

**Blood, sweat and tears:
a look at opposite functions of *pain* in fiction film narrative**

As luck would have it, I have been assigned the painful task of closing this conference (pun fully intended, of course). Painful, not only because so much of what I will mention today has already been so expertly addressed by many of the speakers that have preceded me, but also because it is truly a shame to see it come to an end.

Before I start, then, I would like to give one final thanks to the organizers and all of the participants for what I believe has been a very enriching discussion about a fascinating subject: the depiction of pain in the arts and the media.

Pain, as I am sure all of us are aware of, is an emotion that lies at the core of the human experience. As such, it's really no surprise that it has become a recurrent element within narrative cinema; an art form that seeks to represent the many aspects of human life through the telling of stories in the film medium.

Like it has been pointed out in this conference, however, there is a clear distinction between *pain* understood as physical suffering, and *grief* understood as emotional distress.

Likewise, an "image of pain" does not necessarily constitute a "painful image". While the former refers to the portrayal of pain in any of its forms, the latter seems to refer only to those capable of somehow disturbing the viewer's psyche.

The function of pain in fiction film is thus greatly determined by the narrative context in which it is inserted. It is precisely this *plasticity* of "pain as a narrative element" that I wish to talk about today.

Comedy, and more specifically *slapstick comedy*, is an interesting example of a narrative genre in which "pain" plays a very important role. Let's have the experts shows us, shall we?

Insert: Three Stooges clip: <https://youtu.be/TjdJcbHhg8U?t=10m15s>

In slapstick, a character is constantly exposed to exaggerated physical violence and pain for the sole purpose of our amusement. Here, the "image of pain" is used as a comedic device, a visual gag, intended to make us laugh.

But why *do* we laugh? Why is it that the suffering and humiliation of a character is "funny" in this particular context, but would be painful to watch in a drama, for example?

Obviously, it has to do with the level of *realism* of the representation.

A realist narrative, even though fictitious, tries to make its “story-world” as loyal to our reality as possible, with all of its physical and social rules. If a character viciously attacks another, the victim will be hurt.

Comedy, however, is a caricaturization of reality. Characters can hit each other over the head with hammers and then just go on with their business. We don't respond negatively to these images simply because we recognize the **absurdity** of them.

An absurdity which is made obvious by a series of elements working together like the narrative improbability of the situations, the defiance of physical laws, and a particular style of acting, among others. So what we have here, is a type of comedy which relies heavily on “images of pain”, but with a very low potential to act as “painful images”.

Now that we've gotten into the topic of exaggeration and excess, I think is a good moment to move on to what Linda Williams (1991) calls the “Body Genres”.

	PORNO	MELODRAMA	HORROR
Bodily Excess	Sex	Emotion	Violence
Ecstasy	Ecstatic Sex	Ecstatic Woe	Ecstatic Violence
Shown by/as:	Orgasm, Ejaculation	Sobs, Tears	Shudders, Blood
Pref. Audience	Men	Girls, Women	Adolescent Boys
Satisfied Perversion	Sadism	Masochism	Sadomasochism

These are categories that differ from “traditional narration” in the sense that their main objective is to create a sensational display of predominantly *female* bodies caught in the grips of some intense sensation or emotion; which would in turn be able to generate an analogous response in the viewer.

So for instance, in Pornography (which is perhaps the clearest example of a “body genre”) the indulged excess is sex, which reaches its ecstatic point with the depiction of the orgasm and ejaculation. Williams also points out things like the intended audience of the genre (men), and the particular “perversion”¹ that it attempts to satisfy (sadism)

Melodrama is another example, where an excess of emotion becomes the spectacle, more specifically: ecstatic woe... intense sadness. The bodily reactions displayed in this case are sobs and tears, and it is commonly directed to a female audience with a masochistic tendency.

Finally, we have the Horror genre, which revolves around violence and summits with ecstatic violence in the form of shudders, screams, and of course: blood. This

¹ Understood here as preference towards the viewing of certain excesses.

is a type of narration generally directed at adolescent audiences and satisfies both sadistic and masochistic viewing pleasures. As you might've already realized, "pain" plays an important role in each of these cases, although once again with very different functions.

Porn, for instance, is well known for exploring the interplay between pleasure and pain at a physical level, with depictions as varied as human sexuality itself. However, pain is almost always subordinated to pleasure; so its presence is meant to *excite* the viewer's fantasies about sadism, power and control. The objective, of course, is to aid masturbation and produce sexual satisfaction.

In **Melodrama**, images of physical pain can be present (as is often the case with "made-for-tv-movies" which usually tell the story of a female character enduring some disease or affliction), but the focus is in showing and generating *emotional* pain.

Then we have the **Horror** genre, which uses images of predominantly physical pain; specially sub-genres like the "slasher film" (Halloween, Friday the 13th, Nightmare on Elm Street, etc) and "gore" or "splatter films" (like "Saw" or "Hostel").

Here the images of pain are perhaps at their most explicit, but as we saw with slapstick comedy, the departures from reality and the excesses in the portrayal prevent them from being truly "painful" images to the viewer at an emotional level.

Quite the contrary, these images of pain provide the thrills and jolts that its audience wants to experience, and that are heightened by the genre's typical retardation devices.

What's common to all of these cases, is that the element of pain is essentially being used for **entertainment** purposes; with narration manipulating very specific tastes and expectations in the viewer in order to produce a physical response. Like Williams herself points out, these are genres known for being able to *perk* sensations from our bodies and minds, be it sadness, fear or pleasure.

What I would like to show you now, is a clip from the film "Hostel 2", which as I mentioned before, can be classified in the "horror" category, and in a particular sub-genre which focuses even more intensely in the depiction of gore. This type of movies, like "Hostel" and the "Saw" series, have also been called "torture porn", because of their indulgence in the graphic depiction of this type of violence.

I think this next clip is a perfect example of the reason for that name. Here you will actually see an interaction of the principles of horror and pornography that we just discussed: a sensational display not only of violence, but also of the female body, with a very clear sexual undercurrent that appeals to sadist preferences.

Insert: Hostel 2 clip: <https://youtu.be/f2Z72oKojr8>

I would now like to move on to my final point and that is the “images of pain” in fiction film that are actually intended to be *painful* to watch by the viewer.

An example of this was the “Third Cinema” movement that emerged in Latin America during the 1960’s; so called because it positioned itself as an alternative model of filmmaking from industrial and auteristic cinemas.

More importantly, the “Third Cinema” ideology was a political one: It was meant to be a weapon in the class struggle of “the oppressed” against “the oppressors”. As such, it focused on denouncing situations of social inequality, suffering and injustice that, according to its followers, had been brought about by oppressive, capitalist practices.

Originally, it wanted to be a call to arms, to revolution. The pain portrayed in these films was the pain of misery, of marginalization, of violence and injustice... not against an imaginary character, but against real people. The purpose of these depictions was to strike a chord with audiences that were themselves part of this reality, make them reflect about the situation and move them to action.

However, the objectives and the nature itself of “Third Cinema” changed considerably throughout the years: With the decline of the socialist project and the consolidation of a new global political and economical paradigm, the “Third Cinema” as a revolutionary project has basically disappeared. However, some of its core ideological principles survive to this date, assimilated into the commercial operations of the region’s cinema.

The most salient of these, in my view, is what can be described as a “socially conscientious” tradition in Latin American cinema; not just in documentaries, but also in fiction film.

Many films from Latin America (I would go as far as saying *the majority*) continue to tackle issues of social inequality and violence as central themes in their narratives. As such, they preserve the tendency to portray the “other’s suffering” in an effort to create an empathic awareness -and rejection- of it.

Once again, the issue of *realism* is pivotal to understand this point. I will address this point next, but before that I would like you to take a look at two clips from two Latin American fiction films that I think illustrate my point.

The first is from a Brazilian movie called “Cidade de Deus” or “City of God”, which tells the story of a group of young characters living in one of Brazil’s poorest and most violent “favelas”.

Next, it’s a scene from an Argentinean film called “La Noche de los Lapices” that tells the true story of some of the many young people that were abducted, tortured and “disappeared” during the military dictatorship; often for no real reason at all.

This is also a torture scene, so while you see it, think about how it compares to the one we saw previously.

Insert: “Cidade de Deus” clip: <https://youtu.be/V26Pogm8ktk>
& “La Noche de los Lápices” clip: <https://youtu.be/Nx0k0iTiOVA?t=43m24s>

As you might have noticed, the depiction of the act of torture is much more graphic in the clip from the horror film, than it was in this one. However, while the intention of the horror film is to play with the audience’s disposition to be shocked and revolted; the depiction of pain in this other clip is meant to represent and denounce the abuses committed during a period of that nation’s history.

In doing so, it revisits a very recent and traumatic past, and touches social and personal wounds that are very much open to this day. In other words, a scene like the one from “La Noche de los Lapices” is potentially much more painful to watch than the one from “Hostel”, simply because it is addressing a *real* human tragedy.

We could call this a type of “hyper-realism”: the film is realistic not only in its cinematic portrayal of pain, but in the fact that it depicts real past or ongoing situations that are literally charged with the inflicting and suffering of pain in these societies.

In a region scarred by social conflict, these types of film examples abound: From “Los Olvidados” by Luis Buñuel, to films like “Pixote”, “La vendedora de rosas”, “City of God” or “Amores Perros”... these are all the products of filmmakers that recognize *pain* in their own societies and translate it to their work.

Each of them has their own purpose for this. While some are actively trying to denounce a situation, others seek only to present it to the audience in order for us to draw our own conclusions.

And it’s precisely on this note that I would like to end my presentation: by validating *the role of the spectator*.

What I have tried to outline here today are just a few of the many narrative uses that can be made of an element of our human experience, such as “pain”. However, no matter the amount of manipulation exacted by all these narrative models and conventions, at the end of the day it all comes down to how the individual spectator perceives a particular image of pain, based on his/her own experiences and context. Maybe “pain”, like beauty, is just one of those things that lies in the eye and the mind of the beholder.

Thank you for your attention and good afternoon.