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Jack Ketchum's *The Girl Next Door* and torture porn. Between cheap sensation and serious examination of the problem of evil

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Horror has been frequently dismissed by critics as offering a highly reductive view on the nature of evil, based on worn-out clichés (see Alford 1997). Recently, however, we have observed a tendency to re-examine popular horror. More and more critics argue that popular horror, both in film and fiction, encourages serious reflection on evil. Freeland (2002: 3) writes that horror films “stimulate thoughts about evil in its many varieties and degrees.” The present article is an attempt to discuss Jack Ketchum’s popular horror novel *The Girl Next Door* (1989) in the context of the new cinematic genre of “torture porn” in the hope that film critics’ insights into this tradition will also prove useful while analyzing a work of literary fiction.

Usually describing a literary work as “porn” is equal to denying this particular work the status of work of art. Labelling it as “porn” implicates that the work in question is deprived of any redeeming social or

artistic value. On the other hand, in “A Preface to Transgression” Foucault claims that unrestrained exploration of erotic desire is an ethical imperative. It empowers the individual, increases the individual’s self-knowledge and could potentially lead to a breakthrough in human thinking (since sexuality speaks its own language with its own logic). “What characterizes modern sexuality from Sade to Freud,” writes Foucault,

is not its having found the language of its logic or of its natural process, but rather, through the violence done by such languages, its having been ‘denatured’ – cast into an empty zone where it achieves whatever meager form is bestowed upon it by the establishment of its limits (Foucault 1977: 29–30).

Consequently, according to Foucault, the job of a contemporary writer is to re-discover, or re-invent, the language of sexuality by transgressing the limits artificially imposed on it, which process must inevitably involve violating the existing taboos.¹

The term “torture porn” was coined by film critic David Edelstein in his article “Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn” (2006), in reference to such movies as *Hostel*, *The Devil’s Rejects*, *Saw*, or *Wolf Creek*. The critic denounces these movies not only as “inherently sadistic” (which he believes to be a general characteristic of the horror genre) but also as “viciously nihilistic.” The new coinage is clearly used as term of abuse. However, as Steve Jones writes in his 2013 book *Torture Porn: Popular Horror after Saw*, “torture porn” has recently become a legitimate critical term in the field of film studies, free from its negative connotations. Jones begins his book by listing adjectives commonly used to describe movies belonging to this category: deplorable, depraved, despicable, distasteful, perverse, poisonous, rancid, repugnant, revolting, repellent, salacious, sleazy, vile (Jones 2013: 3), but he argues that they reflect only the reviewers’ bias and ignorance. Interestingly enough, in contrast to Foucault, for whom literature’s chief value lies in the challenge that it poses to traditional thought and morality, Jones feels obliged to demonstrate that these horrors do not constitute such a threat. He maintains that “[c]omplex ideas such as justice, choice, innocence, guilt, blame, and retribution are dramatised and scrutinised via torture porn’s representations of violence” (Jones 2013: 5). Jones’s chief contention is that “torture porn” is a perfectly valid critical category since it successfully

¹ In the essay Foucault argues that an example of such a writer is Georges Bataille.

describes a relatively uniform body of movies. According to Jones, these movies share the following three elements:

(a) [they] were made (roughly) after 2003, (b) [they] centralise abduction, binding, imprisonment, and torture (mental or physical), and (c) [they] broadly belong to the horror genre. (Jones 2013: 8)

Jones notes the ambiguity of the word “porn” in “torture porn.” Originally, the word “porn” was used in a metaphorical rather than literal sense, since many movies to which it was applied contained little or no nudity. What was originally meant was that in these movies cultural norms regarding the representation of violence were violated in the same manner in which pornography violates cultural norms regarding the representation of sex. However, Jones notices that many torture porn movies include vivid representations of sexual violence, which gives the term “torture porn” a secondary, more literal meaning.

Jones also adds that the term “torture porn” has been retroactively used to describe earlier movies, evincing similar characteristics (Jones 2013: 1). Arguably, it could also be used to describe works of literature, especially those belonging to the category of natural horror (according to Jones, torture porn stems from the tradition of natural horror). An example of such a work is Jack Ketchum’s *The Girl Next Door*, by its readers frequently compared to and contrasted with torture porn.²

Ketchum’s novel tells the story of a gruesome torture and murder of an orphaned girl, Meg Loughlin, who is in the custody of her distant relative, sadistic and misogynistic Ruth Chandler. Meg’s abuse by Ruth begins relatively innocently with Ruth picking on her and calling her names, and ends with Meg being tied and locked in the basement, where she is tortured by Ruth, Ruth’s sons, and some neighborhood kids. Meg is beaten, forced to masturbate with a bottle, starved, deprived of “toilet privileges,” urinated upon, forced to eat a dog’s feces, given a scalding bath, raped and mutilated.

² Despite its popularity (since 1989 *The Girl Next Door* has had at least six English editions and has been translated into all major languages – see *Jack Ketchum: Bibliography*), the novel has received very little serious critical attention. Google Scholar lists only nine scholarly publications quoting Ketchum’s *The Girl Next Door*, and in all cases Ketchum’s novel is only briefly mentioned (usually as an example of natural horror), rather than analyzed (see Google Scholar: *The Girl Next Door*). In 2007 Ketchum’s novel was adapted to a movie directed by Gregory Wilson. Both the novel and the movie are frequently commented upon by internet users. If nothing else, *The Girl Next Door* is an important cultural phenomenon that deserves critical scrutiny.

In 2007 Ketchum's story was turned into a movie, very harshly reviewed for *The New York Times* by Neil Genzlinger. Genzlinger wrote,

If you're going to make a film as repellent as "Jack Ketchum's the Girl Next Door," you had better make sure that your redeeming reasons for doing so are crystal clear. Gregory M. Wilson, the film's director, either doesn't have any such reasons or doesn't know how to convey them, which means that he has made the kind of movie that makes you wish you could rinse your brain in bleach, to wash all traces of it from your memory. (Genzlinger 2007)

Since the movie is quite a faithful adaptation of Ketchum's novel, the same accusations may be levelled at the book. However, the readers' response has been surprisingly overwhelmingly positive. Out of 1721 customers who rated the book for Amazon (*The Girl Next Door*. Customer Reviews), 62% gave it the top five stars,³ 20% four stars, 9% three stars, and only 4% two stars and 4% one star. The reviewers used words like "twisted," "heinous," "sickening" but in fact they did not judge the book but referred to characters' actions. Definitely, a very important factor influencing the readers' perception of the book is the fact that despite being a work of fiction, it is based on real events. Many people openly admitted that it was impossible for them to separate the book from the real-life incidents upon which it was based and, quite understandably, their disgust and anger were aimed not at the author but at the actual perpetrators of those atrocious crimes.

The tortures described by Ketchum are not a product of the author's perverse imagination, but the actual events that happened in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1965. Ketchum's novel is based on the story of Sylvia Likens, who was tortured and murdered by Gertrude Baniszewski, Gertrude's children and local kids. In fact, instead of exaggerating, Ketchum did the opposite – he presented his readers with a toned-down version of the events. While discussing the origins of the novel, Ketchum wrote: "[T]his was about child abuse. Abuse so extreme that writing it I eventually made the decision to soften some of what happened and leave some out altogether" (Ketchum 2011b). In real life, certain horrible things were routinely done to Sylvia (e.g. feeding her feces), and, as the court records reveal, perpetrators did no longer perceive them as shocking or transgressive (see *Baniszewski Trial Transcript*; Dean 2008). In

³ Some five-star reviews came from the people who have not read the book. One person simply wrote: "I saw the movie on Amazon Prime and just had to buy this book. I can't wait to dive into it!".

the novel, the same things are presented as extreme and unique humiliation, and the perpetrators have the full awareness that they are crossing an important boundary. Another interesting difference is that reading the novel, one tends to perceive the problem of Meg's malnutrition mostly in terms of a psychological torture. She is denied food on account of being fat and the reader might think that the main problem is the fact that Ruth accuses Meg of being fat (in order to humiliate her). In the case of Sylvia Likens, malnutrition was one of the many causes of her death (in the book Meg dies as a result of a head injury, which she sustains when Ruth bangs her head against the wall). These facts seem to exonerate Ketchum (at least partially) from the charges of gratuitous violence but they leave him open to the charge of cannibalizing real life for the sake of writing a successful horror story.

Ketchum decided to put his own spin on the story. He moved it to the 1950s, which was the time of his childhood. This decision, as he admits in an interview, was primarily motivated by technical considerations (Dunne 2011). Ketchum needed to create a believable setting. He knew nothing about 1965 Indianapolis, so he decided to write about his home town as he remembered it from his childhood. However, this decision also has important consequences for the overall meaning of the story. It suggests a politicized reading of the violence which takes place in the atomic shelter (Ruth's basement was adapted for his purpose by her former husband). At the beginning of the novel, the narrator offers a brief characterization of the 1950s:

Still I like to remember that it was the Fifties, a period of strange repressions, secrets, hysteria. I think about Joe McCarthy, though I barely remember thinking of him at all back then except to wonder what it was that would make my father race home from work every day to catch the committee hearings on TV. I think about the Cold War. About air-raid drills in the school basement and films we saw of atomic testing – department-store mannequins imploding, blown across mockup living rooms, disintegrating, burning. About copies of *Playboy* and *Man's Action* hidden in wax paper back by the brook, so moldy after a while that you hated to touch them. I think about Elvis being denounced by the Reverend Deitz at Grace Lutheran Church when I was ten and the rock 'n' roll riots at Alan Freed's shows at the Paramount. (Ketchum 2011).

This passage implies a link between political oppression (and anxiety) and domestic violence. The latter could be seen as a projection/displacement of the former. Interestingly enough, film critics also tend to see violence in torture porn as political allegory (of war on terror – see Jones

2013). Ketchum's narrator notes that the 1950s was a period of sexual suppression. This statement becomes politically charged if one considers Wilhelm Reich's ideas. Reich in his famous work *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1946) postulated the existence of a connection between sexual suppression and political oppression. Reich argued that a fascist state in which citizens are deprived of any real political freedom is a perfect replica of an authoritarian family in which parents have complete control over their children's sexuality. According to Reich, it was sexual repression that eventually led to the monstrous crimes of the Second World War. Since Ketchum moves the story from the time of sexual revolution to the time of sexual repression, one might suspect that he intends to endorse Reich's argument.

That would however shift the blame from the individuals involved in the crime to the state (or the system), and this is what the narrator cannot accept. The story is told from the perspective of David, now a grown man, who provides an account of him being a witness to Sylvia's tortures when he was a twelve-year-boy. The sense of guilt – when he tried to act it was already too late – has haunted him ever since. At the beginning, David admits that he tried to see Ruth as a victim of circumstances – abused by her former husband, forced out of the job market by the Second World War veterans, struggling economically, frustrated and disillusioned. But he concludes that it is all lies and that there is no explanation for the kind of evil that Ruth represented. Following the good vs. evil logic of traditional horror, at a certain point in the narrative David denounces Ruth and her sons as monsters disguised as human beings:

I was captured by savages. I had lived with them. I'd been one of them.
No. Not savages. Not really.
Worse than that.
More like a pack of dogs or cats or the swarms of ferocious red ants
that Woofer liked to play with.
Like some other species altogether. Some intelligence that only
looked human, but had no access to human feelings.
I stood among them swamped by otherness.
By evil. (Ketchum 2011)

However, apart from solving certain technical problems connected with writing about this terrible crime, the addition of David as intradiegetic narrator witnessing Sylvia's tortures introduces a moral ambiguity to the story. In this respect there is a close analogy between *The Girl Next Door* and the torture porn movies discussed by Jones. The function of the

witness, as Jones (2011: 84–89) convincingly shows, is to disturb the seemingly clear difference between a torturer (evil) and a victim (good). In torture porn movies in the course of the story these roles are interchanged: torturers become victims, victims become torturers. Consequently, the line separating good from evil becomes blurred. Witness occupies the middle ground between those two positions; he/she can become both a torturer and a victim. At first David watches, but when he refuses to torture Meg he is bound and thrown into the basement together with Meg.

David as a witness experiences both sympathy for Meg and, when her abuse is not that extreme yet, a sense of excitement. David feels sexually attracted to Meg, but being an adolescent boy (he is only twelve) he does not fully understand the nature of his desire, nor does he know how to express it. He fantasizes about seeing her naked. In the narrative, a disturbing analogy is drawn between erotic desire and evil. David fails to distinguish between the two as the laws of the adults seem to condemn with equal severity showing interest in one's sexuality and hurting physically (and/or psychologically) other people. The chief source of Ruth's initial appeal to David is the fact that she treats these laws with laxity: she seems to be one of the boys. It is ok to talk sex with her, and, as it will turn out later, it is also ok for her to torture and abuse sexually a helpless teenage girl. Still Ruth as an adult is a figure of authority for him. If Ruth says that is its OK, it must be OK, David reasons (even though he is also troubled by the girl's visible discomfort). In an interview, Ketchum commented on the character of David in the following way:

[H]e's tempted and seduced by all this, too. And, like a good Nazi, by the fact that all of this is done with permission. He's not good – certainly not entirely. (...) Fact is, a number of readers have told me they hate David as much or even more than they hate Ruth! (Dunne 2011)

Still, since the story is told from David's point of view, the reader automatically adopts his point of view and becomes complicit in the process of objectification of Sylvia. This has been acknowledged by Ketchum as part of his authorial intention:

Remember I told you I wanted you to feel complicit simply by turning the page? Well, it's no accident that the book's written in the first person. In a first-person story the narrator's voice to some degree becomes your voice, the reader's. It's a kind of trick. You can't help but hear yourself in there. So in this case, while reading, David is you. (Dunne 2011)

Ketchum signals an important moral problem but at the same time he trivializes it by using the word trick. It seems that rather than in examining complex ideas such as innocence, guilt or blame, he is more interested in creating a certain dramatic effect. Indeed, it is difficult not to think that in certain passages in the novel Ketchum manipulates his readers.

To many readers, the most shocking scene in the novel is the scene in which Ruth performs female circumcision on Meg. The scene is also very revealing when it comes to Ketchum's narrative technique. After the words "I FUCK FUCK ME" are carved on Meg's abdomen (the carving is done by the children supervised by Ruth), Ruth declares, "[W]e got her so no man's gonna want her now. Problem is, see, Meg might still want him" (Ketchum 2011a). Then she explains to the surprised children:

A woman doesn't want a man all over her body. No. She only wants him one place in particular. Know what I mean, Denise? No? Not yet? Well you will. Woman wants a man in one particular place and that's right down here between her legs."

She pointed, then pressed her hand to her dress to show them. They stopped rolling.

"One little spot," she said. "Now. You take out that spot, and you know what happens? You take out all of her desire." (Ketchum 2011)

In the meantime the process of preparation is already underway. Newspapers are lit in the sink, an iron poker is brought from the upstairs (the scene takes place in the basement).

The next chapter is unusually brief (I quote it in its entirety):

Chapter Forty-Two

I'm not going to tell you about this.

I refuse to.

There are things you know you'll die before telling, things you know you should have died before ever having seen. I watched and saw. (Ketchum 2011)

Readers tend to misinterpret the narrator's refusal to describe the scene as motivated by Ketchum's desire to spare them the pain of seeing the terrible act. It seems to me that the real reason why the scene is omitted from the narrative is the fact that leaving the scene to the reader's imagination is rhetorically more effective. Ketchum in fact applies to fiction Elaine Scarry's insights into what makes torture work.

Elaine Scarry in her analysis of torture notices that "torture is a process which not only converts but announces the conversion of every conceivable aspect of the event and the environment into an agent of pain"

(Scarry 1985: 27). That is why an important part of the procedure is displaying the instruments of torture, prior to inflicting any physical pain.

Scarry writes,

Testimony given by torture victims from many different countries almost inevitably includes descriptions of being made to stare at the weapon with which they were about to be hurt: prisoners of the Greek Junta (1967–71), for example, were made to contemplate a wall arrangement of whips, canes, clubs, and rods, were made to examine the size of the torturer's fist and the monogrammed ring which "he wore and which made his blows more painful," or were compelled to look at a bull's pizzle coated with the dried blood of a fellow prisoner. (Scarry 1985: 27)

Sometimes the entire torture session is devoted to detailed explanation how each instrument works. Scarry argues that people tend to over-emphasize the significance of physical pain during torture. According to her, the most horrific aspect of torture is the victim's awareness of his or her vulnerability, and the expectation of pain is actually much worse than the pain itself. Ketchum proceeds thus as a skillful torturer, displaying the instruments of torture and letting the reader form expectations (at this point in the story the reader has every reason to expect the worse) as to what is going to happen next. What may be misconstrued as an act of mercy (sparing the reader) is in fact a strategy calculated to produce more shock.

It is difficult to determine if and to what extent *The Girl Next Door* is a serious examination of the problem of evil. Traditional supernatural horror derives its power from the fact that evil and good are clearly delineated. We sympathize with the good protagonist and fear for his or her safety. In torture porn, as Jones convincingly shows, these categories become problematized. Victims turn into torturers, torturers turn into victims. Although the latter does happen in *The Girl Next Door*, the novel seems to offer a disturbingly facile explanation of the problem of evil.

The narrator denounces Ruth as evil, a monster disguised as a human being. In the epilogue there is a strong suggestion that the other active participants in those tortures had a certain inborn propensity for evil which only grew with time. We learn that Woofers, Ruth's youngest son, has become a serial killer. Looking at a picture of Woofers in his twenties, David notes his striking resemblance to Ruth, the suggestion being that such form of extreme of evil must be hereditary and is beyond any possibility of redemption. This seems a great oversimplification, especially if one considers what has happened in real life.

Gertrude Baniszewski was found guilty of first degree murder and sentenced to life in prison. However, despite violent protests, she was released on parole in 1985 (Dean 1999: 186). Allegedly, “[d]uring her years at the Indiana Women’s Prison, she was considered a model prisoner and earned the nickname of ‘Mom’” (Stall 2015). Fuller (1985) reported that during questioning “Baniszewski claimed to be a changed person who is now involved in church, Bible studies and sewing.” In a released document the Parole Board described her as “healthy, stable, pleasant and agreeable” (after Fuller 1985). The public was divided; some wanted to see her as a changed person, others still saw her a sadistic murderer.

Even more interesting is the case of Paula Baniszewski (one of Gertrude’s daughters). She pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter and was released from prison in 1972. In 2012 it turned out that she was working under a false identity as an aide to a high school counsellor (she had been employed in a similar capacity since 1998). She was suspended and then fired on account of providing false information in her job application. No evidence was found of her not doing her job right (Raftery 2012; Stall 2015).

In the novel, Ruth is duly punished. Young David pushes her off the stairs, vindicating Sylvia’s death. Ruth breaks her neck and conveniently dies, providing the kind of poetic justice (and closure) that the readers might expect. On the other hand, one might argue that revenge is not justice (the point emphasized by Jones in his analysis of torture porn) and David’s act does not reaffirm but further destabilizes the moral order. What is more, since the novel presents David’s perspective it is possible that what seems to be a clear-cut difference between good and evil is only David’s projection. In order to say sane, David needs to convince himself that he has nothing in common with people like Ruth or Woofers, even though he watched Sylvia being tortured in the basement and did nothing.

To conclude, Ketchum’s *The Girl Next Door* is a natural horror telling the story of a teenage girl who is tortured both physically and psychologically; the work meets thus two of the three formal criteria of the genre of torture porn as it was defined by Jones. Discussing it in this context enables us to ask the question about the political aspect of violence presented in the book. It also draws our attention to the significance of the function of witness in the process of torture, and further emphasizes the moral ambiguity of the story told by Ketchum. Obviously, Ketchum’s novel does not meet the first criterion; it is not a movie. Even though the novel has often been described as graphic or raw, it conveys its horrors

by means of language – it does not show them directly. Additionally, Ketchum's real focus is not on the girl's tortured body but its impact on David's mind, from whose perspective the story is told. Even though it may seem shocking, offensive, or exaggerated, it is a softened and simplified version of the events that really did happen. Ketchum was careful not to include too much horror so as not to scare or disgust his readers more than they wanted to be scared or disgusted. It seems that this, rather than its offensive nature, is the true reason of the novel's commercial success.

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Abstract

The article discusses Jack Ketchum's popular horror novel *The Girl Next Door* in the context of the new cinematic genre of "torture porn." Torture porn movies, as defined by Steve Jones (2011: 8), are horrors which "centralise abduction, binding, imprisonment, and torture (mental or physical)." Though originally used as a term of abuse, nowadays the term "torture porn" is treated by many film critics as a perfectly neutral critical category. Jones argues that, contrary to popular belief, torture porn movies are means of examining complex moral issues, in particular the concept of justice. The analysis demonstrates that Ketchum uses the figure of witness in a similar way in which it is used in torture porn movies, namely to introduce moral ambiguity to a seemingly obvious ethical situation of torture. It also shows, however, that Ketchum crafts his narrative in such a way as to produce the kind of horror that will meet his readers' expectations and secure commercial success.

Keywords: horror novel, Ketchum Jack.

