

Economy of Pain

By Crispin Sartwell

Maybe you've heard about the Crash Café. The restaurant, planned for the south side of the harbor in Baltimore, will be hard to miss, what with the tail of an airplane sticking out of the front wall. Inside, giant-screen televisions will show satisfied patrons an endless video loop of building implosions and train wrecks.

Crash Café's developer, Patrick Turner, intends the Baltimore restaurant to be the first of a national chain. The idea has stirred controversy, and there's no doubt that Turner's taste is atrocious. But overall it is a little too late in America to worry about taste. All our media are dedicated to one thing: turning people's suffering into money. In America, pain is a commodity.

There are two kinds of movies: movies for men and movies for women. Movies for men feature a nonstop barrage of explosions, beatings, and fire fights, until in the end justice is re-established in a gorgeous orgy of violence. Movies for women describe terrible romantic calamities that would leave

most of us mumbling randomly in a rubber room. In both cases, everything comes out alright in the end, but whether it's Payback or My Best Friend's Wedding, the suffering makes the solution possible, and it's the suffering that makes us lay our money down.

Television, likewise, constitutes an endless spectacle of affliction. The doctor shows welcome enthusiastic viewers with fearsome diseases and slow torturous deaths; the cop shows are built around gritty characters who love nothing more than a good pistol-whipping. The average character in a soap opera goes through more hell in a month than most of us experience in a lifetime.

Television news is a running sore of pestilence, with saturation coverage of murders and natural disasters. You can wallow for years in, say, the death of JonBenet Ramsey. The Weather Channel provides upclose and personal coverage of tornadoes and hurricanes. Everyone involved in the impeachment has been suffering on television for a year. And the suffering of the audience has reached a kind of crescendo as Linda Tripp

meets Larry King.

Let's not even bother to talk about Jerry Springer, Cops, Vicious Animal Attacks, or the NFL. Seen a Roadrunner cartoon lately? Nickelodeon and the Cartoon Network are dedicated to training our children in the delectation of pain, so they can take their place as consumers and content providers in the marketplace of mindless destruction. America's Funniest Home Videos has a magic formula: folks get kicked in the crotch or take terrible falls or are

fooled into thinking they've won the lottery. Humiliation is the thing we find most deeply comic.

Or consider the music industry. The voices of Bono Vox and Eddie Vedder and that dude from the Goo Goo Dolls come apparently from an infinitely deep well of wretchedness; these guys bellow through their ditties about suicide

like the damned burning in eternal hellfire. Rap, the blues, metal, punk, opera: all of it is basically about pain, both the pain it describes and the pain it inflicts. Marilyn Manson mutilates himself on stage, which in the economy of suffering is a guaranteed road to stardom. The guys in Marilyn's band generate their names by combining starlets with serial killers: Madonna Wayne Gacy, Daisy Berkowitz,

Sara Lee Lucas. A starlet who really was a serial killer would be worth more than the annual GDP of the EU.

Now you might think that all this shows how sick we've become recently. But when you get right down to it the entire Western tradition is dedicated to torment. Think about Jesus nailed to a cross, lacerated and wearing a crown of thorns. Contemplate Oedipus, Hamlet, Paradise Lost, Les Miserables, Madame Bovary. Think seriously for a moment about socrates, Augustine, Beethoven, Tolstoy, Picasso.

The severe pain of others gives us an endorphin rush, a little burst of adrenalin. And watching people suffer is morally edifying, because the pain is happening to people who deserve it: that is, to people other than ourselves.

We might as well admit that the affliction of others is delectable. We are epicures of agony; all of us have dedicated much of our lives to perfecting our consumption of pain. Suffering is valuable; extreme suffering is extremely valuable. That's why the Crash Café makes sense: watching people get mangled in a fiery cataclysm is good; but watching people get mangled in a fiery cataclysm while you chow down on Buffalo wings is really good. See you there.

Ten Good Reasons

Most people have a long list of complaints about everyone and everything around here, and so to be fair, this is what some students said they liked about Penn State Harrisburg:

1. "The couches."
2. "Level 1 F-words come to mind: like fun, frustrating, etc."
3. The clubs and people."
4. Couldn't imagine a better place to be for thirty hours a week (unpaid)."
5. Learning that having class on the third floor is not a good idea if you plan on having dinner downstairs in the Lion's Den right before. Take the elevator."
6. One word: Tuna-wraps."
7. Convenient, accessible for night classes, small classes."
8. If you attend stuff in the Gallery Lounge, there's always free snacks offered."
9. I loved the sound of planes buzzing the place."

AND THE NUMBER ONE REASON TO BE GLAD YOU ATTEND PSH:

10. "The 'hot' professors."

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