes gruesome images are the unmediated reality of war and they provide a wholly new source of evidence for journalists and commentators bypassing the official accounts and records. (LiveLeak.com, 2007)

The mention of LiveLeak by Blair provided positive publicity for the site and contributes to the domestication of spectatorship of gruesome images that the news does not or cannot show. This illustrates that the ethical propriety regarding viewing death and body horror is being reconstituted by the access to imagery enabled by the internet. However, this emphasis on rendering spectatorship of graphic imagery as an antidote to the hygiene of mainstream press coverage potentially has significant consequences, as it enables viewers to avoid the moralizing frameworks discussed by Chouliaraki (2006). It fails to consider the impoverished form of knowledge that looking can provide. Video clips are provided with little context other than brief titles or descriptions. In this regard video hosting sites may be less equipped to render knowledge than television news stories. As Rosalind Morris (2004) contends with regard to the paucity of television's representation:

> [T]elevisual imagery merely reveals the appearance of war … television war … is a war of unsignifying signs: of corpses and wounded bodies, broken buildings and other ruins which are incapable of saying anything other than that they are there. The image of a fly-crowned body at the road-side does not testify to geopolitical history, the pursuit of oil or the recycling of Vietnam War policy. (p. 403)

When new additions or archived material are discussed by forum members, this is seldom an impetus to address broader geopolitical issues; typically, users speculate over the cause and nature of death or injuries, or the aesthetic quality of clips, such as their image and sound quality. Recent public accounts of the spectatorship enabled by the internet imagine a critically engaged audience, and fail to consider the fragmented nature of audiences. Neither the mode of looking advocated by the new-look Ogrish (its public relations and its new incarnation as LiveLeak; civic duty and bearing witness) nor the pornographic metaphor account for the specificity or diversity of spectatorial positions internet access to body horror enables. In the following section, I identify a range of spectatorship positions Ogrish forum users take up, including: an amoral gaze, whereby the suffering subject becomes a source of stimulation and pleasure; a vulnerable gaze, where viewers experience harm from graphic imagery; an

entitled gaze, where viewers frame their looking through anti-censorship discourses; and a responsive gaze, whereby looking is a precedent to action.

Complicating Looks: The Diversity of Internet Spectatorship of Body Horror

As Vivian Sobchack (2004) observes, "[B]efore the nonfictional screen event of an unsimulated death, the very act of looking at the film is ethically charged" (p. 244). Posters to the Ogrish forum acknowledge that their desire to look at imagery of death and body horror breaches cultural taboos, and this recognition is reflected in the discussions of spectatorship that have taken place on the Ogrish forums.[2] Over the past year, threads entitled "The roots of gore fascination," "Ogrish is bad for you," "What is your explanation for viewing gruesome material?," "Are we sick?," "Are we crazy?," "What has Ogrish taught you?," "Most brutal video," and "Desensitized by Ogrish" have each drawn up to 200 responses from members. Within these discussions, participants express their pleasures and anxieties around looking, or attempt to legitimize their looking by drawing on the discourses of access to the "real" and "truth-telling" promoted by the site. These user comments may not exhaust the actual motives or practices of their authors, yet they reveal the ways in which forum members organize their self-understanding of their presence on the site. The content of these discussions illuminates the multiplicity of spectatorial positions taken up in relation to documentary imagery of death and suffering, illustrating the limitations of the pornographic metaphor and the assumption that to look is to bear witness.

Looking at imagery of body horror for entertainment or pleasure is the central reason why sites such as Ogrish are referred to as "death porn" or "gore porn" sites. It is a mode of spectatorship that was explicitly censured during the changes made to the site, yet it is a mode of looking that has persisted. As one poster to the forums claimed, "[I]t has been said that this site is an independent news site or some shit, that's just an excuse for people who feel guilty looking at it. Let's look at it for what it is, senseless violence, death and gore for our entertainment."

The popular threads on the Ogrish forums have discussed the most brutal or disturbing imagery members have seen. In sharing their experiences, posters express either the pleasure they take from such imagery ("That is *numero uno* on my list I love that clip, that was the 1st gore clip I ever saw and I've been hooked ever since!") or the ways in which such imagery has harmed them. Sometimes one response does not preclude the other:

> Damn, I just clicked on that link, that was the first beheading I saw. It made me quite shocked for like 30 mins, after that I was hunting for more, only just watched the Armstrong one too, its some good shit.

In accounting for why they watch graphic material, one poster claimed:

> [A]fter I watch the really brutal videos I get a kind of high that I can't get from anything else . . . the videos get my heart racing and breathing all heavy. When I am

> watching them the rest of the world just fades away for awhile and I am totally lost in the moment.

That the pleasure of looking diminishes over time was discussed by a number of posters to one such thread: "They don't affect me like they used to, which is a shame. I miss that nervous adrenaline rush I used to get. That's what happens to you if you hang around Ogrish too much I guess." In response, other posters similarly lamented the loss of the "rush" or feelings of physical sickness that accompanied the novelty of viewing graphic videos:

> I love this clip, its really great. Guess it was my first gore video I ever saw in my life on Ogrish. I was like turning white and felt like puking. Yeah those were the days. It brings back the memories.

The pleasure that viewers express after having their body "moved" by viewing graphic imagery has been discussed by film scholars and is a link that has been made between viewing horror films and pornography. Steven Shaviro (1993) describes the manner in which horror and porn

> are not content to leave me with vague, disembodied imaginings, but excitedly seek to incise those imaginings in my very flesh. They focus obsessively upon the physical reactions of bodies on screen, the better to assault and agitate the bodies of the audience. (p. 100)

Both genres "privilege the degraded half of the mind–body split" and are thus considered "disreputable" genres (Pinedo, 1997, p. 61). Linda Williams (1991) notes that these "body genres," along with the "weepie," are characterized by "an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion" (p. 5).

While these genres share commonalities in their ability to act upon the viewer's body, their differences, and the crucial distinction that Ogrish users are responding to documentary rather than fictional footage, must be clarified. As distinct from the pleasure of pornographic spectatorship, the horror viewers' pleasure is of a different order to sexual arousal. Arousal derives from fear, terror, shock, and repulsion; it is experienced as both pleasure and displeasure. Academic attention to imagery that moves the body has not attended to bodily responses to documentary footage, and this difference between the fictional and the "real" crucially marks these pleasurable responses as corrupting the ethical space around witnessing death and suffering. As one forum regular explained:

> Body horror on the internet takes it to the next level from horror films. The film has character development and attachment to them, narrative structure. On the internet its just a random act of gore—shock value. It doesn't need that build up [of the film] because it is real—it just shocks you. Everyone wants quick and convenient gore—it's the McDonalds of gore. You don't have to commit yourself to a gore clip . . . you're not emotionally attaching yourself to the person that's getting killed. It entertains me—that's all the justification I need. There's always been people who want to look at this stuff, but you're just watching, you can safely get your kicks. You're not participating in that death by looking.

This justification conceals the complicity of the gazer on extreme imagery such as beheadings, where the viewer is aligned with the camera's sadistic gaze, becoming a participatory spectator in an act intended to terrorize. The person who takes pleasure in this footage neutralizes its intended threat, but poses a new crisis for the management of the ethical space enveloping death. We don't need a neologism to replace pornography as an apparatus of moral condemnation here: it is sufficient to identify an amoral gaze which perverts the empathetic and ethical space constitutive of death imagery.

This mode of viewing, where pleasure is derived from the shock of the "real" and from the objectification of the victim as a "reality effect," rather than a suffering subject with whom one empathizes, renders this category of spectatorship a "low" form of popular culture. This type of gazing subverts the documentary genre, which relies upon its ability to testify to atrocity. This perspective underlines that it is not the image itself that bears witness, but rather that there is cultural labour required to orient viewers to the ethical significance of that which the camera records. This mode of spectatorship, where the internet enables a "quick fix" of gore outside of cultural narratives that embed the viewer in moralizing discourses, is a disturbing effect of recent discourses that domesticate access to graphic imagery in online contexts.

The spectator who takes ethically bankrupt pleasure from suffering is less visible on the Ogrish member forums than the viewer who discusses extremely graphic videos in the context of harm and vulnerability: "After watching my first beheading vid, I went into a 3 day emotional shock. Now, I just avoid them all together. Beheadings are the one thing that I will NEVER get used to, no matter how many times I watch them"; "I guess you don't get used to it really I think it just takes your brain to another stage and fucks ya up inside"; "The first time I found a site like this, I spent 8 hours straight, couldn't log off, the problem came when I tried to sleep, and nope I couldn't, could only see these ugly pics flimmering through my head." Users report feeling physically ill, having butterflies in their stomachs, crying, and being "haunted" by graphic imagery.

These comments reflect that the immediacy and veracity of the image, which expresses the limits of representation and comprehension, is felt at the level of the body through the crisis it poses for the mind. Unlike the amoral gaze, this category of spectatorship relies on a viewer's empathy with the victim on screen. These negative responses to graphic imagery reflect one of the reasons why publics are screened off from such material by mainstream news organizations. This type of response has been rarely considered in recent public discourses which contend that looking at gruesome imagery is an enlightened response to the limitations of mainstream news outlets. These responses also illustrate that some watch the suffering of others despite suffering themselves in the process, and these renderings of vulnerability undermine any assumption of a singular death porn spectator feeding base appetites. Rather, this form of spectatorship resembles Carol Clover's (1992) "reactive gaze" within horror film, which is not characterized not by a person's mastery and control of the image; instead persons "can be physically assaulted by the projected image" (pp. 202–203).

Like audiences of fictional horror, the viewing practices and motives of Ogrish members are diverse. Of the horror film audience Andrew Tudor (1997) writes:

> [H]orror appeals to people for as many reasons as its consumers can find ways of making use of genre products. For some, no doubt, horror may be a source of titillation. For others, a fount of salutary warnings, and for yet others, an occasion for collective hilarity. Some horror fans relish and rely upon the stigma that attaches to such officially undervalued culture. (p. 461)

While the motives assigned to viewers of fictional horror overlap with those of viewers of documentary horror (and often fandom of the former has led to an interest in the latter), members of Ogrish have frequently claimed to value the site's access to the "real." Indeed, members who post or discuss footage that has been faked, or taken from horror films, are derided by other posters who cast themselves as aficionados of "real" gore. The reasons why members value this access to the "real" vary, and this variety illustrates the complexity of spectatorial positions on body horror.

   A number of members illustrate an entitled gaze, mentioning a desire to see what the news will not show, visiting the site because: of "the censorship issue – I want to know what really goes on in the world"; "I come here to see what Big Brother doesn't allow me to"; "I want my world view to reflect facts not wishes . . . I want to see the real world, not the censored shit on TV." One poster claimed:

> [R]egular people know that humans were beheaded in Iraq by insurgents. But the fact that the actual video and audio of the beheadings were never shown in the mainstream media means that people do not REALLY know that people were beheaded in Iraq. The fact is a simple pale statistic to them, not an experience.

Similar posts express a duty to bear witness to the "monstrosity" of the enemy, often imbricating such claims within a discourse of patriotism, or citing the use of such imagery to motivate military service. These posts counter the pornographic metaphor by positing a desire for truth over pleasure. While both horror and pornography allow the viewer to "see everything," for the pornographic spectator this seeing is directed towards sexual fantasy, while the entitled spectator seeks to circumvent taboos pertaining to the destruction of bodies in order to acquire knowledge. This anti-censorship position rests on the assumption that graphic footage is a superior form of knowledge than the tamer images the news may present, and bears out Joel Black's (2002) observation, "In an increasingly artificial and visual world, *nothing must appear to be unreal*, meaning that *nothing must be left unseen*" (p. 10, original emphasis). This position also assumes that looking in and of itself constitutes knowledge. However, this notion is problematic because graphic imagery of violence shows the ruined body, but provides no knowledge of the social, cultural. or psychological conditions that may produce it. As Susan Sontag (1977) contends, "Only that which narrates can make us understand" (p. 23).

   The discursive construction of looking as expressing an anti-censorship position organizes the desire to see the "real" as rational, and little is made of the ethical obligation that attends the assumption of the right to look. Instead, in these accounts

the cultural taboo regarding documentary footage of death and suffering is rendered as an impediment to knowledge and truth, thus expressing resistance to the moralizing frameworks of mainstream news outlets that privilege the narration of the reporter over the spectator. In this way, some posters consider their use of the site to express a counter-cultural sensibility: "People I talk to about it consider I'm a whack job, but that's fine. They are welcome to buy their Nike t-shirts and drive their 4WDs." Others express that they visit the site for a variety of reasons, but anchor them in the need to "really" know the "truth":

> [I]t depends on what gore I'm looking at – some clips will give me experience and knowledge, some will teach me lessons, some I will see as humour, some I will only find upsetting. My reasons for being an Ogrish user is because I feel poking your head in the sand and blocking out what really goes on in the world is a coward's way out … during hard times it can make me feel fortunate—I've still got my life.

Several posters similarly explained their use of the site as a means to make them feel better about their own circumstances or to remind them that life is fragile. However, rarely were such motives described as part of these posters' political agenda. Rather, the transgression of the ethical space of death and suffering was to serve personal or sentimental rather than collective agendas. And, as illustrated by those who take pleasure from documentary footage of suffering, access to the "real" does not necessarily correspond to bearing witness to suffering. For Barbie Zelizer (1998), bearing witness requires taking responsibility for what one sees, and as Carrie Rentschler (2004) elaborates, to witness "means far more than to just 'watch' or 'see'; it is also a form of bodily and political participation" (p. 298). Watching suffering while failing to mobilize the sentiment one experiences for a further end bears out Rentschler's observation that "being a spectator of others' suffering trains us to imagine ourselves as the victims of the violence we witness, or feel relieved that 'it wasn't me'" (p. 300). This is not to say that witnessing is absent from the ways in which Ogrish members respond to what they view on the site.

There is a mode of viewing that demonstrates responsive gazing, whereby looking mobilizes action. One poster described his interest in the site as emerging from the loss of his wife in an accident:

> Several months later I started looking for gruesome stuff on the net … what did it do to me? Today I am a member of Red Cross, volunteering in a First Aid team. I also made a prompt decision to restore my military skills …. The new purpose to living for me is to protect my family and try to save as many people as I can from pain and suffering.

Some posters claim that what they have viewed will prepare them should they be confronted with gruesome circumstances in real life, and some assert that their looking has already made them more vigilant drivers. Some posters describe a process of actively educating or desensitizing themselves in order to prepare for specific occupations: "I'm going into the military so the war clips show what it is really like, then I'll come out as a fireman, so I guess it will brace me for some of the car crash scenes." Of course, internet footage cannot show the soldier what war is "really like"

but this assumption reflects the investment viewers make in the "reality" effects of this media form. John Taylor (2005) notes that despite a skepticism directed toward the genre of documentary photography because digital manipulation allows photographic deception, photographs "are still read as simple windows on the world" (p. 46). Taylor recognizes that this understanding is naïve and concludes that this "type of reading indicates the level of literacy in the present day" (p. 49). This investment in the access photographic media provide to the "real" is intensified in online environments because the mode of image generation is "raw." Amateur digital cameras, camera phones, and cameras attached to soldiers' helmets produce imagery that is coded as "real" through frenetic or disorienting movement, disturbances within the field of vision, low image resolution, the use of expletives, and poor sound quality. These signifiers of participation and proximity encourage viewers to "look through" the image to see the "real."

The imagery of war available online also differs from that provided through mainstream media in its explicit depiction of violence. The pictures of dead and maimed bodies of coalition troops, insurgents, and civilians graphically illustrate the carnage that soldiers may have to inflict or sustain. While this may "brace" the recruit for what she may encounter, as I said earlier, experiencing war is another matter entirely. Visual imagery is always the reduction of another's experience to a surface, excising the subjectivity of presence—the smell, touch, and sound of the "real"—yet a number of posters conceive of their ability to look at graphic representations as a step toward being able to witness and participate in the reality signified.

Posters account for their use of Ogrish as a means to prepare for medical school ("Nothing, I mean nothing, can disgust me now") or a career in journalism or crime scene analysis. Under these circumstances spectatorship becomes something more than voyeurism or an expression of an imagined right to see: it becomes a precedent to action. However, this looking further complicates the concept of bearing witness. Some of these viewers are using imagery to blunt their physical and emotional responses to the graphic, implying that empathy for the suffering subjects is displaced so that a dispassionate mode of spectatorship may be acquired. This category of viewer reflects the idea that there are those who must be prepared to look at body horror, and must look on our behalf. This perspective assumes that the spectatorship enabled by Ogrish performs a social service by equipping some citizens with the capacity to look.

The range of discursive resources that posters to the Ogrish forum mobilize in accounting for their spectatorship of death and body horror illustrates that looking is framed by a range of factors including a taste for morbid material that may extend to fandom, prior experience of trauma or the expectation of involvement in traumatic situations, personal contexts that may orient the viewer to the suffering of others, or a commitment to freedom of expression. Pornography is not an appropriate metaphor for making sense of these forms of looking: it functions as a moralizing trope borrowed from a genre that represents live and performing bodies, confounding attention to the specific breaches of ethical space of the mediation of dead and suffering bodies. There is a spectrum of looking positions taken up by Ogrish users,

ranging from those that debase the ethical space around imagery of body horror to those that transform this ethical space into a rational one devoid of empathy. Further modes of looking lead to self-reflection which, while implying sympathy for the other, direct this inward rather than towards a humanitarian agenda. Still other users claim to engage images ethically so as to bear witness to suffering in preparation for civil service.

Conclusion

The online hosting of body horror makes such imagery available to the public. The central goal of this essay has been to show how we might understand the new modes of spectatorship that this access to body horror enables. Body horror sites decontextualize the body in pain: the biography of the suffering subject is occulted and trauma is transfigured into imagery which stimulates, fascinates, or repulses the viewer. The moral breach that this represents has traditionally been expressed through the pornographic metaphor. However, Ogrish has justified its hosting of graphic material as enabling viewers to bear witness to atrocities. A more complex accounting of looking than either the pornography or bearing witness discourses allow is required in order to understand the range of looks body horror sites sustain. Within the spectrum of looks testified to by Ogrish forum posters are some which serve violent and warring cultures, some which are debased, and some which are a precedent to action. I have identified amoral, vulnerable, entitled, and responsive gazes.

The term "pornography" is being over-extended in contemporary contexts in order to frame public anxieties around spectatorship of body horror while circumventing insight into the specific offence posed by these categories of image or the looks they may draw. The pornographic analogy misnames and elides the variety of looks engaged and their specific ethical implications. At stake in these online contexts are the ways taboos around the representation of death and atrocity are being subverted and diluted through new regimes of visibility, requiring management and re-articulation of what these new opportunities for seeing mean.

The re-framing of looking undertaken by the owners of Ogrish, and the acceptance of this rationalization by the press, assumes that uncensored image and video hosting signifies a maturity within contemporary visual culture, providing a means for viewers to bear witness to that which a sanitized or propagandist mainstream media excludes. Here it is assumed that graphic imagery is more "real" than mainstream media coverage, an assumption shared by Ogrish forum users who claim to look as part of an anti-censorship agenda. Graphic imagery stakes a greater claim to the real because it renders public previously censured regimes of representation that may generate a visceral response, or have a profound emotional impact on viewers. These responses may be compounded by the reality effects of amateur footage, which is often of poor visual and audio quality, coding it as "authentic" rather than professionally produced. That the explicit signifies the real has political currency in relation to imagery of war; the cruelties of war are rarely visualized by the mainstream

press. However, body horror websites host a wide variety of categories of graphic violence, extending an imagined right to see to a host of contexts through which the body is rendered monstrous by violence. Under these circumstances the argument that mainstream media serves a propagandist function is difficult to sustain. How viewers respond to body horror, and the silence surrounding the moral obligation that attends witnessing the graphic, has not been adequately attended to through the discourses that legitimize these forms of spectatorship.

The lack of public criticism of the assumption that online hosting of imagery of body horror is a public service reflects both the power of the argument that bearing witness is a duty and the difficulty of identifying the range of spectatorial positions graphic media may sustain. The internet enables access to imagery formerly concealed from public view, imagery which may be sought out, shared, and browsed, its consumption tailored towards specific interests and tastes. This mode of viewing may be directed towards a "quick fix" of gore which sustains amoral looks, evacuated of ethical engagement, or may result in vulnerable gazes whereby viewers testify to being harmed by imagery. Uncensored video hosting sites lack the function of news media to position the viewer as a moral witness to what they view, and "without a politically mobilizing news media, witnesses are left to 'feel' with little to no direction for how to act" (Rentschler, 2004, p. 300). Without the provision of political and social context for imagery, the viewing of graphic material may be an experience of bodily response or the expression of an imagined entitlement rather than an ethical engagement. The notion of bearing witness that the anti-censorship stance relies upon renders "bearing" as the ability to withstand and tolerate graphic imagery, rather than "bearing" as taking a moral burden upon oneself.

The availability of graphic material online compounds the concerns raised by Zelizer (1998) regarding the possibilities for bearing witness in the contemporary era. Zelizer argues that photography "may function most directly to achieve what it ought to have stifled – atrocity's normalization" (p. 212). Zelizer compares the role of contemporary imagery of atrocity with the role photography played in forging a collective response to the Holocaust:

> In some cases, viewing images may now stand in for action itself, raising crucial questions about the shape of public response in the contemporary era. Bearing witness, then, may have turned into an act carved out of the shadows of habituation, a mere outline of the call for substantive action that it seems to have played at the end of World War II. (p. 213)

However, these limitations to witnessing do not preclude this as a mode of looking employed by some Ogrish forum users. While the looking most viewers of graphic media do is divorced from intervention, for some members spectatorship enables action in the service of others. That some forum members testify to processes of desensitization that either diminish their pleasure or enable them to confront their fears, while others remain highly sensitive to graphic material, provides anecdotal evidence of the heterogeneity of such effects. It also complicates the compassion

fatigue thesis: a level of tolerance towards graphic imagery is required of certain occupations predicated on intervention to protect publics and alleviate suffering.

Furthermore, the bearing witness position is premised on a pacifist agenda—but cultures which make war require a cohort of citizens for whom violence is both tolerable and exciting. Uncensored image and video hosting sites such as Ogrish and LiveLeak are popular with soldiers, who may use the imagery in order to anticipate the visceral and horrific aspects of service or use the sites to share the "highlights" of combat with an appreciative audience. Here spectatorship is necessarily evacuated of empathy for the enemy other, constituting subjectivities necessary to war.

The domestication of graphic internet footage, coupled with a lack of critical attention to the phenomenon of spectatorship of body horror imagery, reflects a culture that believes that the rights of the voyeur outweigh the rights of the suffering or deceased, and where the explicit signifies the "real," furnishing a moral argument for the consumption of graphic media as a civic duty. Rather than invoke the pornographic analogy, and thus foreclose debate regarding the implications of this phenomenon for the ways in which we comprehend the plight of others, we need to attend to the specific ways in which the ethical space of imagery of body horror is being reconfigured online. This reconsideration requires further attention to the ways in which differing spectator positions impact our selves and our cultures. Understanding the modes of looking that the internet enables, their potential harms and utilities, is necessary to equip us for future debates concerning the inclusion of graphic material in the mainstream press, regulation of the internet, and the pleasures and politics of novel looking practices enabled by the internet.

Acknowledgment

Notes

[1] Urbandictionary.com (2008) defines "death porn" as "a slang term for the material found on the internet that is intended to gross out its viewers. All pictures/videos of dead bodies, horrible accidents, or blood and guts can all be classified as death porn."

[2] Comments from the Ogrish user forums were collected over the period March 2005–January 2007. Permission was granted by the owners of the site, with the understanding that the comments used were to have been posted in the public area of the forum and that no identification, such as user names, would be included. There is potential for posters to rationalize their fascination, and thus conceal prurient motives through the discursive resources they mobilize; however, because these comments were generated independently of the researcher, and in an environment that lends itself to candidness, these comments have been read at face value.

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