

*Cinema, Pain and Pleasure:
Consent and the Controlled Body*
by Steven Allen

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Steven Allen's *Cinema, Pain and Pleasure: Consent and the Controlled Body* (2013) examines Richard Dyer's concept of radical pleasure taken to its most extreme. The basis of Allen's book is formed by his 2003 doctoral thesis, *A Pleasure in Pain*, which he completed under Dyer's supervision at the University of Warwick's Department of Film and Television Studies. In his study Allen, a Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Winchester, looks at various practices which might be considered less socially acceptable (taboo), illegal, immoral or, in some cases, both. The central theme that unites the work is the way in which control over the body is represented on screen.

The book is broken up into five distinct sections, each chapter analysing the cinematic presentation of a different taboo subject. These taboos range from the differing ways, both positive and negative, that BDSM (Bondage and discipline, Dominance and submission, and Sadomasochism) has been portrayed in cinema to the raft of torture-porn films that emerged from Hollywood in the first decade of the 21st century. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1979) is used extensively in the chapter concerning BDSM, and is referenced in four of the book's six chapters, so perhaps comes closest to serving as a foundation upon which Allen constructs his theory. Rather than propose a new theory with which to analyse cinema, however, Allen's work encourages the reader to reconsider the stereotypical ways in which traditionally taboo topics — bondage, domination and submission, body modification, fetishization of the disabled, masochism — are considered.

Allen is to be praised for the scope of his study. Analysing an array of films ranging from obscure 1930s works such as *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) to kitchen sink dramas such as *This Sporting Life* (1963) to the *Saw* franchise of the 21st century,

the study is thorough and well-researched. By relating culturally accepted forms of body control (tattooing and piercing, for example) with forms of control that are either culturally taboo, and therefore misunderstood (as in the case of BDSM play), or illegal and immoral (the ‘artistic serial killers’ of chapter 4), Allen re-situates the reader’s expectations and encourages a more nuanced view of control of the body.

Allen begins his study with a brief history of the central concepts of his work — sadism, masochism, and the controlled body itself — followed by a broad overview of previous scholarship on both BDSM and the more general concept of the controlled body. While acknowledging their importance in the field, Allen problematizes figures such as Krafft-Ebing, Freud, and, more contemporarily, Laura Mulvey for their ‘gendering’ of sadomasochism. Allen explains that the refusal of Krafft-Ebing and others to accept the possibility of female sadism combined with the active male-passive female dynamic described by Mulvey in her work have resulted in a general understanding of sadomasochism that is not representative of the subculture. Additionally, Allen states what might function as the primary thesis for the entire work —

Marking the flesh, confronting trauma, enduring restraint and accepting passivity are all components of the controlled body, and these pleasurable pains have the potential to be represented in the manner they are felt and interpreted by participants in comparable social acts. Commonly though, these practices are relegated to cinematic shorthand for deviancy... (p.25)

The chapter entitled ‘BDSM at the Movies’, concerning representations of BDSM in both documentary and feature film, breaks down the negative association feature films usually draw with the subculture. Allen contends that many of the wrongly-held opinions concerning BDSM ‘[originate] from false assumptions pioneered in psychoanalytic studies’ (p.29). The author spends much of the chapter comparing the reality of BDSM, as found in the documentary *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, with the glamorised, falsified portrayal of the subculture in such films as *Secretary* and, especially *8mm*. Allen finds this latter film particularly problematic in that its portrayal of BDSM (and non-traditional sexual subcultures generally) conforms to virtually every negative stereotype that Allen is attempting to breakdown.

The chapters 'Playing with Control' and 'Choosing Torture Instead of Submission' are also particularly noteworthy. Organised sequentially, 'Playing with Control' analyses the glorification of self-punishment (masochism) found in several films produced in the last decade of the 20th century, with particular attention paid to David Fincher's films *The Game* and *Fight Club*. The following chapter, 'Choosing Torture', functions as a denouement of sorts, where Allen, using the *Saw* franchise, combines all of the different themes analysed in the work. In this chapter Allen draws a connection between the surge in popularity of 'torture porn' films and the loss of a sense of security and stability felt in the United States after the events of 9/11.

Although the study is quite strong throughout, a criticism might arise from the chapter focussing on 'artistic serial killers'. Allen himself acknowledges that there is 'no unifying genre' (p.95) amongst the different chapters. There is, nevertheless, a general motif found throughout the work — that of control of the living body, especially where that control intersects with sexual taboo. This motif is generally absent in chapter 4, however, which focuses instead on control of the dead (murdered) body and the relatively distant relationship that exists between the serial killer and the authority figure trying to catch him. As a result, the chapter feels somewhat out of place in a study which, generally, focuses on highly intimate, personal interactions.

Ultimately, however, this criticism is a minor one, and should not distract from the fact that Allen's book is both an engaging and, perhaps more importantly, necessary analysis. It is engaging because the book is well written and casts new light on popular and noteworthy films, and necessary because throughout the work Allen questions what is and is not considered acceptable practice in Western society broadly. In doing so, he encourages the reader to think differently not only about the role the body plays in contemporary cinema and the myriad ways in which the body can be controlled, but also about the arbitrary nature of what society deems acceptable and what it deems taboo.