“Live Feed: Suffering in Public and the Motive for Culture.”

“About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along”

W. H. Auden, “Musee des Beaux Arts”

Introduction:

Pain has a complicated presence in western commodity culture (Morris, 1991). Modernity both erases it and announces it, sometimes at the same time. In its ideological mode, pain is "private" -- although the presentation of pain in public has numerous uses and offers various pleasures. These are often contradictory. Put simply, our pain we dislike, but other people's pain we like -- arguably quite a lot, if news fare, tabloid, horror / splatter cinema, reality- and talk-TV are any indication (Bok 1998; Bruhm 1994). Pain is everywhere for sale. Major American news broadcasts offer viewers sentimentalized images of suffering miners; victims of war, or famine and torture; as well as heroic narratives of wounds and traumatized soldiers -- (all the more interesting if the soldier is female). Polemical uses of brutalized bodies by individuals as well as nation states are daily staples across media. Further, even when pain is presented as a problem, more often than not it is managed into banality. We misspeak violence by rewriting it into something else -- "friendly fire," "collateral damage." Pain can also be erased by being ennobled. In one way or other, governments, churches, parents and teachers all say that suffering builds character" or that it is "good for you." Indeed, when long-endured by “someone else,” pain can be grounds for sainthood. But even with less transcendent aims, pain is sanctified. No pains, no gains, remarked Ben Franklin, good Deist, and devotees at the worship of the body recite his creed painfully at body-sculpting centers across the land.

Western Culture in its late consumer phase is suspended uneasily between Plato's life of the imagination and Aristotle's embodied one. Specific historical moments, and adaptations, of both impulses – idealism, materialism – are strategically anchored by the pained body. From either perspective, the display of a pinned or suffering body is not so much a “discontent” of civilization but, rather its underlying intent. Elaine Scarry (1986) argues that pain has no voice. To the contrary, one might argue that at least in Western culture, pain never shuts up. That is, suffering in public has its pleasures even if we seldom talk directly about them. One critic notes the "almost interminable discourse of complaint, lament, litigation, symptom-mongering, and public confession" (Morris 1997, 27). Talking about pain aslant is what this culture does for a living.

It is easy for culture critics on the right to bash Hollywood for what academic James Twitchell terms its “preposterous violence” (1989), but the cinema merchants are not alone in finding occasions by which to manufacture, and to delight, in pain. Civic authority from Diocletian onward, and churches Christian and non, install the suffering body at doctrinal
dead-center (Auguet 1994; Futrell, 2000; Rey, 1993). Nor should we limit this preoccupation to the vulgar masses, as is customary in leftist critiques of popular culture. Renaissance art would not exist were not pain a favored subject. Consider Titian's "Flaying of Marysias," Caravaggio's "Sacrifice of Isaac," or the hundreds of Sebastians, pierced delectably through. (And speaking of Sebastian raises the uncomfortable question, why do we see these images as erotic but miss the violence they contain?) Or think for a moment of the constant iteration of blood and agony in the Crucifixions. What is the grammar of pain by which this public sign manufactures its meaning again and again, for each generation? As with Sebastian, one wonders where the pain goes, in this installation of memory. Indeed, pain captivates across class divides as well as religious systems. Generations of preachers -- Old World Catholic Savonarola to New World Calvinist Jonathan Edwards, even evangelical incendiarists like Jimmy Swaggart and Fred Phelps -- capitalize upon its lure. Edwards biographer, observes that the New World’s first Gothicist made Hell “real enough to be found in the atlas” (Winslow 1940, 193). At the height of his powers congregants would tramp three days in the Connecticut snow to hear mild-mannered Edwards, literally and inventively, scare the hell out of them. Pain sells, as churches know, and remnants of that ritual appear, modernized, in the grotesque taxonomies of the horror film (Wolf 1976).

Pain is privatized in modernity as a discrete bodily function -- inconvenient at best, and, to those who can afford it, eliminatable by money. Nonetheless, pain is clearly a public investment. A loud scree of lamentation, suffering, and woe buttresses religions, stabilizes civil government, fuels material as well as symbolic economies. Indeed, if architectural historian George Hersey (1988) is to be credited, pain even shapes the classic architecture of ancient Greece, esteemed by 19th century American builders, and whose classic pillars, stately columns and wide porticoes grace the landscape of antebellum South. Nor is this merely antiquarian paganism. Christian cathedrals have sacrifice built into them, displaced now in the language of the crypt. And while on the point of worship -- even the gods (pagan as well as Christian) suffer, with consequences to their devotees.

So what is all this discursive energy about, anyway? Foucault would argue that discourse -- in this case, of pain -- is one of Western civilization's most refined delights. Freud would probably agree. This essay wishes to do two things: first, consider the general paradox of pain in public, and second, theorize briefly on its manifold civic uses in prime time TV News. Pain is a style, a sense of order, a public grammar, even a ceremony. I want to inquire, in overview fashion, into its cultic uses, and to sketch out the ceaseless economies made of pain, often in public rites of wildly inventive kinds. Spectator theory frames my inquiry. Rather than focus upon the modes of representation I focus, instead, upon reception -- how one looks, and how one sees, and how one makes meaning of what one sees (Mayne, 1997). Traditional theories of viewing investigate the processes by which the “magic” of cinema constructs, hails, and reproduces a viewer as its fantasy subject. In what I am calling political spectatorship, similar, or perhaps parallel questions become important. What are the motives of displays of pain; what are the consequences of looking at suffering? How, in other words, does the representation of pain hail, interpellate, reconstruct a putatively coherent viewer in terms of the pain being witnessed (Hansen, 1997; Kleinman and
Kleinman, 1997)? Who is the imagined subject thus unified? How, finally, is this transaction in an economy of pain a motive for culture?

Walter Benjamin remarked that every document of civilization is at the same time a text of barbarism. Put more directly, someone’s body supports the temple. One wonders, then, what happens to pain on its way to culture? What forms of cultural white-wash and erasing transform pain from discontent into an everyday fact of social life – one that teaches and instructs, and from which culture derives clear profit? Of special interest are the processes and disjunctions built-in to the voyeuristic gaze. That is, from Aristotle till now, a disconnection is implicitly established between the suffering subject and those who watch. The two positions are never equal. And here is only the first of many difficulties associated with the subject of suffering in public. Watching pain is about power: who has it, and how they keep it.

I. On looking into suffering from afar.

Walk through any mall: Commodity culture has two prominent traditions from which it derives its physical, intellectual, and emotional habits of being in the world. The worst of these effects are often dismissively -- and erroneously -- associated with pop culture, although they are dispersed widely across all levels of culture; the pleasure of observing pain is one such habit. In its most general form, it comes to us in the “classic” Roman and Greek tradition of the warrior. Prizing individuality, this tradition erases pain by subordinating it to *Vir* and *Agon* -- manliness and contest. One finds this narrative pattern from Homer and Sophocles through neo-classicism, through Wordsworth and the Romantic vision up until the present. From the ideological perspective of the United States, we know its modern equivalents in representations of the Iraqi war. Across different historical epochs and divergent cultures, the narratives converge: the Good Death is apotheosis; in death the individual achieves transcendence with the divine and becomes a hero – someone offered (sacrificed?) to the goddess Hera. Christianity developed in resistance to this warrior culture; early Christian Fathers like Tertullian borrowed the rhetoric of hero-making but inverted its object, focusing instead upon the *sufferingness* of the individual. In the Christian revision, one did not transcend pain; instead, one bore up under it and became oneself most fully through it.: *agon* becomes *pathein*. This transformation can be seen in the way the exquisite and chiseled beauty of the male *kourous* (Dutton, 1995, 24) gives way, in the Christian era, to the martyr and the suffering body (Perkins, 1995). The focus shifts from the perfection of the form to the exquisiteness of its pain. Trauma becomes the mark of transcendence; suffering in public is the new sublime (Seltzer, 1998; Grosz, 1996).

My brief sketch is of course radically condensed. Even so, in this overview one sees the historical interconnectivity of the disciplines of art, theology, and aesthetics in the production of pain, for secular as well as ecclesiastical uses. Nonetheless, in all these discourses, the witnessing of pain is, to some degree, an elaborate hoax. That is, the pain witnessed is not, *real*; or, rather, the witnessing is more real than the pain experienced, since mediation
invariably shapes how the real is presented. Partiality and limit is built-in to representation, whether text or image -- and for this reason, images (in particular) are most contrived when they appear most "natural." Every representation -- whether the Crucifix, or a CNN broadcast from the "theatre" of war, or the staging of a Presidential speech -- works to hide its most significant questions: Who made this image and why? This act of erasure defines the way images are political. More pointedly, who profits from pain, and in what material or symbolic ways, from its making, display and use? Images of the capture of Saddam Hussein portrayed the former in a degraded fashion, as he underwent medical examination. Images like this are a remarkable example of the will-to-blindness characterizing even the most benign representation. Westerners see images of Saddam, but we do not see how his representation instructs us in public national politics -- as we are instructed how to feel about Saddam.

Further, the images of pain that daily flood news, cinema, radio, and other less obvious media invite other reflections: if pain is ubiquitous, how can it be silent? (Scarry, 1986). If pain has no voice of its own, how does it make for such good theatre? Demonstrably it is adept at ventriloquizing voices of others. Lastly, to return to my opening point, what purpose does the fiction of pain serve? A moment's observation tells us that pain is rarely private, and hardly ever just one person's affair, even though culturally we are invested in preserving the fiction. That we prefer to think otherwise, and insulate pain within the area we call private life, is the intriguing point. Pain is, to the contrary, a civil grammar. It structures and makes meaning possible, understandable. It is a palimpsestuous text, rewritten and rewritten into ever varied, sometimes arcane meanings. Reading pain brings the cultural body to light and life (Leder, 1990).

This, then, is another of pain's paradoxes. Literally unspeakable, pain produces language, drama, pleasure. Mute, it is the ubiquitous occasion of gesture -- and thus theatre, since pain is invariably performed in public. It may be because pain has no language that it is always stagey, and always staged -- sometimes less well, sometimes better. Scarry notes that pain "goes away" when we tire of its performance. Ok, you've been sick long enough, get over it. Such judgments, made rapidly and without thought, reflect the aesthetic demands made upon pain. Somehow, in public, it must give pleasure. But regardless of the aesthetics of its performance, the theatre of pain implicates even those not directly addressed nor even those directly watching. Pain on display is always meant to mean. But here is the problem, since meaning is always a matter of negotiation. As if to compound its anguish, then, the suffering body has further pulls and tugs upon it in public. There are limits to the extent that pain can be public, as well as forms or genres into which it must fit in order to be "understood." Finally, the more one tries to capture pain in representations, the less one "gets" of the pain itself. This is especially -- if paradoxically -- true of the image, since pain moves toward symbolic extinction in visuality. Visual representation moves irresistibly toward allegory, becoming a vehicle for a wider range of significations -- culture, in other words.

The absence, then, of the pain in the representations of pained bodies is especially the case in the mediatized social gaze, and typically so in the "live feed" of pain that underwrites daily
news broadcasts. In these quotidian dramas of over-looked (or looked – over) pain the viewer occupies a contradictory space both within and outside the pain. The subject of suffering -- the person suffering -- is transformed; transfigured through distance, the victim becomes a source of pleasure for the viewer. A friend of mine, having seen Rwanda (2005), immediately emailed to announce how much the film had disturbed him, saying his stomach was in knots. I wrote back, asking how he had been affected by the actual events in 1994. To date I have received no answer. I hate to pick on my friend. His sentimental response is scripted into visual commodity culture. The more we can watch others in pain the more alive we ourselves become – surely the implicit logic of spectation moves to this conclusion. The final hazard of the disjunction between suffering and its pleasure is, implicitly, to view all other people as there for me – to enable me, the viewer, to have an emotional life.

To sum up, then, pain is never neutral, nor, despite its ideological cast, is it ever "just" private. To the contrary, pain is central from Homer through the Christian era through Renaissance art; through Pop Culture and the Slasher film; across political discourses from the far right to the far left. In each of these periods and fields (there are others) the pained, torn or violated body is used as communal example, witness, threat, pedagogy, entertainment. As I shall explore in a moment, Christian ascetical practices organized around the wounded body insure a grammar of meaning that, however much it might pass today without comment, nonetheless still guarantees the semiotic and theatrical use of pain as transcendent, or in some manner, sublime.

II. Painful subjects

Are there moral consequences to a life of pain-watching? What are the effects of habitually viewing (other's) suffering? What is to be done with the pain one sees? How does one both subject oneself to pain, by watching it, and become, at the same time, a properly political subject by doing so?

In Serial Killers (1998) Mark Seltzer argues that American political culture coheres around the wounded body. Seltzer's insight about wound culture is not new, although it sounds avant garde. To the contrary, Seltzer reads Old World religious history and transmutes it into aesthetic history through the lens of his secular gaze. That is, in the evacuation of religious significance public ceremonies that were once intended to teach no longer do so, and are often not recognized as ceremonial or religious. Insofar as they remain in place as civic habits, however, these public patterns trace representational and imaginative modes both strange and familiar at the same time. Pain of the body is one such form. It anchors the ostentatio of Christ's dying; the lives of the saints and martyrlogy; it is central to the history of bloody Renaissance art; it organizes romantic-era portrayals of suffering, anguish, detailed pain; pain is the point of what Seltzer terms the modern “atrocity exhibitions” (1998, 21). All of these share in common a certain imaginative fixe from which many cultural forms derive their unrecognized power. In media and popular culture, in particular, viewers inhabit a habitual way of looking that is so close to us that we no longer
recognize it as a form. Other people are there for us to watch. Their suffering feeds us (Bok, 1998; Goldstein, 1998; Young, 1997).

The fact that we do not recognize this gaze as meaningful shows how powerfully we are held in its prison. Unrecognizability is an ideological burden. Cultural forms are neither self-explanatory nor inevitable, and why a particular culture chooses one form of expression over another invites examination. Further, the continuance of any mode through history -- its cross-cultural durability if you will -- likewise invites our reflection. The pained body is such a form, present in the very earliest documents of what Western Culture values. From Aristotle in the 5th BCE, the pain of others was offered, often explicitly, as social text. Reading that pain one could find power, condemnation or inspiration. Images of suffering are still offered for aesthetic pleasure as well as for moral tutelage. Either as pleasure or as moral gauge, however, pained bodies make possible economic exchange; they become currency, traded in symbolic as well as material ways.

By the time of the Enlightenment the social, aesthetic and moral uses of bodies suffering were firmly established, a cluster of attitudes of sympathy and hierarchy that formed the bedrock of what we now call the humanities.” “If it bleeds, it leads,” runs the journalistic axiom (Sontag, 2004, 18). Ask any literature teacher why read Don Quixote or The Sorrows of Young Werther or Huckleberry Finn; they will say that literature teaches readers how to be human by opening them to the pain of others. Less directly, they might use the term “experiencing the suffering of others,” or “crossing over” into the life of someone else, but these are polite evasions. In the unsettled political climate of the late-Enlightenment, suffering was framed as having social and political usefulness. In the work of nation-building even aliens and foreign nationals were, presumably, able to feel suffering. Social and political alienation, then, was thought to be overcome in these acts of aesthetic distance. One read Goethe’s Sorrows of Young Werther, or MacKenzie’s The Man of Feeling, not so much because the suffering of others was good for individuals; more pragmatically, it was very excellent for the stability of the state. The underclass and non-classed could be disarmed, socially speaking -- unified through a common bond of fellow-feeling (Bruhm, 1994; Hinton, 1999).

The narcissism of Christian ascetical modes remains sedimented in literary practices, as well. The humanities tradition reverences the memorializing of hurt, and the motive for pain sanctions civic action. While touting reason and rational conceptions of the human being (explicitly western, classed and raced), the Enlightenment mentalite privileged “feeling” as the essential, and necessary, political bond. The romantic era’s justification for the “fine arts” will center precisely in their perceived value as an imaginative pedagogy. Nonetheless, the humanizing gestures advanced in the name of literature (and the arts more generally) hid, perhaps, but certainly never erased the utilitarian politics of making citizens. Literature – after the classics, vernacular texts in English -- were intended to guide persons in appropriate civilities, instructing them in necessary emotions, helped them know their places, and thus to be docile to authority. Nor did the covering rhetoric of compassion and
sympathy and fellow-feeling obscure a need to find moral grounds by which to disarm any and all potential opposition to authority -- particularly revolutionaries, natives, foreigners and others. Making subjects was a full-time representational business.

It is no accident that The Age of Enlightenment also made possible the new commerce in looking over the lives of others, since this was a time of conquest and moralistic gazing called the Age of Exploration. This new commerce was, at least initially, conducted under the moral cover of altruism. Voyages were undertaken, and wonder cabinets were filled with exotica from afar (things as well as persons). These activities were conducted, or justified, in the interest of saving, improving, uplifting the various persons who were thereby rescued from their benighted states. Altruism required then, and still does today, the bodies of others upon which to direct its complex gaze. The more unfortunate the body, the better: The will-to-power that underwrites altruism is often disguised by the sentimentality of its expression.

The commerce in looking over the suffering of others -- developed under late-capitalism and authorized by the moral requirements of Enlightened citizenship -- has very deep roots in the blood cerements (rites and words) of classical warrior ethos and its Christian revisions, emendations, and outright plagiarizing. Such blood-ceremonies that are the daily offering of commodity culture hereby signal their importance as well as their historical density. In Cannibal Culture Deborah Root notes that various kinds of human sacrifice saturate Western institutions from the time of the Greeks and Romans to the present (1996, xvi). Root writes, "Many cultures possess a conceptual map that grasps the nature of violence and power and explains it through a metaphor of consumption." (1996, xii). Root here directs her attention to what might be termed rites of cultural communion, or consumer totemism. She examines the process whereby the exchange of artifact from one culture to another (commercial museum sales are Root’s primary example) transfers, along with the artifact, ineffable qualities of national "identity." Root’s point can be extended to include the formless postmodern pastiche of the genre of news, which likewise deals in intercultural trade of this sort, even if less obviously.

However, what is to be remarked is the way an ascesis -- a spiritual pedagogy -- of the pained body that was, originally, an act of resistance against imperial Roman power now accommodates that history, in banal ways, to a commerce of the flesh. That is, pain no longer serves interior discipline, as it did, for example in the Athletus Christi -- Tertullian’s revision of the warrior trope. In its contemporary commercial equivalent, the body-in-pain stands witness to nothing more transcendent than its own agony – an agony made intensely visible, for the undefined pleasures of those who watch. The solipsistic nature of this gaze can, and often does, veer into the pornographic mode, where provoking visible emotion is the goal. Pain is the money shot; That is, it functions to guarantee a media-organized social gaze. Viewing someone else’s pain becomes an exercise in the commercial that contrives, at the same time, to offer itself in less obvious ways as an authoritative public mode of experience and, thus, citizenship, even as it is placed in the service of the superficially titillating. In other words, like any other representation, watching suffering is never without its frame. The frame instructs, guides, viewers into appropriate feelings, as did
the tradition of sentimentalism and benevolism in the formative years of the novel. In this respect *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and its many down-heel variations might be considered the civic analogue of burying a human body at the base of the cathedral; the live burial sanctifies the structure, and dedicates it.

Judith Perkins (1995) argues that early Christian narratives -- letters, martyr accounts, and later fully-formed hagiography -- borrowed from formulas of pain already extant in the warrior culture of imperial Rome. Christian authors revised these tropes as a mode of resistance against Imperial politics, thereby creating a distinct and contrasting identity. Perkins argues that the commerce in suffering bodies produced identification with a clearly defined religious -- and later civil -- authority. In similar ways the exploitation of suffering is, in contemporary practice, a political as well as economic exchange. In *The Resurrection of the Body*, Catharine Bynum (1995) likewise notes that the Martyr was "the ideal Christian hero." In other words, the transcendence attributed to the suffering, martyred body fallen in the Roman games did not foreclose other, less exalted possibilities from the vantage-point of the spectator (Auguet, 1994). Indeed, the endurance of the Crucifixion as a memorial device provides an example of the multi-layered uses of pain, a use especially evident in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). From early examples of the aestheticizing of the cross, even including Gibson's cinematic exploitation of it, religious and pornographic uses of violated bodies are sometimes not distinguishable. The simultaneous exaltation and demeaning of the body-in-pain underwrites contemporary representational modes; popular media exploits an homology between the consumption of commodities and the consumption of bodies. The mode of consumption varies; sometimes, for example, on such shows as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* or *Divorce Court*, spectators are invited to consume the emotional bodies of the distressed. At other times spectators are offered the trauma of the devastation of civil tragedy, or natural horrors such as earthquakes or tsunamis. The wounded bodies of famine, slaughter and civil attack all compete for viewer’s attention. Pain-per-view is given moral cover.

**III. Pain junkies: “Live feed”**

Consumption is an overworked metaphor in the scholarly and popular press. So overused is it that the term’s strangeness is lost; rarely does anyone take offense when she or he is addressed as a "consumer." Like devotees lingering before the cross, habit and rhetorical force train us away from seeing the violence and trauma contained in the word, and the violence that implicates us as viewers. Raised in a post-Christian era, most people pay the cross little mind, and especially do not attend to the violence of the crucifixion. Further, to argue that the crucifixion or communion is "only symbolic" does not lessen the force of the participatory violence. To the contrary, such an elision magnifies it. Similar effects track the identificatory-mechanisms of media, and in this way the term "consumer" is apt. That is, the gaze directed at the material bodies of suffering miners, soldiers, victims of personal and public trauma on the
daily news offers, in the mode of a Eucharist, commodity transubstantiation. In Christian ascetical practice the cross is metonymy as well as metaphor; its significance lies in the way it creates proper Christian subjects -- abject, pained, docile. The "live feed" of TV enables a similar moment of transfer -- an exchange between the abjected pained body and the spectator who consumes the pain for his or her own purposes. In both systems of exchange the effects of pain are displaced, in a kind of holy contagion, onto the viewer. Watchers of media-pain are like the Christian partaking in the symbolic cannibalism on the body of Jesus that is, Catholics insist, all too real. Likewise viewers become slightly cannibalistic; we are meat-eaters, neo-colonial in that we not only colonize countries but other persons as well.

Aristotle argues that the power of tragedy comes from watching one more noble than oneself suffer. In this schema, tragedy is understood as a cathartic movement toward pity; modern genres as different as News and Soap Opera, seem, at least on the surface, to solicit a similar compassion and sympathy. Indirectly, a movement to community is implied. Unlike the classic movement of tragedy, however, modern genres privilege readers and viewers, who look into suffering from a very far distance (Brooks, 1976). The gaze, is, however, hardly benign; the pleasures of watching suffering displace the lessons supposedly inculcated by the watching --although it is never very clear that this has happened.

The Liberal Space is the faux-public sphere in which modernity constructs its subjects. In this public arena gestures of altruism solicit the emotions of spectators for pointedly political ends. Other persons are there, then (remember the film Rwanda and its actual events) to the extent that their disadvantage profits viewers. Televisual bodies suffer so that viewers can have emotions -- and not just any emotion, either; citizens need to be instructed, subjected into subjectivities proper to them. To this end the ceremonies installed around suffering bodies ritualize these encounters in order for specific goals. We make art of pain, we do religion around pain, we form governments on the basis of dead bodies and body counts. Perhaps the word profit is never put that bluntly, but it is profit nonetheless. Often, that profit is being "moved to feel" -- since to have emotions, and to express them, is historically one of the rights of class. Nobless oblige guarantees a top-down view of pain. The pleasures of gazing into suffering from distances, however, remain self-contained, and surely of no advantage for the sufferer. The narcissism, for example, that promotes AIDS rides (to name one popular form; there are many others) come to mind: "I'Mpossible." Not long ago Time Magazine's cover story featured an investigation of AIDS in Africa: The text on the upper corner, accompanying a pieta of blasted flesh, read, "Can you gaze upon this suffering body and not weep?" Remembering my friend weeping over the film, Rwanda (2005), the expression bleeding heart liberal is both more telling and more vacuous than at first it appears.

Emotional narcissism of this sort grounds many, maybe most popular genres. The gushy “feature” spreads in the Sunday newspaper, and TV news programs like 60 Minutes or Hard Copy are high-minded exposes that regularly detail the hard lives and times of this or that disadvantaged person or group. In this respect, such shows are distant ancestors of Wordsworth’s “The Cumberland Beggar,” whose suffering life, the poet croons, makes
virtue possible for the townsfolk who are forced to interact with him. Returning to our metaphor of consumption and communion, contemporary displays of benighted bodies offer a telecommunion; suffering exists for our benign gaze and emotional "profit." Consider the typical ceremony of watching. Turn on the TV and see, in the foreground, a distraught face, set against the backdrop of some disaster or other. Voice over: "How do you feel about (fill in the blank)? From the viewer, watching, this is a perfectly stupid question. The microphone thrust in the devastated face will tell us nothing we do not already know from what the leering camera shows. Or will it? The question is, or should be, what is served in this exercise? What sorts of desires (hungers?) are given blanket cover in the catchall "news" -- and should they be?

What do we get out of seeing others suffer? Granted that even in mimetic art, a one-for-one equivalence does not obtain between the subject of art and art object. Nonetheless, what is the viewer’s relation to what she or he looks at? Can we claim that our viewing is disinterested, a manner of aesthetic appreciation, or art? Does our viewing have commercial pay-off? Is it of political significance? How and why? Does the viewer’s emotive response (or lack) do anything for the sufferer? Or should it? In this regard, what must be said for the involvement in the artist (Caravaggio, Titian, Delacourt) with the subjects of their art? Or, better, consider the modern day journalist, who is, in that suggestive word, embedded with soldiers in the war-front. All of these, artist and journalist alike, in the presence of pain and suffering, are there, to document rather than alleviate it. To what extent must they be held responsible for what one commentator termed the pornography of depredation?

Commenting on the war aesthetics of Ernst Junger Susan Sontag mordantly observes, “War-making and picture-taking are congruent activities” (2004, 66). Perhaps journalists in Iraq are only “doing their job”; one wonders what job it is they think they are doing. (Or think of the media event of a year or so ago about kidnapped Elizabeth Smart. Her uncle, a professional photographer, later took charge of licensing pictures of her ‘suffering’).

How would Aristotle view the news? Do we have any responsibility for the images, scenes and dramas that come, often without permission, into our houses and heads? Kissinger is reported to have turned down the volume so that he could better see the images, believing, rightly, that what was being shown was more significant than what was being said about it. I have been arguing that a rich confluence of traditions – religious, civil, philosophical -- concludes that meditating upon the suffering of others makes us morally better. Yet the moralizing gaze is, at best, ambiguous. Does suffering make us ethically more acute? Does our excitement cut across our compassion? Consider, for example, rubbernecking at an accident. Although often images are presented as being somehow educative -- I think here of Amnesty International’s advertising campaigns, or even the Starr Report in the US -- one can argue that the moralizing gaze is both anti-liberal as well as anti-human. That is, it establishes what is essentially a cinematic model of engagement, facilitating a one-way relationship between person and thing. As Cohen observes, "Moral indignation about a remote place is safe, cheap and uncomplicated" (2001, 19). Sontag, likewise, terms the view “adepts of proximity without risk” (2002, 111). For reasons seldom addressed, this sort of
moral indignation is also deeply pleasurable. It is pornographic, as I define the mode – the exercise of emotion removed from a humane context.

Among other points, Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts" underscores the fact that pain is always incomprehensible to the one not suffering. This incomprehensibility is less a question of malice or even indifference than a result of structural inaccessibility. David Morris writes, "aversion or detachment is a function of a structural position [the observer] cannot help but occupy" (Morris, 1997, 29). As a consequence, there is a deep sadism at work throughout popular culture in the way that so many media translate misery into money. In the commerce of the suffering body, TV shows like 911 or even Divorce Court are perhaps more blunt about their avarice than other media, though even newspapers more and more concur: money is where the pain is. As one producer remarked about the coverage of the World Trade Center bombings, "No one cares what you say or show. The concern is with what makes money." High-minded liberals would of course distance themselves from such pain-per-view productions, yet there are many productions – church appeals, voluntary contribution appeals, presidential speech -- that solicit our attention, using suspect means, without comment. TV News, perhaps especially, can be interrogated in this regard as it is, more directly than most, a delivery system of pain – in the business of producing cheap, unearned emotions.

Consider for a moment what is offered on a typical US news program. During the months in which I first began thinking about this essay, I saw news of a train wreck, the space shuttle explosion, bombing of a Madrid train station; I also was given garden-variety expositions of police violence, street shootings, drug-induced gang fights. Martha Stewart made the news. In each of these instances spectators had to do a certain amount of intellectual labor to legitimize the violence they saw and to justify their involvement in it. What, for example, does this work consist of? In other words, what demands are placed upon readerly skill? Seldom do we question how, or in what way, random deaths; or multiple deaths; carnage (human or natural) in places elsewhere; legal chicanery or other symbolic violence; pillage in print; should be "news" to us. What is the presumptive investment made for the spectator in the misery of other people – even in Martha Stewart?

I think here of the afternoon Fox Network News/Talk show, running in October 2002 during the Washington Sniper broadcasts. A studio audience in Atlanta was asked, "How are you dealing with the terror of the sniper?" As the camera panned across the strained and anxious faces -- mostly non-white, mostly women -- I heard the sound of money being made, even as terror was stoked as manipulatively as in any exploitation film. What imaginative connection is made? How is the reader, viewer, positioned to reconstitute him or her self in the dis-ease of others? More troubling, why should dismemberings, whether symbolic or sometimes actual, be seen as peculiarly constitutive of a "human" link? Indeed, what about the suffering closer to home -- the routine, banal pain of every day, that one walks over or passes by everyday, in Auden's sense, not wanting it? Finally, what sorts of work must viewer and producer -- not to mention the photographer or interviewer -- collude in to sanctify, justify, sterilize, authorize, and ultimately make possible, the "indecency" of this
“co-spectatorship” of the drama of public pain (Sontag 2004, 60)? What do we think of the position we narratively inhabit in relation to the girl in California (or anywhere), kidnapped, raped and killed; to the miners trapped deep beneath the ground in Philadelphia; to the crowd of passengers huddled in the back of the plane as we hear, through hidden cell phone, the attack on the doomed jet's cabin door?

These questions lead to other questions -- ones that the imperial designs of media seek to avoid. Milgram (1974) and Cohen (2001) demonstrate that people subjected to violence accommodate themselves to violence; what then must be the relation between the representational violence of our medias and the more usual violence of daily life? Does repeated exposure through our cinematically-constructed lives render inter-personal violence normal and acceptable? Or does …[it] simply serve to distract viewers away from violence nearer to them? I think here about the Atlanta talk-show audience, being invited to feel fear about a distant event. However terrifying that event, it was less pressing than anxieties much closer to their lives. Surely they would have reasons closer home for the practice of anxiety, if they wanted, dealing with institutional and personal violence that might be more pertinent to their lives.

Or again, can someone watch such displays without at the same time being implicated in the production of symbolic violence? Even those who say they turn away from violent programming in films must confront this question in other contexts -- especially “news” – where violence is excused because of its presumable worth to the viewer. The circularity of the reasoning is evident. Are viewers entranced by a violence of language, by a slippage from a habit of representation to an easy acceptance of a similar naturalized violence? To some extent that seems a reasonable conclusion. This violence, however, is not only a result of culture but, indeed, a necessary foundation to culture as we live it. Why are these stories repeated, and repeated so often? Live feed: Media, with support from government and religion and commercial ideology, offers as the civic equivalent to the body buried at the base of the building to propitiate the gods.

Probably more than other genres, news broadcasts hide the effects of their making, while asking viewers to collude in that silence. This collusion is how media more generally announces its politics. What, however, is the informational status of news? Or, indeed, is news busy about something other than dispensing information? One could argue that news is merely a fiction different in degree from the novel, and that at its best news delivery services are only less obviously fictions than their down-heal tabloid cousins. It is evident that up or down the fiduciary scale, narrative rather than factual content structures the production of all of these related genres. Fiduciary content -- and a presumed moral veneer, justified by watching suffering is good for you -- is merely the cover to a politics of comfort where narrative pleasure, rather than moral nuance, is key.

Other questions can likewise be asked. What moral claims does a news broadcast make upon its viewers, and what might be its moral benefits for us? On the other hand it is very
clear how news profits from us -- although this point may not always be addressed. One commentator, viewing network response to the 2001 World Trade Center bombing remarked, "this isn't patriotism, it's capitalism." From the reverse, however, the question becomes, how does a viewer take profit or benefit from news? Putting the question that way uncovers the discomforting way in which the relations established by "news" are studiously one way. Viewers need take no responsibility for what -- more often than not -- are simple acts of commodity, emotional shopping, far removed from any humane investment. Cohen argues in States of Denial (2001) -- and Amnesty International also notes, to its chagrin -- watching suffering actually undoes arguments that have traditionally buttressed “human interest.” The ability to “suffer with” has been, since the Enlightenment, a mark of the civilized “man of feeling.” This of course is the banal reason often offered up as a reason students must sit through general education requirements in the Humanities. To do so, it is thought, makes one more human. Cohen concludes grimly, and to the contrary, that a steady diet of watched pain results in "compassion fatigue" (13). Writing with Amnesty International’s publicity campaign in mind, Cohen argues, "Worse than Torture not being in the news, it was no longer news. Something whose existence could not be admitted, was now seen as predictable" (xi).x

These questions are not new. Even Augustine in The Confessions admits the powerful allure of public blood sports. One might say that compassion fatigue is the logical conclusion to a social order in which the watching of bodily pain saturates cultural forms from poetics to literature, from religion to government -- even as the actual pain itself slides away in representational oblivion. Milgram's work demonstrates that even the most average citizen can be pressured into colluding with torture. One asks, what happens to the reality of pain? Where does it go, what does it become, in its transition to "something else" -- that is, en route to economics, aesthetics, politics, and, finally, its speechless translation into profit? How does pain -- mute, as Scarry argues -- speak, and speak incessantly, and in whose voice?

Let me return again to an image that, I think, demonstrates my point. Have we ever stopped to think about the contradictions of the crucifixion -- an image that builds forgetting and erasure into its visual representation? How is this crude violation of the body – in Roman culture, mors torpissima, a death so degraded that no citizen could suffer it -- acceptable in polite society with rarely an apology? It is curious that the more present the cross is in public the less it is seen for the offense that it is. What form of cultural erasing enables it to be viewed as a “sign of victory” -- as Constantine and before him, as apostle Paul did?? Where does the pain, blood, agony and visible distress go when it is viewed from within the frame of triumphant (new Right) Christian ideology?

But even within Christian ideology the cross is a sign of offense and scandal. The fact that Christ intended it as such does not lessen its scandal, either to his disciples or to the later church, which has since worked diligently to undo it. Read St. Paul. Glance over the history of the war of Reformation. Some may not be willing to concede that Christ's pain -- offered up on civic and church walls as a teaching device and meditative aid -- is a
curiously mixed sign that borders upon the pornographic; nonetheless, the history of its representations show that the image also appeals to pleasures best left unspoken. On the other hand, the doubleness of this sign underscores our contemporary dilemma. Raised upon the bloodied and near-naked body of Jesus, perhaps we see how it is that in American popular and populist culture, our children, in their own way, do the same double-visual split. They watch slasher films, or even the workaday horror film like *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and without qualms they see bodies broken and bleeding. How are we to read the contradictions in the way bodies are used alternately to provoke pleasure, suffering, and sometimes both at once?

As a cultural sign, the crucifixion demonstrates how news can be written and erased at the same time. Many genres, of course, train readers to extract pleasure while erasing pain. Commodity narrative is cross hatched with such ambiguities; in a manner similar to the crucifixion, readerly gazes are trained away from seeing the evident violence of so much of it – unless and until a producer decides to capitalize upon the very thing to which we hold ourselves blind. Mel Gibson does exactly this in *The Passion of the Christ*. He banks -- literally -- on the fact that the moral gaze does not deny other gazes – sometimes sentimental, economic, prurient. In similar fashion, the news is "news" only to the extent that we do not see it for what it is, but view it through the lens of our own need, lack, or?

How then, indeed, do we see it? What does the panoramic viewing of desolation involve and invoke? The multiple tragedies of the Manhattan bombings; the explosion of the Columbia; and the blood-sport of the Iraqi war coverage; the salacious coverage of the prison torture – these recent media scenes provide opportunities, again, to consider how viewers are subjected to media while they are created as subjects through its devices. True, there is a growing sensitivity to the fact that these questions should be asked. During, and after, the coverage of the destruction of the World Trade Center commentators found themselves oddly positioned. On the one hand they ran devastatingly graphic, numbing and shocking video footage of, first, planes hitting the towers, then, second, the towers exploding and collapsing. As if this were not enough, viewers then saw broadcasts of people flinging themselves in desperation from the carnage -- all of this, in that terribly ironic word, "live."

At the same time attempts were made by some channels and commentators to provide screening of sorts -- rating the news as it were for "adult" content. Peter Jennings remarked that "care had been taken" and that coverage had been "judicious." Jennings’ careful word-choice asks us to consider how this genre is linked -- economically, technically, cinematically, and perhaps morally -- to other genres where "adult themes" in public provoke public management, linguistic erasure and visual censorship. Can "adult theme" include duty, as well as Pleasure?

To conclude, allow me tell an anecdote on myself. In preparing a lecture from this essay I had first considered a series of slides as visual counterpoint -- "if only to add interest" I told myself. That is my argument. What did I think the quality of that "interest" was? To this extent Scarry is right; somehow pain evacuates language, dissolves it, escapes it, and, instead, compels visuality. To our image-drenched imagination, however, this visuality
seems naively to obviate criticism, evaluation or analysis, because seeing is thought to be all of those things. After all, we "see it" and so have little need to "understand" it. The conclusion, is as distasteful as it is ignored. The rationality and cognition that are traditionally associated with "high" or "literate" culture are apparently voided in this culture of image-literacy. Ask students to evaluate an essay, on the one hand, and a film, on the other. The essay will be judged “hard,” the film will be evaluated as “liked” or “not liked.” A representational fundamentalism of pain has consequences in culture where popular modes of expression, across many kinds of media, disconnect between visuality and comprehension is established, even if the disconnect between what one sees and what one understands is rarely addressed. Close reading gives way to the Close Stare.

So, then, to return to the question: Are there moral effects to a life of pained-watching pain? What are the consequences of a life of attending to someone else’s unhappiness? Readers who are at all self-reflexive about their consumption of media thus inhabit an uneasy place, somewhere between the social fantasy that representation is transparent, and its effects neutral, and the realization that representation is, often enough, outright fantasy. From Aristotle forward the goal of rhetoric has been to persuade. Persuasion is not always, or inevitably, or even often, linked to fact. Few are willing to admit that reading has its complexities and makes demands upon its readers for the pleasures it bestows. The often-remarked addictive potential of genre fiction is suggestive, likewise, of the difficulty of reading the news. Like other commodity genres News functions as a comfort narrative. It is a sensationalist genre, in the prominent place afforded sensation and feelings; further, it borrows unacknowledged from versions Enlightenment nationalisms that still underwrite and authorize notions of "the public sphere." (Hansen, 1997). This brings us back to the news, the late-capitalistic hagiography of the torn body: The production of commercially addictive pleasure is, then, just one of the many ways that this "public sphere" maintains a sort of faux-authority, producing the Gothicized body onto which can be dramatized fears and desires otherwise consigned to representational (and thus political) oblivion.

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i Or Christ’s sexuality. See Leo Steinberg’s wonderful study, The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion (1983).

ii Indeed, sacrifice grounds our buildings -- a fact still discernible in the Greek architecture such as the Parthenon and temples, which allegorizes ceremonies of blood.

iii One can argue this point from the evidence even of absent language. Silence is a powerful speaking, as Sedgwick argues. This is the lesson of the Gothic, for instance, as witness the way gothic settles into the mode Du Jour in trauma.
narratives, whether of the Holocaust or modern news. Linguistic fracture presents, in the medical expression, pain.  

And it must be said that the reverse phenomenon is also true. Even when pain speaks it is silenced -- paradoxically, by those who try hardest to make its meanings out. In the academic study of pain, for example, attention is often directed less at the pained body than at those responding to it. I confess to this bias, myself. For this reason the history of looking at pain can be understood as making possible a kind of double-mindedness; pain is announced as subject while it is erased as affect. So caught up in the fact of suffering I forget that a real person, or persons, suffer. The fact of pain is relegated to a realm of unexpressibility, while foregrounding the conditions by which it appears to speak. Auden, then, was right: ***


Often the work is done for us, as noted earlier, by the framing in which images are placed and positioned. The switch and bait of news itself, for example, refuges atrocity as "News" -- justifying every indulgence by a narcissistic "right to know." At other times the work is done by recasting atrocity through formula and convention, as Rwanda, the movie, does. Still a third way, violence can be turned into News by the simple expedient of marking it as such: Marks of breathlessness, for example, can lead one to suppose that what they are seeing is important. Indiscriminate violence passed off as "news alert" and sanctioned by that highlighted phrase marching across the bottom of the screen.

Here, as an example, I think particularly of language, its distortion and effective collateral damage. If "decapitation" is a technology in war its equivalent effects can be seen in war broadcasts, as Kleinman observes, "an uncanny and unnecessary correlation between the aesthetics of murder ... and the way in which those deaths are reported in the news" (Kleinman, 1997, 10). Viewers are morally decapitated.

Kleinman, in a similar construction, calls the effect "moral fatigue, exhaustion of empathy" (1997, 9).

Cohen (2001) argues that a "mutual dependency between official and cultural denial is most visible in the mass media coverage of atrocities and social suffering" (11). What should be the "effect" of this knowledge? What sort of controls exist / should exist upon our voyeurism into other person's lives? Perhaps, to borrow from Cohen, the traditional moral cover by which "news" is presented to us for our implicit information / moral uplift is little more than a "vital lie" (6) by which one colludes in self-denial.
The *mors turpissima* of the crucifixion, the scandalous death of a criminal or non-citizen must be read by Jewish exeges as failure – as indeed, does Jesus’ silence (except in John’s account, where silence is used differently). St. Paul’s letters thus amount to no less than a “whitewashing” of the crucifixion; Paul plays PR agent, as he tries to unwrite and rewrite Christ’s “stumbling block”: God has chosen the foolish, Paul writes -- in this first act of rendering pain as power -- to thwart the wise. He says: “But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness” (1 Cor. 1: 23).

Philosophical debates match religious wars in their intensity around this point: the collapse of categories that grounds Christianity’s Incarnational theology provokes an epistemological crisis, and from its earliest days that crisis was made visible in various public rhetorics of scandal, blasphemy, and monstrosity. The Reformation can be traced to this place. As we shall see, these are not dissimilar from the contemporary rhetoric and procedures of news, which also quite purposely blurs categorical lines around the body in epistemologically disordered (monstrous) ways.