I intend in this essay to examine a popular film genre in which a certain return to the materiality of human ontology is discernible: the torture film. I use the term ‘materiality’ rather than ‘physicality’ to indicate a set of features of which the corporeal-physical is only one; affect-sentiment and rationality being the other two. As work by Lauren Berlant (2004, 2011), Ann Cvetkovich (2012) and others has demonstrated, affect is material, and in the public sphere constitutes an important aspect of community-building or identity in the form of ‘public feeling.’ The term ‘materiality’ therefore gestures at a lot more than ‘physicality’. As the ‘new materialists’ propose, ‘materiality’ is also meant to indicate the agential nature of flesh, its material effects on the world around it.  

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While on the one hand there are the popular representations of bodily transcendence, online lives and digital existence in films like *The Matrix* series, there is also a genre which foregrounds the *materiality* of human existence: torture porn.\(^2\) *Saw* (I-VI, at the time of writing), *Saw 3D: The Final Chapter* (usually referred to as *Saw VII*; and I am retaining this usage), *Hostel* (I-III), *Captivity*, *The Human Centipede* (I and II), *Vacancy* (I and II), *Meatwads* (I-V) and numerous other films contain graphic scenes of torture. Not surprisingly, these films have been reviled, attacked and dismissed as sick, perverted and as inspiring violence. (People who work on them are also suspect!). However, as Steve Jones, author of the first full-length book on the genre, points out:

> The vast majority of torture porn’s detractors have failed to adequately engage with the subgenre’s content. Some of the subgenre’s most profitable films have been addressed, but those responses are commonly superficial. Rather than dealing with torture porn itself, the subgenre’s belittlers instead tend to replicate various prejudices about popular violent cinema, duplicating established rhetorical paradigms. ‘Torture porn’ misrepresents the films themselves then, but the label has also been utilised to incriminate the subgenre’s filmmakers and fans. (2013: 2)

Jones’s work also refutes, in great and painstaking (!) detail, the charge that the genre is either ‘porn’ or a mere exercise in sadism, although the term ‘torture porn’ remains the most widely circulated label and justifies my use of it in this essay. Since Jones’s work is the backdrop to this essay, I do not need to rehearse his arguments about sadism here.

Torture porn is a genre that pays incessant attention to the materiality and vulnerability of the human. It might refer to cultural referents and historical conditions, such as Abu Ghraib, war or incarceration, where too, as I have argued elsewhere, the photographic evidence centres the body as the material and discursive object of East-West relations, international law and Human Rights work (Nayar 2014b).\(^3\) The true horror of torture porn is rooted in its apparently casual disposal—if you forgive the droll pun—of the human; but, as I shall argue, it is not really or entirely about the human’s natural state of precarity but about a shared precarity that determines moral agency and choice and, more significantly, the
structural conditions of helplessness that are aligned with precarity. It is this last that, in my view, makes the torture film compelling social commentary.

In the insistence—via representations of torture—on the materiality of the human, these films offer an instantiation of the theoretical shift away from discourse to materialism in the age of the dominance of the virtual. With the increasing virtualization of everyday lives and the extensive intrusion of the media into our consciousness, there is perhaps, a dematerialization of the human body underway, at least according to the praise-singers of the digital age (Hayles 1999). Yet, concomitant with the dematerialization in theory (the legacy of the “discursive turn”) and practice (online lives), there has been an upsurge of interest in materiality. Labelled the “new materialism” in a 2010 volume, edited by Coole and Frost, this “matter-ialist” turn, as Rosi Braidotti terms it in her essay in the volume, calls for greater attention to embodied ontologies, the interlinked nature of existence, the mutuality of life forms and the agentic nature of both organic and inorganic matter. Human Rights scholars also see the vulnerable body as the cornerstone of “rights discourse” (Turner 2006; Anker 2012).

My arguments about horrorist cinema that reveal the vulnerability-helplessness contexts of the suffering human refer primarily to the Saw series, which made its first cut in 2004. Alongside an emphasis on vulnerability that all humanity shares, Saw forces us to address the conditions of structural helplessness that then becomes the focus of the films and our moral imagination. We all accept the vulnerability we share but we are also alerted through these films to the specific material conditions in which this vulnerability is aligned with helplessness. Saw is an instantiation of not only the new materialism’s emphasis on material conditions of existence, suffering, pain and deprivation, but also on the material effects, or the potential for effect that the material body might have.

My aim is not to conduct a detailed scene-by-scene analysis of Saw—that has been done with admirable results by Steve Jones—but rather offer a frame in which to read the torture film so as to
draw out the implications for a new mode of looking at the human in the age of the virtual.

**Horrorism, Embodiment and Shared Precarity**

Adriana Cavarero employs the term “horrorism” to describe a state of continuous and excruciating pain/suffering. Horrorism is not only about fear but also about repugnance, the inability to move: “gripped by revulsion in the face of a form of violence that appears more inadmissible than death, the body reacts as if it is nailed to the spot” (2011: 8). It is characterized by the “spectacle of disfigurement” (8). Cavarero writes:

The human being as an incarnated being, is here [in horror] offended in the ontological dignity of its being a body … Death may transform it into a cadaver, but it does not offend its dignity or at any rate does not do so as long as the dead body preserves its figural unity . . . (8)

The human body torn apart, argues Cavarero, is what makes contemporary horror, especially in war’s dismembered bodies, “unwatchable” (9). In this scheme, efforts are directed at “nullifying human beings even more than at killing them” (9). Further, horrorism is about underscoring not just the vulnerability of the body but reducing it to the “primary situation of absolute helplessness” (29). “Defenseless and in the power of the other, the helpless person finds himself substantially in a condition of passivity, undergoing violence he can neither flee nor defend against” (30). The scene of torture for Cavarero is a particularly powerful instance of horrorism where vulnerability and helplessness are conjoined as a result of “a series of acts, intentional and planned” (31). The body is objectified “by the reality of pain, on which violence is taking its time about doing its work” (31). The aim is not really death, but to “prolong the suffering inscribed in the vulnus [wound, and the root of the word ‘vulnerability’], bringing the vulnerable one to the limit of bearability of pain and offense” (32).

What emerges from the series of traps set by Jigsaw/John Kramer (the character who is the killer in the early Saw films), right from the first installment, is the extensibility of pain, and the
exploration of the limits of the human. If, as Elaine Scarry persuasively demonstrated in her classic *The Body in Pain* (1985), pain defines the limits of our existence, *Saw’s* horrorism defines the human almost entirely in terms of pain: the human is “objectified” by the “reality of pain” (Cavarero 31). Horrorist film might then be read as a genre that shifts our notions of what it means to be human away from domains like mind to the *embodied sensorium*. It is the body’s vulnerability to one particular sensation—pain—that defines the human. Extreme pain is what causes dehumanization. But *Saw* makes one more addition to this thesis. The wound—*vulnus*—is common to all humans; the question is whether the vulnerability has been conjoined through structural conditions with helplessness.\(^4\)

In other words, *Saw* turns our attention to an ethical question. While it is true that all humans are vulnerable, what are the conditions in which this vulnerability might be yoked to helplessness? War, torture, incarceration, famine, starvation and economic crisis are external conditions where the vulnerability of the human becomes embedded in his or her *helplessness*, as witnessed in totalitarian states, civil war and genocidal conditions. Unable to move, rooted to the spot (literally and/or figuratively), the human is helpless to avert the opening up of his or her *vulnus*. If one Jigsaw can force vulnerable people into positions of helplessness—the immobilized woman in the reverse bear trap (*Saw I*), or the search for the escape code using a candle when bathed in napalm (*Saw I*)—to await unrelenting pain, then it is possible to ponder over conditions that produce mass helplessness. A recent example would be that of Boko Haram and the kidnapping of several hundred school girls in Nigeria.

Following Cavarero, I further propose that it is the possibility of not death but disfigurement-dismemberment and the consequent destruction of the “figural unity”—and thus ontological integrity and dignity of the human—that characterize horrorist cinema. Elizabeth Anker has argued that liberal views of the human subject valorize the complete, integrated and “inviolable” human as the person, which paradoxically can be consolidated only by the “specter of abused, profaned and broken bodies” (16). *Saw* not only forces us to ask if
the violated and dismembered human is a person at all but also, paradoxically, seems to propose that the person is one who is willing to lose a limb or two in order to preserve a sense of the self. For example, Michael Marks in *Saw II* must cut out his own eyeball in order to retrieve the key to his spike-filled face mask that has been surgically implanted there. The profaned and broken body lacks a figural unity allegedly intrinsic to human beings. What kind of self exists after a self-induced disfigurement?

Scarry writes of “our recognition of pain [that] enters into our midst as at once something that cannot be denied and something that cannot be confirmed” (13). *Saw* forces every victim in pain to see and recognize another victim in equal if not greater pain. *Saw*’s horrorism is directed toward a shared precarity in the staged setting of the traps. It is in this move that *Saw* proposes a whole new mode of social empathy as a possible foundational text for humanity. Let me elaborate.

Tomie Hahn, writing about ethnographies of performance, argues that “extreme experience . . . affectively precipitates a sense of shared experience between members of a group” (2006: 91). In *Saw*, central to the entire series, is not only the embracing of precarity and pain in order to (i) save oneself, or (ii) to save another, but also a *sharing* of this precarity. What we witness is the *making* of this choice under extreme conditions. The man having the torture device piercing his side as he attempts to keep hold of the ropes that would keep the other victim of Jigsaw alive is warding off making a choice built around his precarity, even as he is aware that his precarity is played off against another fellow-human (who might be a loved one, a colleague, an acquaintance). How much pain is one willing to endure in order to reduce a similar pain for another?

The “precariousness of a body’s generalized condition relies on a conception of the body as fundamentally dependent on, and conditioned by, a sustained and sustainable world,” writes Butler (2009: 34). In the case of films like *Saw*, we witness *mutually constitutive torture*. The sustained and sustainable world that the body depends upon is embodied in another person, who too is
suffering excruciating pain. Butler makes the point that survival depends on the “constitutive sociality of the body” (54). But in the case of Saw, this is precisely what is overturned: the constitutive sociality of the body is simply a constitutive precarity. The world of Saw is one of mutually inflicted pain, but with the illusion of freedom from pain if one is willing to let the Other die. Indeed several characters in the films are willing to sacrifice others for their own survival (Xavier Chavez in Saw II). This last, of course, takes the film into the realm of ethics.

Scarry argues that there is an insurmountable distance between the tortured/torturee and the torturer (36). However, as Steve Jones notes, in these films “torturers may be tortured, and those tortured often consequently become torturers” (83). Jones thus elaborates the moral problematics of these films: that there is no easy binary between good victim and bad torturer because these are unstable identities in the film’s narrative. Being a victim seeking to escape necessarily involves inflicting pain on somebody else (Jones 84–6). In Saw IV, as Morgan pulls out the spikes jointly impaling both she and her husband Rex, she kills Rex in the process—as she had been warned would happen if she sought to escape the trap. What Saw does is to suggest that for a victim to escape, s/he needs to occupy, however briefly, the position of the perpetrator (of torture) or of the indifferent witness. If the only alternative left for Victim 1 is to allow the Other (Victim 2) to bleed to death, to suffer pain or to be simply left without help, then the role of victim can only be played out by occupying the place of an associate torturer. In other cases, the films question the morality of insurance policies and corporate codes. For example in Saw VI, insurance executive William Easton has to make the decision to save either Addy, a diabetic and family man, or Allen, his [Easton’s] young and healthy secretary. The choice lies between company policy and his own moral codes. Easton chooses finally to save Addy, and the film leaves it unsaid whether this was the right moral choice.

The Other here is the one who, for a period of time, occupies the same barbaric space as the Self (Victim 1). It is not a radically different Other but a fungible Other. The Other is one who could
replace you in this space of pain. The only factor that distinguishes the self from the Other in Saw’s world is the slim opportunity and agency given to the self (Victim 1): to escape, to help Victim 2 escape, or to condemn Victim 2 to death. There is no sustainable world in Saw. Saw exhibits that our material conditions are inextricably linked with those of others, and that any change in the nature of our location, bodies or choices, determine the life and death of somebody else and vice versa, just as in real life, the choices we make often determine the life-worlds of others.

Spectacle and the Performance of Material Death

One of the startling features of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay was the choreographed and staged nature of torture: these were performed for camera. Indeed, it is possible to propose that the camera was materially and symbolically integral to the torture because it showed the torturees the record of their humiliation. It is an instrument of the torture process. Stephen Eisenman in The Abu Ghraib Effect writes:

The photographs thus stage and record two kinds of desire: first, the supposed, perverse desires of Islamic detainees; and second, the actual, un-repressed desires of the US prison guards who freely wield guns, fists, handcuffs, dogs and leashes. The presence of the one provides ideological justification for the other, the supposed bestiality of the victim justifies the crushing violence of the oppressor. (2007: 101)

Jigsaw makes it clear that the torturees in his games have earned the punishment: each torturee has done something in his or her life that is unacceptable. Eisenman is right to note the assumption of the detainees’ desire by the torturers in Abu Ghraib. In the case of Saw, Jigsaw assumes, judging them not only by his own moral codes (for example, that they do not value life enough) but also sometimes by existing social-legal norms (for example, that they bore witness to a hit-and-run accident), that his victims have committed a wrong. It is Jigsaw’s sole assumption of their guilt that drives the game: it is his (and after his death, his collaborators’, like Hoffman) ideological justification that gets staged and recorded. The larger point about the staging of the torture, and the admission of guilt on the part of
the tortured, is that the games serve as quasi-confessional: ‘quasi’ because these confessions are extracted under duress and may or may not be legally admissible evidence. But Jigsaw’s theatre of cruel games is a court in itself, even as, in many cases, the chamber functions as the execution cell. Thus, we need to conceptualize Saw as staging the interrogation, the confession and the execution. A key shift, however, occurs after Saw III. Until then there is a certain ‘morality’, if one may call it that, to Kramer/Jigsaw’s ‘games’: the appreciation of life (a “wake-up call,” as he puts it in Saw II), and the sacrifice one is willing to make to ensure one goes on living. With Amanda and Hoffman, successors to Jigsaw, this particular dimension is lost and the tortures become ends in themselves. As Wallis and Aston put it:

While Kramer’s games are ultimately “winnable,” those designed and implemented by his apprentices—Amanda, a former drug addict with a history of violence both against herself and others, and Hoffman, a corrupt and brutal police detective—are designed instead to singularly kill the people they entrap. They thus reflect a nihilistic and sadistic game-playing that contravenes Kramer’s original approach. (2012: 356)

Thus, Jigsaw’s games are not mere nihilistic or sadistic exercises; they serve a purpose beyond just inflicting pain, and are, at least in his view, a pedagogic device where pain is a performative through which the victims arrive at a better sense of themselves. From this point, therefore, it is possible to see the films dwindling into mere sadism-as-spectacle.

There is an additional layer to the spectacle of torture in Saw. Jigsaw’s camera stands in for the witness in the torture chambers. Dean Lockwood writes: “Here it is not a question of the spectacle of the damaged or opened body such as we find in the ‘body horror’ of David Cronenberg’s oeuvre, for example, so much as the body suspended in the expectation of assault” (2009: 44).

There is also a second camera that records the first one recording the events. This second camera is of course a stand-in for us, the audience, and we see through this camera’s eye—a strategy to which I shall return in the next section, on spectatorship.
There is, in other words, a double witnessing at work in Saw. Jigsaw’s camera functions as an archivist-witness, recording the torturee’s admissions of guilt, pleas, suffering and in many cases, death. But Jigsaw also ensures that the second (the film’s) camera draws the viewer-witness into the meaning-making around torture: the recording of confessions of wrong-doing become the witnessing of the ‘crime’ or ‘deviance’ that then justifies, within the diegetic space of the film, the punishment.

One final point about the staging and performance of death in these films is that usually one victim witnesses the death of another. Frederike Offizier, writing about the ‘performance’ of death, proposes that “in dying the bodily process becomes an act … in that it is staged and closely observed” and therefore relies on “similar structures as staged theatrical performances of spectator and actor . . . . Dying can thus not be absolved from the relation to the Other” (2012: 127). Jigsaw constructs situations where protagonists trapped in his situations must necessarily assert the moral agency to witness the death of the Other victim (sometimes this is also a representation of dying). If witnessing carries with it the burden of someday bearing witness to the unspeakable (Oliver 2004), then Saw’s protagonists are to be haunted by not only their moral choice to leave the Other to her/his death, or fail to rescue the Other, but also to forever bear witness to the events that extinguished life/lives. Saw stages the performance of dying: it is very often in the death of the Other that Victim 1 discovers how close s/he has come to death as well. Witnessing bestows meaning upon the performance of death of/by the Other. The meaning of the Other’s death implies the meaning of life for the first Victim. The suffering and death of the Other is staged for the first victim as well, underscoring the fungibility (as noted in the preceding section) of all the inmates in the chambers.

Moral Choice in the Face of Shared Precarity

With the recognition that bodies, fates and ontologies are linked, the Saw films also foreground the crisis of moral decision-making. People act out immoral choices when faced with extreme situations
and choose, therefore, only for themselves. Towards the end of *Saw V*, for example, the survivors discover that if they had worked together as a group of five to collect the required pints of blood, they would all have survived. But since every individual was thinking only of him/herself, they ended up killing several of the group so that the two survivors had to ultimately contribute five pints of blood each. Steve Jones proposes that it is their lifelong instincts of selfishness that causes them to abandon the social, and condemn each other (113). Jones notes that much of the moral theme in these films revolves around issues of moral *agency*, and forces us to ponder difficult ethical questions: “Is it ever necessary to take another person’s life? To what extent does self-preservation outweigh one’s obligation to others? What pressure could lead one to knowingly commit immoral acts?” (117-18).

I return here to the question of shared precarity, but this time to a slightly different line of argument. We have to see moral agency as emerging from a sense of shared precarity, of common threat and of being conjoined in conditions of helplessness—a truth that the protagonists of *Saw* discover. A moral commons is produced within the space of the torture room, but one that is nearly impossible to preserve in the *face* of extreme pain. I of course emphasise ‘face’ in the Levinasian sense. Victim 1 has to see the face of Victim 2, bloodied, suffering, screaming and eventually dying. His or her ethical limits are tested when brought face-to-face with the suffering Other as a part of the staged theatricality of *Saw*. Boltanski has argued that “having knowledge of suffering points to an obligation to give assistance” (1999: 20), but this obligation is precisely what the *Saw* films interrogate by pointing to the innate selfishness of humanity, especially when faced with unbearable pain and the face of the suffering other.

The victims not only accept their victimhood but also assume agency over it. *Saw*’s protagonists are indeed given a chance to assert their agency within the frames of their victimhood, provided they make a moral choice, to save themselves and condemn their fellow-victim/sufferer. When the victim calls out in *Saw*: “What do you want?” and “What do you want me to do?” to her/his unseen
captor/tortmentor, the call gestures at the moral choice given to the victim. The escape from the trap involves not just a clever movement (discovering the key) but also the condemning of another victim to injury and death and a fair amount of self-destruction. This entails, in almost all Saw films: the victim undergoing excruciating pain in the process of escaping—inaugurated in Saw I with Lawrence Gordon sawing off his foot to Simone hacking off her left arm in Saw VI. Here moral agency is not only about condemning somebody else to pain and death but also about the paradoxical situation where the victim must possess and exhibit a willingness to self-destruct as a possible (but never definite) route to survival. It is less the condition of shared precarity than one of shared helplessness that brings the victims face to face: the Saw films thrive on the look each victim gives the other.

Spectatorship and the Intersubjective Condition

The CCTV features in over forty torture porn films (Jones 105-06). Saw was one of the first to deploy the camera as central to the acts of torture. To turn the gaze toward Abu Ghraib quickly, it must be noted that the tortures were performed on inmates for the camera, so that the pain and suffering, and the triumphalist gestures of the American torturers, could be documented. In Saw, we participate in the spectacle of torture even as we realise that we see somebody else observing and recording the events. Catherine Zimmer has proposed that the video in Saw serves to indicate Jigsaw’s “organizational methodology to produce and control responses” (2011: 87). Further, the surveillance system is what blurs the distinction between the subject and object of torture (89).

I suggest that the video camera and the CCTV function as instantiations of global mass culture, where the instrument of information gathering and dissemination is intimately connected to mechanisms of torture. The camera organizes not only the torture of Jigsaw’s victims but also serves as a crucial factor in the organization of reception of these tortures: as, for example, when the policeman sees his son’s tortures in Saw II. The camera, in other words, is used to extend the reach of Jigsaw’s games and the
sufferings of his victims. The camera converts personal suffering into spectacle. But there is one more dimension to the role of the camera.

I propose, following the work of Judith Butler (2004, 2009) and others, that the torture film heightens our spectatorial sense of subjectivity by bringing home to us not only shared precarity of the people on screen but also by pointing to subjectivity as *intersubjective*. This sense is generated partly due to the position we take as witnesses viewing through the camera the unfolding of the events. But it is also due to the sufferer’s position from which the film is made (Jones 61). If it is possible to see our bodies as linked in precarity and helplessness, as *Saw* suggests, then it is possible to envisage an empathy for a similarly-suffering body of the Other. I am here making a massive claim, surely, when I propose a reading of torture films—often dismissed as trashy, sadistic and repulsive—as constructing a new model of human recognition of fellow humans and of “social empathy” (Turner 139).

Following Ballengee’s work on the “rhetoric of torture,” it may be suggested that the two cameras are complicit in the production of meaning: that of the victims’ guilt and of their deserving punishment (2009: 1). Just as the audience is an active perpetrator in the deaths of the victims in *Untraceable*, we as witnesses to the events of torture in *Saw* are placed under the moral obligation to recognize the vulnerability of any/all victims. This recognition of human vulnerability is part of *Saw*’s politics of life itself: that any of us might be reduced to ‘bare life’ in particular socially induced conditions of helplessness.

*Saw* forces us to address the linkage between morality and suffering. Jigsaw emphasizes the point throughout that the victims are paying for the errors, crimes or unacceptable behaviour that they have committed in their lives. By making use of extraordinary situations in order to bring home to them the evil of their everyday lives, Jigsaw hopes to make them aware of the preciousness of their lives. He takes the real world—in the diegetic schema of the film—and produces suffering.
Although there is a very clear fictionality to what is being shown, *Saw* does not absolve us, as spectators, from producing our own empathic narrative with the victim in our sights. The question of spectatorship—which I admit, runs the risk of becoming mere voyeurism or worse, a deadening of emotions—is paramount here. Steve Jones proposes that it is the fictionality of the torture sequences, as in horror fiction/film, that “allows audiences to explore moral dilemmas *because* it is fictional and therefore is partially distanced from the immediacy of politico-historical circumstances” (69).

As in the case of Abu Ghraib, where the torturers posed for photographs of themselves and the torturees, in *Saw*, we as spectators of the film become aware of the presence of both perpetrator and victim in the same frame. But the crucial shift from Abu Ghraib’s visuals—where it is impossible to not stare at the grinning faces of Lynndie England and the US army torturers—is that Jigsaw appears as a masked doll/puppet/camera so that our intensity of recognition stays with the victims. Instead of having our attention divided between the face of the perpetrator and the face of the victim as in the case of Abu Ghraib, we give the victims in *Saw* undivided attention. In other words, the films force us to implicate ourselves in the events. “For the viewer, it is not possible to avoid the victims’ pain by focusing attention on the jailors; we are compelled to face the victims and their pain,” writes Möller (2008: 37), an argument that applies equally to us watching *Saw*. Thus the films are intersubjective in this sense as well: we find our subjectivity aligned more with the torturee than with the torturer. It is the expression—representation—of suffering *matter*, produced by specific conditions of helplessness that enables this empathy.

Horrorism, of the *Saw* variety, brings us face-to-face not only with the question of mutually constitutive precarity and vulnerability, but also the structural conditions of helplessness in which humanity might be trapped and is forced to make moral choices in the context of extreme pain. Horrorism of contemporary films like *Saw* foreground the human as (i) the body/matter that can (be made to)
suffer and (ii) rendered helpless due to specific, deliberately created structural conditions like war or incarceration. It is not the vulnerability of human matter that matters, suggests Saw, but the helplessness that is aligned with this precarity. The avoidance of conditions of helplessness is the need of the hour when entire populations are placed in conditions of extreme pain and suffering. How corporeal matter is subject to conditions of stress is the key focus. I further argue that the politics of life and death that we see in these films reinstates materialism and its cognates—affect, senses—as the foundational structures of being human. In a world dominated by simulations and the virtual, the representation of pain forces us to address this specific state of being human, even as we are aware that we are watching representations. To be vulnerable is human, and natural. To be helpless is a social condition, and artificial.

Notes

1 A sample of the work of the 'new materialists' is available in Coole and Frost (2010).
2 The term ‘torture porn’ was first used by David Edelstein in his 2006 New York article, “Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn.”
3 On these films as reflecting real socio-historical conditions or as political allegories, see Jerod Holyfield (2009), Matt Hills (2011) and Catherine Zimmer (2011).
4 Cavarero notes that infants, the old, the disabled are helpless, while all of us are vulnerable.
5 In some cases, when they are willing to sacrifice somebody else in order to save their own, they discover that they have inadvertently triggered the death of the ones they were trying to save. (In Saw III, when Jeff shoots Joh, he activates the shot-gun-studded collar around his wife’s neck, thus causing the death of the woman he was trying to save.)
6 This is akin to systemic torture where part of the torture lies in keeping prisoners in enclosures adjacent to the torture chambers from where they can hear the screams of the tortured, and thus be made aware that they are next in line. Thornton’s novel about the Argentinian disappeared, Imagining Argentina (1991), foregrounds this theme.
7 It is within the frame of the torture film that the spectator might vacillate between the position of the victim or that of the sadist torturer. Steve Jones
however believes that “torture porn narratives are aligned with sufferers’ perspectives much more consistently than they are with torturers” (5).

The film _Untraceable_ exploited this to the fullest limit where with each viewer logging on to the ‘Killwithme’ website, the victim’s dying was accelerated. The point was that despite the knowledge that their viewing was responsible for the death, viewers continued to log on.

The focus on the perpetrators might be the reason why the Colombian painter Botero excised them from his paintings on Abu Ghraib, choosing instead to focus on the victims themselves.

I have elsewhere proposed that the dissemination of Abu Ghraib’s horrific photographs have implicated us in a global witnessing project (Nayar 2014a).

**Works Cited**


