

Nick Flynn's *The Ticking Is The Bomb*: An Ocean of Shared Suffering

All documentarians try to portray a certain event or issue in a way that connects and relates to the audience, thus broadening the specific to reach a universal understanding. However, the poetic, reflexive, and participatory modes of documentary utilize pathos in a more effective way than the observational and expository modes. Nick Flynn's *The Ticking Is The Bomb* depicts the Abu Ghraib torture scandal in a holistic way through small and seemingly simple images. Errol Morris' documentary *Standard Operating Procedure* also investigates the Abu Ghraib scandal, but it does so in an observational, one-sided way that weakens the film's ability to transcend cultures and generations. A documentary needs to have a balance between personal details and worldly examples so that the subject matter appears to be well-developed by the writer. In conclusion, my own version of a documentary about torture would borrow Flynn's ability to use figurative language and Morris' revealing use of narrative voice so that torture elicits a multitude of feelings, leaving the audience thinking about the past, and present, and future.

Every human being experiences different levels of suffering and pain at some point in their life. Whether it be the oppression of a specific group of people or the internal suffering of a family or individual, people search for ways to ease the mind through public reassurance and shared stories. Although intangible at times, empathy and a shared sense of suffering are best described through Nick Flynn's striking imagery. Flynn's memoir *The Ticking Is The Bomb* and Morris' documentary *Standard Operating Procedure* portray universal suffering through different stylistic techniques. Flynn and Morris invite the audience to reflect upon their own experiences and think about the relationships between torture and the individual. However,

Flynn's repetitive imagery, such as the motif of water, and use of the poetic and reflexive modes appeal to a broader spectrum of torture while Morris' film focuses solely on torture in Abu Ghraib. In a performative way, video footage from *Standard Operating Procedure* creates a one-dimensional correlation between torture and wartime. Even though Morris' editing and sequence skills move the central theme of torture towards greater truths, Flynn's dynamic interpretation of suffering and critique of Morris in *The Ticking Is The Bomb* solidifies the one-way road Morris travels.

The Ticking Is The Bomb is a poetic memoir where the theme of torture is like a stone thrown into an ocean and the ripples created are Flynn's metaphorical fragments that spread throughout the book. Flynn engages with the audience through participatory storytelling and abrupt parabasis or wandering digression (Lanham 108). Despite the contrast between parataxis and hypotaxis sentence structures, Flynn's chapters purposefully repeat specific themes, images, and allegories to parallel the human mind's obsessive thought process. In this way, the whole memoir explores Flynn's own identity while projecting a reflexive mood onto the reader through rhetorically profound stories and epimone, the "frequent repetition of a phrase or question" (Lanham 68). The topic of torture, specifically of Abu Ghraib, is more easily digested when presented in Flynn's poetic fragments. Patterns of images and trance-like narrations create what Flynn most desires: a "few crumbs to lead me back" (Flynn 51). Even though he blurs reality, Flynn grounds us by providing metaphors and allegories that guide the audience to their own interpretations. *The Ticking is the Bomb* incorporates multiple cultural and historical examples that display humanity's repetitive use of torture. Ultimately, the audience is led through Flynn's

multilayered trial and gains a deeper understanding of torture through the balance between symbols and concrete evidence.

As Flynn guides the reader through numerous stories, his use of second-person narration creates a participatory and reflexive dialogue between reader and writer. *The Ticking Is The Bomb* directly addresses humanity, thus making the topic of torture a self-expository story rather than a one-sided, investigative documentary. While Morris' documentary is structured by straightforward interviews with American soldiers, I argue that, like Flynn, there is a relationship between the subject matter and the audience. However, I think Morris' use of face-on videography could be improved if he adopted Flynn's ability to deviate from the ordinary and explore the opposition's side. With regards to torture, Morris takes an observational standpoint that allows his film to be dictated by characters like Lynndie and Sabrina. By staying silent throughout the film, Morris' central argument is lost to the individual soldiers' stories and recollections of torture. On the other hand, Flynn dives into the unknown and critiques both himself and the reader in a reflexive way. In Flynn's chapter "dear reader (oblivion)," the use of second-person narration places the reader directly into Flynn's mysterious and intimate order of events. He writes that "a glass of wine, a tiny pill, the flame to the pipe, whatever we did, however we did it, it merely eased us into the night, into our private oblivion, our quiet desperation" (Flynn 153-154). By including alternate examples of torture, like addiction, Flynn widens the perspective of torture and creates a contrast between internal torture and the torture at Abu Ghraib. In the end, Flynn, the soldiers at Abu Ghraib, and the rest of the world all search in vain for ways to cope with suffering and ease the pain of the world.

One way that Flynn disrupts the stigma of torture is through the simple image of water that flows throughout the entirety of *The Ticking Is The Bomb*. The motif of water symbolizes the connection between Flynn's personal state and the topic of torture; he writes that "my twenties, you could say, were water, you could say I was, in a way, more ocean than earth" (Flynn 192). Water poetically alludes to Flynn's lost and ungrounded state as he struggles with addiction and deals with his mother's suicide. Moreover, water's universal connotations, such as evoking feelings of renewal, anxiety (drowning), movement, and purity, all strengthen Flynn's rhetorical dialogue about torture, suffering, addiction, family, and identity. Flynn's imagistic style uses the rhetorical term *Energia*, which Lanham describes as possessing "a sense of visual vividness" (Lanham 65). Even though Abu Ghraib occurred years and miles away from most Americans, Flynn begins his chapter "Istanbul redux" by writing that "this is where we pour the words into a jar, as if they were water. As if a jar of water was the same as a river. This is where we try to make a coherent narrative out of chaos" (Flynn 226). Watery words metaphorically connect humanity to Flynn's experience in Istanbul, in which Flynn encounters the participatory mode by interviewing Iraqi soldiers where "the encounter between one who wields a movie camera and one who does not" is explored (Nichols 140). His journey to Istanbul relates the torture at Abu Ghraib to Flynn's reflexive narrative while alluding to the reader's own journey, whatever it may be. Through the imagery of water and constant pressure to "swim, until the world becomes water," humanity is unified through the experience of suffering and the desire to survive (Flynn 92).

Whereas Flynn immerses us into the water, Morris uses auditory imagery and ironic narration that contrasts with the seriousness of torture in *Standard Operating Procedure*. The

military agents from Abu Ghraib have evocative and compelling stories; the performative mode of documentary gives “added emphasis to the subjective qualities of experience and memory” (Nichols 150). Because this is also an observational documentary and we only hear from American soldiers, there is a bias towards believing their stories over those of the Iraqi prisoners. I believe that Morris purposefully focuses on Sabrina’s voice because her tone is emotional yet her actions seem contradictory to her character. For example, she shows remorse in the letters she writes while in Abu Ghraib, but then she is seen smiling and laughing next to dead bodies and tortured prisoners. This conflicting use of ethos blurs the truth of the crime and makes it difficult to distinguish the tortured from the torturers. Throughout the documentary, Sabrina describes that she “had to laugh” at some of the things done to Iraqi prisoners (Morris). The combination of laughter and torture could be analyzed in a highly performative way where the situation, place, and person must all be considered. This horribly ironic combination trivializes torture and seeks to lessen the horror; one is left to wonder what made Sabrina laugh? Whether it was a coping mechanism or a nervous tick, the odd connection between laughter and tragedy is repeated by the military agents. *Standard Operating Procedure* presents numerous poetic symbols, such as laughter, a hooded prisoner on a box, and sunrises, that could allude to a greater story of torture, but in the end, Morris does not unpack these images. Instead, Flynn addresses how the human condition changes when put in a difficult situation through his analysis of Morris in the chapters “standard operating procedure,” “a story that could be true,” and “don’t be cruel.” Flynn’s analysis of Morris’ stylistic choices shows that he leaves things unresolved and in the hands of the perpetrators; in the end, the sun still sets and rises and torture continues to go on.

Some may argue that Flynn's argument is lost amongst all of the imagery and that his personal stories minimize the degree of torture experienced by the Iraqi prisoners. Critiques of the narrative digression style would prefer that Flynn sets up his argument in a clear, expository frame; however, the strength of Flynn's argument comes from his dynamic examples and broad narration. Flynn's digressions are not examples of apophasis, which is used to avoid an answer or cause distractions, but rather his digressions are in themselves important fragments that lead the reader closer to the larger picture. His argument that Morris "risks being known as the man who views Abu Ghraib as primarily a problem with getting the captions right, rather than a moral catastrophe" is supported by numerous examples of Americans dealing with the topic of torture. He questions Morris' choices through the argumentative technique of alloiosis, or "breaking down a subject into alternatives" (Lanham 191). Flynn strengthens his own argument by providing alternative ways that he would have conducted *Standard Operating Procedure*, whereas Morris fails to investigate both sides of the stories due to his lack of questioning of American torture techniques. One of Flynn's strongest digressions is in his chapter "don't be cruel," in which he imagines a metaphorically drugged America blindly following every absurd move of the President. Flynn then presents President Bush making a crude joke about "trying to put a leash on them [his daughters]" that evokes laughter (Flynn 244). Spoken only a few months after the Abu Ghraib photos revealed a prisoner wearing a leash, laughter and torture reappear and ultimately show how America puts on a comic routine when dealing with torture; we merely say: "*this is who we've always been*" (Flynn 246).

Through suffering, humanity finds common ground; this shared state of being is the core of relationships that allows for an empathetic world. Documentaries like Flynn's *The Ticking Is*

The Bomb provides the audience with moments of both jarring shock and comforting familiarity through his existentially provoking images. Flynn views human imperfection as a life force that causes relationships to transform; for he writes that “as our bodies floated over each other like doomed astronauts, those few words---*I think I’m a drunk*---connected us like tubes of oxygen” (Flynn 151). Flynn’s argument inhabits the transformative nature of Proetus where, like fear, torture morphs into different shapes depending on who the reader is. In *Standard Operating Procedure*, Morris only scraps the surface of torture by viewing the isolated case at Abu Ghraib. However, Morris’ reserved voice and performative interviews allow Flynn to expand upon the information given by the military agents and thus create a more persuasive argument that will be as relevant ten years from now as it is today.

Works Cited

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