# Misogyny or Commentary? Gendered Violence Outside and Inside Captivity

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Even before its release, *Captivity* (2007) was ostracised by critics, and has largely been overlooked in horror scholarship. The film, however, stands as an example of late-phase torture horror, due to its emergence after the peak of popularity torture horror briefly enjoyed. Furthermore, it is a horror film that – unusually for its time of release – centralised a conflict between the sexes, pre-dating films such as *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) and *Raw* (2017), in their more overt feminist narratives. However, the assumption that *Captivity* is a flagrantly misogynistic film is glib, and this speculation on the film’s content was due partially to its ill-advised advertisement campaign. This perception can also be linked to the film’s alignment to the torture horror subgenre, which is thought to be overtly sexual and misogynistic in nature – an assumption we disagree with.

*Captivity* centres on Jennifer Tree (Elisha Cuthbert) – a model who is stalked, drugged, and abducted, waking in a large underground cell. During her time in confinement, Jennifer is force fed, force-dressed, and psychologically tortured. Jennifer discovers another captive, Gary (Daniel Gilles), who is ultimately revealed to be one of Jennifer’s two captors, the other being Gary’s brother, Ben (Pruitt Taylor Vince). After a violent confrontation, in which Gary proclaims his love for Jennifer, stabs his brother, and shoots two police officers, he returns to Jennifer’s cell where he “rescues” her. Jennifer quickly realises that she is one in a long line of captive females and the film closes with Jennifer killing Gary with a shotgun, before she escapes onto the street outside, finally free, but – as the camera pans up to show the audience – still under the watchful eye of her mediated billboard image.

Beginning by positioning *Captivity* as a continuation of its director, Roland Joffé’s, previous work, this chapter will then move to outline the long and complex relationship that the horror genre has had with gender representations. This section will work to link our examination with previous established work on the Slasher subgenre, of which torture horror is arguably a descendant. Previous work on the male gaze then allows us to explore the recurrent theme of the mediated female form – and idealised female beauty – in *Captivity*, while our positioning of concepts of the “Final Girl” and the male gaze as absolutely central to horror scholarship enables us to demonstrate how Cuthbert’s Jennifer initially functions as a self-aware deconstruction of the final girl, before frustratingly ending the film as an archetypal representation of it.

Joffé, initially a television director,[[1]](#endnote-1) established himself as a significant filmmaker with his first feature, *The Killing Fields* (1984), set amidst Pol Pot’s Cambodian genocide. This British film earned recognition at America’s prestigious industry awards through the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It earned nominations for Best Picture and Best Director, and won awards for Best Cinematography, Best Film Editing, and Best Actor in a Supporting Role. This success was followed by the Anglo-Franco co-production *The Mission* (1986) featuring American mega-star[[2]](#endnote-2) Robert De Niro. This film also went on to earn nominations for Best Director and Best Picture, and winning the award for Best Cinematography.

These successes gave Joffé leverage to launch a career in Hollywood, which was met with lukewarm to negative reception. 1989’s *Shadow Makers* about the Manhattan Project was harshly criticised by Desson Howe (1989, n.p.) of *The Washington Post* who stated, ‘Its effect is more innocuous than lethal, a cloud of un-drama wafted along by director Roland Joffe (sic)’. More notable is Joffé’s ill-received *The Scarlet Letter* (1995) adapted from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 novel. According to Bruce Daniels (1999; 2), ‘The movie lost nearly $50 million and was considered a bomb from its first weekend of domestic sales through its foreign distribution and video cassette release. The public stayed away in droves’. Joffé never attained the success of his first two films prior to making *Captivity*, however there is a distinct commonality amongst his films: an effort to redress the representational balance and tell stories that restore agency to traditionally maligned groups.

This is consistent with Joffé’s first two pictures. *The Killing Fields*, while initially driven by white actor Sam Waterston, centres primarily and for much of the film on the non-professional actor Dr. Haing S. Ngor who had experienced the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime first-hand. Ngor’s character in the film is, not unlike Jennifer in *Captivity*, captured, tortured, and orchestrating his own escape. James Park (1984; 15) writes, ‘*The Killing Fields* is even more sharply distinguished from films about Vietnam made by American directors. It does not share the exclusively American orientation of such films as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, nor does it ever lose the human message in orgies of hardware or distracting allegory’. *The Mission,* while again centring on white characters played by De Niro and Jeremy Irons, fundamentally asks questions about the effect of colonization on indigenous people, and according to Joffé, attempts to answer in a way that gives the indigenous people agency:

Because you hold the moral high ground, and because part of your moral high ground is to say, “Modern civilization is bad; therefore, Indians shouldn’t have it,” doesn’t mean that you can afford to ignore the rights of the Indians. I think that’s intensely paternalistic. What the film is arguing, and I think it argues it very clearly, is *they* will choose. They have the right to choose *and* they have the right to go against what you think is in their particular interest.

(qtd in Dempsey 1987; 7) [emphasis in the original]

This illuminates a preoccupation with the concerns of minority groups, however, a particularly interesting case here, especially as regards representation and its implications for *Captivity*’s approach to gender, is *The Scarlet Letter*. Daniels’ identification of (and outrage at) major historical misrepresentations and changes to Hawthorne’s original novel is not entirely unjustified; the film contains a toothless attempt at reframing the focus on native Indians in a manner which Daniels addresses. However most significant are the changes to the story’s main character. Hester Prynne in the novel is subjected to the evils of a patriarchal society as the story builds towards tragedy. Joffé’s Hester (Demi Moore), however, is bold, headstrong, and overtly seeking her own sexual pleasure. Daniels (1999: 3-4) argues, ‘She is a wisecracking, confrontational feminist who injects gender into nearly every scene. Not only is this absurdly ahistorical, it is also unbelievable as propaganda and offensive to modern feminists’. To underline this, Daniels (1999: 4) writes, ‘Being annoying and chippy to virtually every male or authority figure should not be made the litmus test for women’s advocacy – especially when one has an aerobically-sculpted body that is shown off at every opportunity. This feisty feminist is naked a lot’. This may have been written almost 20 years ago, but it does beg the question of what, exactly, Daniels thinks a feminist *should* do, and why, indeed, he is an expert here.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, while quality is questionable, these adjustments made through adaptation are notable.

Joffé’s decline in success is lamented by Robert Shail (2007; 113) who writes, ‘Whatever reservations might be voiced about the commercial compromises inherent in his first two films, there was enough cinematic flair and liberal good intentions on show to suggest that Joffé should be capable of more work of real substance’. Cinematic flair remains unquestioned, but it is the liberal good intentions that, while consistent, seem largely forgotten particularly where *Captivity* is concerned. Misguided or not, Joffé’s concern with minorities (within the context of the western film industries) does not only extend to indigenous and non-white people, but to women as well as evinced by *The Scarlet Letter*. This concern, and these ‘good intentions’, are present in *Captivity*, a film within a genre that has its own complex relationship with gender representation.

The phrase “torture porn” was coined by David Edelstein (2006), in his article detailing the emergence of the subgenre in *New York* *Magazine*. Edelstein expresses puzzlement at the rise in popularity of more visceral horror, and laments the presence of ‘viciously nihilistic’ films in his local multiplex (rather than where we can assume he believes they belong, in back-alley fleapit cinemas and the sticky back pages of sordid magazines). Although Edelstein does not provide the reader with a definition for what constitutes as a torture porn film, including such disparate films as *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) and *Wolf Creek* (2005) in his assessment, attempts have been made since to define the exact characteristics of the subgenre.

Jeremy Morris (2010: 45) for example, notes that torture porn differs from other horror narratives in its lack of supernatural elements, and suggests that it has instead a preferential focus on the brutality that human beings are willing to inflict on each other. Meanwhile, Luke Thompson (2008) defines the characteristics of the subgenre more simplistically, as being ‘realistic horror about bad people who torture and kill’. Steve Jones’s (2013:15-16) more nuanced definition of torture porn argues that films belonging to the subgenre will generally share two main qualities, ‘(a) they chiefly belong to the horror genre and (b) the narratives are primarily based around protagonists being imprisoned in confined spaces and subjected to physical and/or psychological suffering’.

If we return to Edelstein’s article, we can also discern a curious gendered component to his thoughts on torture porn, such as when he rhetorically asks if watching these films is similar to the way that ‘some women cut themselves (they say) to feel something’. In keeping with this interesting use of charged language, the use of the suffix ‘-porn’ implies a latent sexual angle to these films, as does Edelstein’s use of the word, due to his argument that the spurting blood in these films is equivalent to the ejaculatory “money shot” of pornography. The coining of the term “torture porn” therefore imbues the subgenre with an implied sexually gratifying angle, and this misconception can be seen in later journalistic responses to the subgenre. For example, in his review of *Captivity*, James Berardinelli (2007) warns his readers that in addition to the film being ‘morally repugnant’, that they should ‘make no mistake about it – this is masturbation material for those who enjoy this sort of thing’.

The equation of the horror genre to pornography is not new, and torture porn is one of many horror subgenres to have had this comparison drawn against it. The slasher films of the 1980s for instance were compared to hardcore pornography by Janet Maslin (1982), in an article during which she also criticises any female that is involved in the production or consumption of horror, as they ‘should know better’. Indeed, the apparent inherent misogyny of horror cinema is something of a given in journalism, such as reports by Emine Saner (2007) and Nada Tawfik (2015) show, and as Cochrane (2007) generalises in her article for *The Guardian* newspaper, the horror genre, and torture porn in particular, is a place where ‘sex and extreme violence collide’.

Given this supposedly inescapable misogyny of the horror genre, it comes as no surprise that torture porn, perhaps due to the popularity it enjoyed in the first decade of the new millennium, has been criticised for its preferential focus on the suffering of its female characters (Cochrane, 2007; Griffiths, 2014). The film that is the focus of this chapter, *Captivity*, does indeed feature a young, attractive female as a main character who endures suffering. However, *Captivity* also attempts – not always successfully – to centralise a conflict between the sexes and their attendant characteristics, rather than focus on any sexualised aspects of Jennifer’s torture.

Our preference towards the term “torture horror” (as per Morris) rather than torture porn therefore, is due to our mutual finding that the violence in torture horror is not any more sexual than that of other cinema and is certainly no more misogynistic. To support our argument, we cite a qualitative study carried out by Steve Jones of forty-five “torture porn” films. In his sample group, Jones (2013: 133) found that the ratio of men killed compared to women was 244 to 108 (with an additional 293 incidences of serious injury committed on a male body to 144 incidences of comparable injuries to the female form). More interesting still, is Jones’s findings relating to the aggressor of these incidents, with 206 incidents of males harming females, 155 incidences of females harming males, and a comparatively large 351 incidents of men harming men. In terms of sexual violence, Jones notes that there were, in his sample, 67 acts of sexual violence, with 37 of these incidents happening off-screen. In addition, he notes there were 42 consensual sex acts in these films, with only half of these acts depicted on screen. It is clear that torture horror is inarguably a violent subgenre, and a graphic descendant of slasher films, splatter films, body horror, and even further back, the Grand Guignol. But it would be inaccurate to say that torture horror is a particularly sexually charged subgenre.

Torture Horror, as a distinct subgenre of horror cinema, began to emerge in the early 2000s, with its progenitor arguably being *Saw* (2004),[[4]](#endnote-4) a film which climaxes with a character carrying out a self-amputation of his foot with a hacksaw. The success of this film spawned a franchise which, as of 2017, still sees entries released. Writing before the release of *Jigsaw* (2017), the eighth instalment of the saga, Simon Thompson noted that the *Saw* franchise had grossed $873.3 million worldwide, positioning the saga as one of the most financially successful horror series of all time.

In the wake of *Saw*, films followed such as *Hostel* (2005), *The Devils Rejects* (2005) and *The Ruins* (2008), all featuring extended scenes of bodily suffering and gore. Reaching a peak in popularity around 2007, torture horror films began to be positioned as limit experiences, and the level of saturation the subgenre achieved lead to its aesthetics entering mainstream consciousness, forming the basis of theme park thrill rides and mazes,[[5]](#endnote-5) and with the term “torture porn” being used in self-referential horror narratives such as *Scream 4* (2011).[[6]](#endnote-6) The popularity of the subgenre also resulted in elements of its aesthetics appearing in non-horror films, such as a torture scene in *Casino Royale* (2006), or the brutal opening scenes of *Law Abiding Citizen* (2009). With the growth of the subgenre, there came a body of criticism towards it, with torture horror being described as ‘morally repellent’ (Queenan; 2007: 16), ‘rancid…joyless’ (Hornaday, 2008), ‘cretinous’ (Cashmore, 2010), and ‘perverse’ (Slotek, 2009). These potent and emotive terms suggested torture horror was something to be avoided, lest an un-cautious audience member become sucked into the depraved pit these films seemed to inhabit.

The phrase “Torture Porn” itself has now become a signifier of bad quality, such as in assessments of the season seven premiere of *The Walking Dead* (2010 -), where the violence shown was largely derided as ‘just torture porn’ (Kain, 2016), or in criticism of Darren Aronofsy’s divisive film *Mother!* (2017), which was disparaged as a ‘biblically-infused version of torture porn’ (Smith, 2017). Meanwhile, lists such as ‘Pure Anguish: 10 Torturous Horror Films You Should Suffer Through’ (Watercutter, 2012), suggest that torture horror films are something to be endured rather than enjoyed. More recently still, the release of serial killer drama *Hounds of Love* (2016), and the return of the *Saw* saga after seven years, has been met with numerous articles decrying a return to the popularity of torture porn aesthetics (Lee; 2017: White, 2017a), and although Steve Jones’s monograph, *Torture Porn: Popular Horror After* Saw (2013), has gone some way to legitimising the study of torture horror in film scholarship, it is still a relatively understudied area of film studies.

However, *Captivity* is of interest to us due to not only it’s position at the end of the popularity enjoyed by the first wave of torture horror (if indeed, the release of *Hounds of Love* and *Jigsaw* is heralding a renewal of interest in the subgenre), but as an intriguing forbear to more overly feminist horror texts in its attempt to, often falling frustratingly short, present a feminist torture horror film. An understanding of how *Captivity* accomplishes this can be established through relevant, arguably related, work on the Slasher subgenre.

The concept of the “Final Girl” has been widely disseminated throughout not only scholarship but popular culture as well.[[7]](#endnote-7) Furthermore, the concept of the male gaze, as introduced by Laura Mulvey, and more broadly the gaze itself has been widely discussed as a key theoretical model in the reading of horror texts. Considering this is a publication specifically about horror and feminism/gender, we will not reiterate what the Final Girl is, nor “the gaze” – discussions of which you can find in other chapters - but will instead establish key elements of these concepts, how they link to feminism, and particularly, how that relates to *Captivity*.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In revisiting the idea of the Final Girl, Carol J. Clover, who is credited for having coined the term, feels it necessary to explicate the function of this particular character. Clover (1992/2015; xi) writes, ‘The point is fear and pain – hers and, by proxy, ours’. Clover goes on to say that ‘It is with the Final Girl’s suffering that the film leads us to identify, and not only narratively, but cinematically’ (ibid.). Clover (1992/2015: x) clearly frames the position of the Final Girl not exactly as protagonist, and closely qualifies the idea that she is the “hero”:

“Tortured survivor” might be a better term than “hero”. Or, given the element of last-minute luck (she happens, in her flailing, on a cup of hot coffee or some other such item, which she throws into her assailant’s eyes), “accidental survivor.” Or, as I call her, “victim-hero,” with an emphasis on “victim.”

It is therefore notable that Clover, while finding it unique that slashers create a locus for male viewers to willingly identify with a female character, establishes that the success of that character is less important than the fact that we see her suffer.

This recent overview by Clover is useful to establish not only a clear summary and clarification of this character’s position within any narrative, but also to establish that the author maintains this view. Janet Staiger, however, has undertaken an extensive analysis of a large selection of slasher films, including a range of tables establishing statistical support for her arguments. Through this method of data collection and analysis, Staiger finds problems with Clover’s arguments, including the figure of the Final Girl. Staiger (2015: 222) claims that, while Clover makes much of the fact that the Final Girl is masculine or at least masculine-feminine, ‘They may be quite feminine’. Furthermore, Staiger argues that these feminine Final Girls learn from and are supported by the men around them, as well as women and children. Staiger writes, ‘They learn from those people so that they do take control of their battle with the killer’ (ibid.). So, while suffering, torture, and pain may be the focus, Clover’s assertion that the Final Girl is purely extant for victimisation and does not have the wherewithal to forcefully despatch the killer, or torturer, is contestable. In fact, Staiger (2015: 225) argues that the framing of the “monster” may reverse: ‘Yet, I would point out that in becoming these aggressors, the Final Girl also becomes, non-normal, a monster and, while adult, contradictorily also associated with the abject, the other side of ‘now’, a terrible place of loss and death’.

This becomes problematic from a feminist perspective according to Rebecca Stringer. In writing of revenge/vigilante narratives, particularly *The Brave One* (2007) where the avenger has been framed as victim (admittedly of sexual violence in her case studies), Stringer (2011; 280) states that such narratives ‘distort the political spirit of feminist anti-violence efforts, suggesting that feminists are for the counter-violence of vigilantism when, Valerie Solanis notwithstanding, they generally are not’. This observation is useful here particularly, where *Captivity* does contain elements of sexual violence. Although the response to violence by the Final Girl in this film is one of survival, of making an effort to escape with her life, the viewer is granted the opportunity to indulge in the satisfaction and pleasure of attacking the attackers. However, the violence assumed by the killer(s) as well as the victim(s) is deeply entrenched in the way that the gaze works and functions within these films.

The significance of the gaze is often reduced to the key tenet of the person who controls the gaze has the power. Clover distinguishes between the ‘assaultive’, or masculine, and the ‘reactive’ or feminine gaze. Extending psychoanalytic thinking, Clover (1992/2015: 182) asserts that ‘horror movies are obsessively interested in the thought that the simple act of staring can terrify, maim, or kill its object – that a hard look and a hard penis (chain saw, knife, power drill) amount to one and the same thing’ [parenthesis in the original]. This is further explored (and more widely applied) by Barbara Creed (2005; 200) who, in considering Jack the Ripper as a phallic monster, and by our inference male slashers, writes that films featuring this figure

draw upon the horrified uncanny gaze that was created by the cinema and remained central to the nature of cinematic looking throughout the twentieth century. Deployed in relation to scenarios that traverse moral and bodily boundaries and invoke the threat of the uncanny, this gaze is central to the formation of the horror genre.

Both Clover and Creed acknowledge the male, phallic, assaultive gaze as central to horror broadly, and to slasher killers particularly, with Clover (1992/2015: 184) arguing that this gaze may inhabit the woman, but not comfortably.

The reactive gaze, however, is reserved for the woman, and by extension the viewer, in line with Clover’s complex thinking about the relationship and identification between audience and horror’s ‘victim-heroes’. According to Clover, (1992/2015: 200)

Certainly horror plays repeatedly and overtly on the equation between the plight of the victim and the plight of the audience. Whatever else it may be, the ploy of showing us an about-to-be-attacked woman watching a horror film depicting an about-to-be-attacked woman is also a clear metacinematic declaration of our common spectatorial plight.

In other words, seeing with and as a vulnerable woman foregrounds the viewer’s vulnerability as well – as an object for assault, for attack, for penetration, both in the body through identification, and in the eyes through viewing.

In *Captivity,* work on the gaze crosses over into an understanding of receiving the gaze in visual culture. Laura Wilson (2015; 97) highlights a significant element of the film’s narrative, writing that, as Jennifer is forced to watch videos of other women being tortured with the awareness that this will happen to her, ‘Torture, therefore, becomes a process of the gaze, suggesting a critical stance towards cinematic spectatorship’. It is therefore useful to highlight Laura Mulvey’s (1989/2009; 35) assertion that ‘for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second nature*. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes’ [emphasis in the original]. Gaylyn Studlar confronts and reworks the way Mulvey and others have theorised how the viewer receives the gaze, especially as regards masochism. Studlar (1984/2000; 215) concludes that ‘The spectator must comprehend the images, but the images cannot be controlled. On this level of pleasure, the spectator receives, but no object-related demands are made’. Therefore, the process of torture in the film is closely linked to, via Mulvey, the habit of uncomfortably adopting a trans-sex identification, and via Studlar, being an object for forced reception.

This brief overview is important to establish as Clover’s work on the Final Girl and the gaze in horror are central to the function of *Captivity* as well as engaging with a reading of gender in the film. While Clover’s work has been subjected to some re-evaluation, some of these core ideas are useful in the way that this film is understood, both as a challenge to gender representations in torture horror, as well as a flawed challenge to gender representation. *Captivity*’s approach is complex, and while not wholly successful, useful as a point for discourse to understand the way it challenges long-held tropes of horror, slashers, and torture horror.

Mark Kermode (2007), British film critic and horror cinema aficionado, called *Captivity* a ‘loathsome car crash of a movie’, as well as an example of ‘vulgar opportunism’, puzzling ‘what the hell happened’ to Roland Joffé. While Owen Gleiberman (2007) of *Entertainment Weekly* dismissed Capivity as a ‘*Saw* clone’. Most relevantly for this chapter’s discussion, Joe Leydon (2007) of *Variety* Magazine predicted that the film was ‘destined to be better remembered for its grisly billboard imagery than for its relatively tame torture-porn tropes’, before calling it ‘a thoroughly nasty piece of work’. The billboard advertising campaign for *Captivity* is of central importance to this chapter, as its use of torture porn aesthetics led to a pre-judgement of the film, and an assumption around its content, much the same as how the term “torture porn” implies the content of these films with no reference to their actual themes.

After being screened at Sitges Film Festival in 2006, as a thriller, *Captivity* was subjected to extensive reshoots and editing, with scenes of gore added in, perhaps to capitalise on the popularity of torture horror at the time (Floyd, 2007; Miller, 2009; Scheck, 2007). However, the timing of the film’s release, with torture horror’s popularity waning, resulted in C*aptivity* being cited as the film that essentially marked the end of audience’s thirst for torture horror. We therefore posit it may have been more a matter of advertising misfires and a missed zeitgeist that lead to the film’s lack of success and subsequent ill-repute.

The billboard campaign for *Captivity* features four stages of torture inflicted on a female victim. These stages are abduction, confinement, torture, and termination. The “abduction” poster shows a female face in extreme close-up, with only half her face visible, her eye staring out of the frame, at her audience. A finger, clad in what appears to be a black medical style glove, further obscures her features. The “confinement” poster shows the same female face, but behind a wire fence. In this poster, the female’s tearstained visage looks out imploringly at her audience while her bloodied fingers grip the wire of the fence. In the “torture” poster, the female’s face is again partially obscured, this time by bandages covering the majority of her face and the seemingly blood-filled tubes emerging from her nostrils. Again in this poster, her eyes look pointedly out of the frame at her audience, her mouth agape. The final poster, entitled “termination”, shows what we must assume to be the same female, now deceased, laying with her head lolling off a metal surface. Her mouth and nose are visible, but her eyes, which in the other posters were a central feature, are out of frame.

The public display of these posters was met with controversy, with self-proclaimed feminist Joss Whedon heading a campaign to have the posters removed from public billboards. There was also a mobilisation of public outcry in the form of a telephone complaint campaign to Lionsgate, *Captivity*’s distribution company (Gurwich, 2007; Grossberg, 2007). On his personal website, Whedon (2007) compared the posters’ treatment of women to the honour killing of 17 year old Du’a Khalil Aswad, and goes on to note that the advertisements were ‘part of a cycle of violence and misogyny that takes something away from the people who have to see it’. Whedon went on to criticise the torture horror subgenre as a whole, stating ‘the advent of torture porn and the total dehumanizing not just of women (but they always come first) but of all human beings has made horror a largely unpalatable genre’.[[9]](#endnote-9)

In spite of its reputation, when compared to other torture horror films such as *Hostel*, or any of the *Saw* films, *Captivity* is relatively tame both in its use of graphic gore and the number of torture scenes featured in the film. If we are to take the term “torture” as meaning the act of deliberately inflicting psychological or physical pain on a restrained person, then there are seven scenes in the film which come under the bracket of torture. In keeping with Steve Jones’s findings regarding gendered violence in torture horror, we can confirm that the worst of the film’s violence is from males and inflicted on males. For example, to use the film’s own parlance, in terms of ‘termination’, *Captivity* details the death of one female (off screen) in comparison to five males. And although the film features extended scenes of Jennifer being restrained and an instance of forced feeding – where body parts are put in a blender and the resulting purée is funnelled into her mouth clearly against her wishes – she actually comes to little physical harm during the film. The criticism of the film therefore seems to stem from the assumed brutality and assumed gendered violence of its content based on the billboard campaign images, and its self-aware (and potentially, for the filmmaker’s, mistaken) positioning as a film belonging to the torture horror subgenre, and therefore, a misogynistic horror film. In order to explore how *Captivity* considers gender more fully, a close analysis of the content of *Captivity* demonstrates the complexity of representation within the film.

Cuthbert’s Jennifer functions in narratively and characterologically similar ways to Clover’s – and therefore Staiger’s revised – ‘Final Girl’. Under Joffé’s direction, however, there is a distinctive self-awareness which undercuts many of the inherent problems of misogyny evoked by the archetype. This self-awareness, while providing greater complexity, ultimately begins to re-service the Final Girl trope, but not without some notable restructuring at the outset.

There are two views of Jennifer at the start of the film – as subject and as object, and these views are coded in visually clear ways. As subject, Jennifer herself is part of the mise-en-scène. However, when Jennifer appears as object it is not her, but an image of her which is part of the mise-en-scène. Jennifer, as a subject and narrative agent prior to her capture, is shown “unfiltered” (conceptually and diegetically – an imperfect concept as the film itself is a reproduced image). The first shots of her without a buffer between herself and the camera are extreme close ups of her putting on make-up prior to a photo shoot. The first shot is of her mouth as red lip paint is applied. The lighting and focus captures the details of her skin: pores, small hairs below the mouth, and the strings of tacky paint as the applicator is lifted from her lip. Next, a three-quarter shot of her eye as eyeshadow is brushed on, again, pores and small hairs dot the frame. Finally, her other eye to the camera, with slight wrinkles around the eye as her mascara is applied. While the makeup enhances certain features, the natural contours of the young woman’s face, of a person’s skin, are not covered or removed, as they are in the photographs taken during her shoot, or in the footage filmed by her stalker as he (and the stalker as per Clover’s slasher conventions is absolutely a ‘he’) follows and films her. Jennifer’s face is further shown in close up both during and after the shoot, her natural features, including a small youthful pimple on her chin, again apparent.

Jennifer as object is not herself captured by Joffé’s camera. She is instead shown on the cover of a magazine the stalker glances at, on advertisements on the sides of buses, on the instant digital renderings during the modelling shoot, and through the viewscreen of the stalker’s digital camera. Within these images, she has no agency, she is captured and her image manipulated to fit the needs of those reproducing her image. This she has no control over, and significantly, her natural pores, hairs, and lines are removed for, one assumes, increased “perfection”. Joffé attempts to capture Jennifer (or rather Cuthbert) *as she is*, and juxtaposes this with images of *how others want her*. This appears to be a way of distinguishing between the film’s ethos and the ethos of the world of the film.

There is a recurrent theme in the film of mediated images of beauty. For instance, early in the film when Jennifer first awakens in her “holding room”, she is next to what appears to be a window looking towards a beautiful beach, where a lone palm tree moves in the breeze. This image is quickly revealed to be illusory. Jennifer’s own mediated image is also shown throughout the narrative as an object of beauty. In addition to a large poster bearing her face near her bed, her image can also be seen in the archival interview footage that is used to mock her, through the CCTV camera in her room, or through the glass behind which she first appears to apparent fellow captive Gary, her beauty untouchable to him. There is a line of commentary constant throughout the film, although often clumsily wrought, around the commodification of not only Jennifer’s body, but of the female form more generally by the male gaze. This is shown in a scene where the audience become aware that Gary is in fact one of Jennifer’s captors, as after he has sex with her, he walks out of their confining rooms and speaks to his brother, Ben. The brothers are recording Jennifer’s captivity, with Ben having just watched Gary and Jennifer’s lovemaking. After a brief conversation about their respective roles in Jennifer’s capture, torture, seduction, and implied eventual demise, Gary asks his sibling if he has ever wanted to swap roles, in order to experience having sex with the women they capture. Ben responds that he feels he already does experience this vicariously through his brother, because, as he tells Gary ‘If you’re inside her, I’m inside her’.

It is not only Jennifer’s image that sets the film apart from more generic offerings, but her behaviour. The film refuses to overtly give in to what Kim Newman (1988/2011; 203) refers to as ‘The Idiot Plot’. This is a device which ‘demands that, in order to build up suspense and justify the horror sequences, all the characters act like idiots’ [[10]](#endnote-10) (ibid.). *Captivity* does not succumb to such lazy narration. In fact, Joffé seems to take great pains to avoid making Jennifer appear in any way complicit with either her capture or retention, unlike the films where Newman perceives pleasure is to be derived from an ability to condescendingly de-empathise and ultimately blame the victim for their demise. Furthermore, any choices she makes that lead to her capture and after are not only reasonable, but generous and self-valuing. The interview snippets of Jennifer that she is shown are similarly not presented as being chosen at random, nor is an interview ever left to play in full. Each snippet is implied to have been carefully curated by her captors, to place an emphasis on aspects of Jennifer’s personality as presented in interviews (much is made of her coldness for example). At one point, Jennifer is shown an interview clip where she notes ‘I like the attention’, hinting at her captor’s belief that his attention towards Jennifer is not unwanted, and that Jennifer was “asking for it”. Another interview snippet shows Jennifer stating ‘beauty opens doors, it always has and always will’. The playing of this particular interview snippet is followed by a threat being made toward Jennifer’s beauty [[11]](#endnote-11). In this scene, Jennifer is made to believe that acid will be showered onto her face, after being forced to watch a video where this torture is carried out on an unnamed female. Jennifer faints, and wakes up back in her room, with bandages concealing the presumed damage to her face. This turns out to be a trick, in keeping with the psychological rather than physical torture of Jennifer, when she removes the bandages she finds her beauty untarnished, save for a crude piece of special effects latex makeup – which she peels off.

Leading up to her capture, Joffé establishes empathy with Jennifer. The film shows her on the phone, presumably with an agent, discovering that she expected to get a day off of work (reinforcing that modelling is not her identity, simply a useful source of income), and establishing a tender relationship with ‘the only person that loves her – her pet dog, the latter being used as a form of torture later in the film. Finally, she arrives at a club where she is stalked and kidnapped. Although she arrives alone, she is seen waiting in the club and receives an email which reveals she was expecting to meet someone there who has just cancelled. Her martini is drugged, but not because she leaves it with someone, but because the drug is placed in the drink as the waitress’s back is turned before she brings it to her table. As Jennifer begins to feel strange, she collects her purse and dog – not leaving either behind with somebody else – to go to the restroom; a reasonable response to the situation. Unfortunately the restroom is in an isolated corridor where she is knocked out before waking in her cell. Furthermore, upon realising her predicament, she does everything evident to attempt escape, all of which has unfortunately been identified previous to her captivity. Jennifer is not a passive captive, and her first act of defiance in the film is to throw the beauty products placed on a table in her room on the floor, rejecting the femininity her captor apparently desires from her. She also rejects the tight clothes and high heels her captor wants her to wear, however she does eventually acquiesce to wearing these, due to an extended aural assault from the speakers placed in her room. The climax of the film sees Jennifer finally being able to change out of these restrictive garments, and instead put on a shirt and trousers coded as more masculine, or androgynous, the clothes swamping her small frame and erasing her female silhouette.

As Jennifer realises that Gary is not who he purports to be, he corners her in the kitchen, where she is shown barefoot next to a dead body and cleaning products. Gary asks Jennifer to show him that she belongs to him, and she begins to clean on her hands and knees, before using a cleaning spray, coded here as a marker of female domesticity – given that Jennifer is quite literally “barefoot in the kitchen” – to temporarily disable Gary, and return to the site of her suffering, her basement prison. In this final sequence of the film, Gary taunts Jennifer about her ability to wield and use a gun, with him at one point gaining control of the weapon, straddling Jennifer and running the barrel of the gun over her face and mouth. Jennifer does however finally shoot Gary in the groin, relieving him of his other “weapon”, before shooting and destroying the poster of herself that the audience first saw near the beginning of the film. It is only when, therefore, Jennifer violently destroys and rejects this image of her commodified beauty that she is able to make a serious attempt to escape. Here, the overt commentary of earlier in the film does ultimately devolve into common tropes of the slasher – weapon/phallus conflation which is made explicit through the literal emasculation of Gary, as well as the masculinisation of the feminine in order to defeat the masculine. These tropes sit uncomfortably with the seeming feminist setup of the narrative, but the film’s self-awareness presents some refreshing, if incomplete, progress.

It is clear that from the outset, and through the setup, Joffé makes the effort to create a female character, and Final Girl, worthy of empathy (as though characters need earn it), and also one whose only “crime” is being an attractive and desirable woman. A woman who we later discover is subjected to violence and torture at the hands of men who only value the beauty seen through her objectified image, willing to discard her once their male sexual dominance and superficial desires have been sated. It is clearly the men who are the problem. Not the woman. Not Jennifer.

In conclusion, whether it is agreed that the Torture Horror subgenre is necessarily linked to the Slasher or not, the Final Girl archetype is still alive and well in C*aptivity*. However, this function appears to be initially deconstructed, then ultimately reinforced. This is simultaneously progressive (an awareness of the Final Girl trope allows divergence and commentary upon its problematic elements) and reactionary (ultimately adhering to a traditional depiction of a woman in distress, who succeeds by morphing into a man). Whether or not *Captivity* belongs to the torture horror subgenre, or was placed in that category due to the inserted scenes of gore and the infamous advertising campaign, it is clear that torture horror suffers from the weight of (non) viewers assumptions. That the subgenre is impenetrably misogynistic, and “women-hating”, appears simply untrue for this film, as could be argued about most of the films falling under the torture horror banner. In these texts made firmly within a culture of patriarchy, there is sometimes some critical awareness and cultural challenge on display of said culture in these, or at least this, film.

1. This includes work on *Coronation Street* (ITV 1960-Present), *Crown Court* (ITV 1972-1984), and a BBC adaptation of Elizabethan playwright John Ford’s *‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (1980). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Whose contemporary celebrity status we happily verify via Bananarama’s 1984 chart-topping single ‘Robert De Niro’s Waiting’. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Daniels does not suggest, with or without research, what the best behaviour for a feminist is, or why he is qualified to make such an assertion. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Though Edelstein among others, as stated, has included the earlier *The Passion of the Christ*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In the United Kingdom, Saw – The Ride is one such rollercoaster at Thorpe Park, which opened to the public in 2008, followed by the now seasonal opening of the Saw – Alive Horror Maze in 2010, in addition to this, there is the Snuffhouse experience in Blackburn. In America, torture porn aesthetics have formed the basis of multiple Halloween Horror Nights, such as the Hostel themed Universal Studios maze in 2011, which sought to ‘re-imagine the film’s dehumanizing torture chambers’ (Beard, 2011). A relatively new development are “extreme experiences” like MacKamey Manor in California, a seven hour ordeal before which patrons must sign a waiver form (Carroll and Ryan, 2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In which the character of Trudie states that she “hates all that torture porn shit.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See the 2015 slasher spoof *The Final Girls* (dir. Todd Strauss-Schulson) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Wickham Clayton (2015; 11) establishes torture horror as an aesthetic and narrative trend within the development of the slasher film, and we here use theory surrounding slasher films to explore the elements of this particular film. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. These emotive comments, and the spearheading of the anti-advertising campaign by Whedon is intriguing when viewed in light of the recent controversy regarding Whedon’s own treatment of women, especially with the statements made by his now ex-wife Kai Cole (2017), who notes that ‘he used his relationship with me as a shield… so no one would question his relationships with other women or scrutinize his writing *as anything other than feminist’* [emphasis added]. This later controversy brings a sliver of contradiction to Whedon’s crusade against this campaign and his self-proclaimed ‘woke bae’ (White, 2017b) status. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Newman’s (1988/2011; 203) preferred example is *Friday the 13th* (1980), which ‘is full of people wandering off into the darkness on the lookout for a nice, secluded spot where the killer can polish them off.’. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. There is something of a trope of informed attractiveness at play here. Elisha Cuthbert has frequently been ranked highly in annual “hottest women” lists for men’s magazines such as FHM and Maxim.

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