Introduction

Minding Manners

> I dare to assert that torture is the most horrible event a human being can retain within himself.
>
> —Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*

> Etiquette is knowing how to yawn with your mouth closed.
>
> —Noted toastmaster, quoted in Rees

"Manners are of more importance than laws," wrote Edmund Burke at the turn of the eighteenth century, "upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend." While the law "touches us but here and there, and now and then," continued Burke, "manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in. [They] give their whole form and colour to our lives, [yet] according to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them" (qtd. in Hazlitt, n.p.). Manners, wrote C. Dallett Hemphill, serve three social functions. First, they have a regulatory function as a system of social control. Second, they

have a creative function in helping people assume their social roles. And third, they have a communicative function in telling us about our place in the social order. She offers the example of an inferior bowing to their superior: the bow initially just acknowledges the existence of a social hierarchy determining social position. But it also helps the inferior to feel deferential before their superior and enables them to express that deference. "The sociological argument," wrote Hemphill,

> is that although the 'big rules' of social life—our systems of law, morality, and religion—are necessary if humans are to live in groups, the 'little rules' of manners are necessary to enact the larger social order in every encounter. Manners also constitute a mediating level of culture between a society's abstract 'ideals' and the varied behaviors of its individual members. These meaning-laden acts and gestures are the signal flags of an encounter, by which we communicate, often nonverbally, who we are and what we expect of each other. (4)

Historically, etiquette was the codification of deference, guidance on grace. Etiquette guides were written for those not born to lofty social positions to teach them the basic rules of high society in a time (the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) of unprecedented social mobility.

Of course, etiquette has been attacked for doing quite the opposite. "Etiquette is the barrier," began Charles William Day's 1842 book,

> which society draws around itself as a protection against offences the '*law*' cannot touch,—it is the shield against the intrusion of the impertinent, the improper, and the vulgar,—a guard against those obtuse persons who, having neither talent nor delicacy, would be continually thrusting themselves onto the society of men to whom their presence might (from the difference of feeling and habit) be offensive, and even insupportable. (9)

If for vulgar one substitutes the word "common" (both share a root), this statement confirms suspicions that etiquette was about the social exclusion of the lower classes. While good manners might be regarded (by most) as fundamental to keeping good relations and living in

a harmonious society, we moderns tend to regard "etiquette" with suspicion: as antiquated, arcane, and arbitrary; rules designed by the upper classes to frustrate and intimidate—indeed "torture" the lower social classes who were pressing on their flanks. "We might quibble over elbows on the table," writes Pen Vogler, "but nobody thinks it acceptable to blow their nose on the tablecloth," so can't we just dispense with guidelines written for the uncivilized times of a bygone era? Don't we now live in a world in which the inscrutable rules of social form have become moot? ("Chivalry is not only dead, it's decomposing," declares John [Rudy Vallee] to Gerry [Claudette Colbert] in *The Palm Beach Story* [1942].)

Cinema is compulsively drawn to etiquette as a theme. It often details the minutiae of social behavior and its impact on human drama, or else dramatizes rules and violations for our pleasure. Apropos of the novels of Henry James, Slavoj Žižek writes that "tragedies occur and whole lives are ruined during what appears to be a polite dinner-table conversation" (*Plague* 197). In film, dining etiquette can be unpredictable. It can be destroyed by the smallest of faux pas—a maid accidentally using her master's familiar name, thus betraying that they are having an affair (*Gosford Park*)—or upheld even after the most devastating exposure—an adult son being quietly ignored after using a speech to publicly accuse his father of having molested him as a child (*Festen*). Sometimes, we fall in love with the blundering parvenu, either because she is adorably ingenuous (Anne Hathaway in *The Princess Diaries*) or because her naivete shows up the boorishness of more savvy dinner companions (Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*). At other times, tabular desecration puts our hero beyond the pale—slicing the frontal lobe from the skull of one's guest, sautéing it, then feeding it to him (*Hannibal*). In film, rudeness can be performed to keep safe one's dinner guests from a worse threat—as when Bruce Wayne insults his guests to drive them away before a terrorist attack (*Batman Begins*)—while at other times, violence ends what we might call "hostile etiquette"—as when Al Pacino's character chokes his brother-in-law for insulting him during an excruciating Thanksgiving dinner (*Scent of a Woman*). These are just some of the examples in cinema where table manners become torturous etiquettes.

The "purpose of etiquette," then, is far from singular. "Etiquette is laughably old-fashioned and hidebound," writes Vogler, and belongs not to a modern society "but to seventeenth-century France." Today,

we all (broadly) subscribe to the rules of the "social contract." We simply call these rules "manners." This book insists, however, that we are as obsessed by etiquette as our ancestors were. We wring our hands at formal occasions when called to "stand on ceremony." We speak of "biting" and "holding" our tongues in polite society. We "put ourselves out" and "bend over backwards" for others, and we "agonize" over local mores (we blush when we "slip up," and are "mortified" when we slip up badly). We might not regard our behavior as "ceremonial," but at formal occasions we all try to do the "done thing," just as those who don't are quickly censured (if they are lucky), or disinvited in the future (if not). We might not call it "etiquette," but the rules governing behavior run through our lives. "That which we call a rose, / By any other name would smell as sweet" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.43–44).

Speaking of roses: "The best ingredients for likeableness," wrote the doyenne of decorum, Emily Post, "are a happy expression of countenance, an unaffected manner, and a sympathetic attitude. If she is so fortunate as to possess these attributes her path will have roses enough. But a young woman with an affected pose and bad or conceited manners, will find plenty of thorns" (68). This book asks whether one can ever have the social equivalent of "roses" without "thorns." It asks to what extent one's path in society can be smoothed by manners, and whether some are condemned to thorns simply on account of who they are. Without the correct breeding, must one suffer social torture?

At its best, etiquette is the recognition of another person's humanity. It says, "I see you." At its worst, it is the opposite: "imagine a boot," wrote George Orwell in his dystopic novel *1984* (1949), "stamping on a human face—forever."

Speaking of Torture . . .

I use the word "torture" as a prism through with to think about the degrees of suffering associated with etiquette. One can torture out of punishment or revenge, to extract information or a confession, or for sheer sadistic cruelty. But we also speak colloquially about being "tortured" when in pain. It might be physical pain ("a toothache which tortures"), emotional pain ("grief which tortures"), or psychological

pain ("a secret torture"). Torture also means to twist or distort, to put into an unnatural position (torture, from *tortūra*, meaning "to twist"), hence to pervert. My two epigraphs were deliberately intended to provoke. While writing this book I have been confronted by more than one raised eyebrow at the suggestion there is any confluence between etiquette and torture. What could possibly bring the most barbaric and uncivilized abuse of human beings into contact with the system most heavily associated with civility and decorum? Doesn't its very premise pervert both terms? The wires of torture and etiquette nonetheless touch in compelling ways.

First, there is the sense that etiquette involves at least a modicum of discomfort ("Good manners," wrote Emerson, "are made up of petty sacrifices"). This is captured by the former butler Charles MacPherson, who describes etiquette with the analogy of the swan: "She's a vision of poise and beauty as she glides effortlessly across the water's surface. But, in fact, what we don't see when we admire her are her powerful webbed feet pedalling furiously underneath her" (3). Some must pedal harder and more furiously than others to maintain the same image of poise and beauty; some fail to maintain the image (regardless of their efforts); others simply drown. We often say that "manners cost nothing" and remind children to "mind their P's and Q's" (pleases and thank-yous). But equally we are "at pains" to ensure a gracious host doesn't "put herself out" or "go to too much trouble." And if they do, we tell them they "shouldn't have" (seeing them in discomfort on account of our comfort makes us, well, uncomfortable). There are degrees of discomfort in etiquette, too. It requires almost no effort to hold a door open for someone rather than let it crash into them. Somewhat more effort is required to feign interest at a long and tedious speech, however, and considerably more to resist punching an oafish dinner guest who is ruining your long-planned dinner party. The road to good grace is peppered with failings, embarrassments, and, if we cannot sufficiently contain our true feelings, disgrace.

Second, there is a preponderance in the language of etiquette to speak of it in terms of torture. I've already mentioned "biting one's tongue" and "standing on ceremony," but we also "hold a door" and "wait in line." We tell children using bad language to "wash their mouths," and when we get a "slap on the wrist" for a misdemeanor, it means to get off lightly. But historically, beating someone on the wrists or washing a child's mouth with soap for blaspheming and

using profanity were not exaggerations or mere figures of speech. That neither practice still occurs has not stopped the currency of the expressions. "Spare the rod," so the saying went, "ruin the child." In Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* (2009), a pastor (Burghart Klaussner) reprimands his children (Maria-Victoria Dragus and Leonard Proxauf) for being late to supper and tells them they will be thrashed the following evening as punishment. "I must beat you," he tells them rather solemnly, "and the lashes will cause us [he and their mother] more pain than you." This is a classic variation on the way torturers account for the unjustifiable cognitive dissonance arising from their cruelty. By instrumentalizing the act ("you give me no choice"), they disavow themselves as agents in the torture. As a result, the blame for the cruelty is placed on the "choice" (refusing to talk, or be on time for dinner, etc.) made by the victim, who bears a responsibility both for her original transgression, as well as for her torturer's punishing corrective. She makes her torturer (whence, the pastor's final, perverse, logic that beating his children will hurt him more than them).[1] Since corporal punishment is used less often today, one is more likely to hear beleaguered parents warned by older generations of making a "rod for their own back" by letting bad behavior go unpunished. In any case, the language of manners is shaped by violent hyperbole, and is more violent still in the etiquette guides themselves. Post describes the ballroom as a "torture chamber" for young woman (268), Margaret Visser describes eating dinner as "violence" (*Rituals* 3), and Judith Martin ("Miss Manners") describes her book as a "guide to excruciatingly correct behavior." The language of torture, violence, and the crucifixion, right at the heart of the manuals on manners.

Third, the torturer has his "ways to make men talk" (as the famous line from *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* puts it [1935]). Torturers use coercion; in addition to physical pain, they demean, embarrass, and humiliate. In J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), a torturer describes his method: "First I get lies, you see—this is what happens—first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth. Pain is truth, all else is subject to doubt" (5). But quite often that "pressure" is intensified by etiquette. Take the moment in *Marathon Man* when, after drilling holes in Dustin Hoffman's character's teeth to interrogate him on the "safety" of some undisclosed "it," Laurence Olivier's torturer tenderly applies clove oil and apologizes. Even before

he began the malicious dentistry, Olivier meticulously washed his hands for several seconds—an adherence to hygiene seemingly at odds with his desire to inflict pain. In *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), the villain played by Sidney Greenstreet insists on formal manners while threatening Humphrey Bogart's private eye with torture: "Well, sir," Greenstreet says (quite charmingly), "there are other means of persuasion besides killing and threatening to kill." Why not say "torture" instead of the euphemistic "persuasion"? Why use the polite and respectful "sir?" When screen villains sigh and warn that their "patience is wearing thin," we might wonder why there is any patience in the first place? Here we have a threat system ("Give to me, or I'll *do* you") but with an insertion of gentility ("Give to me, if you'd be so kind, or . . ."). Such mannered rituals in torture were so cliched by 1964 that Sean Connery's James Bond knew he was in trouble during an interrogation in *Goldfinger*. Strapped to a solid gold gurney through which a laser was slowly burning a hole toward his groin, he asked his captor (Gert Fröbe) if he expected him to "talk." "No, Mr. Bond," came the chillingly cheery reply, "I expect you to die!"

Fourth, torture is entertaining. As Michel Foucault (in *Discipline and Punish*) and Friedrich Nietzsche (in *Genealogy of Morality*) pointed out, the spectacle of public torture and execution was not only about seeing "justice done," but finding a means to satisfy our repressed instincts to see our fellows in pain. This also accounts for the interest in Sade's libertine novel *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, and the enduring fascination with Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*—both of which depict highly graphic and detailed accounts of rapturous torture. In high society, we might not see torture in the sense of fingernails being pulled (*Syriana*), or unnecessary dentistry being performed (*Marathon Man*), or the beating of a man's genitalia (*Casino Royale*), but we do find humiliation (*Emma*), shaming (*The Age of Innocence*), coercion (*Romeo and Juliet*), condescension (*Barry Lyndon*), and mortal threats (*Titanic*)—all techniques in the torturer's "playbook"—all part of a system of "laying low." All screened for our viewing pleasure.

All this said, I want to keep one crucial distinction crystal clear. The narrow definition of torture—to torture as punishment or revenge, to extract information or a confession, or for sheer sadistic cruelty—is much less the focus of this book than the broader, linguistic one. Several books on torture in film have been recently published.[2] While there might be some overlap with a few of my examples of

torture, my central intention is to approach the subject from another angle (social form). Since the banning of torture across Europe in the eighteenth century, calls for its reinstatement have gathered apace in the twenty-first—principally to deal with terrorism (see Langbein 93). I conjecture that the coincidence of these two moments in history with the rise and fall of etiquette is no accident. We increasingly hear complaints that the tenor of political debates and discussions in online forums have become undignified, divisive, and abusive. Perhaps my approach will open the door to torture in the narrow sense, and certainly some of the examples herein constitute torture of that type. But this book intends to look more broadly at suffering, of different forms of suffering, and the suffering that form itself can engender. In any case, I hope I don't seem to be riding roughshod over Jean Améry's sober warning: that "if one speaks about torture, one must take care not to exaggerate" (22).

Performance, Inside-out

In his posthumously published *Untimely Meditations* (1910), Nietzsche regarded the "power" of forgetfulness as intrinsic to a quiet mind. Or, rather, he described the human capacity to dwell on mishaps, rue misfortunes, and stoke the fires of failure, as an evolutionary error. "There are people who . . . can perish from a single experience, from a single painful event, often and especially from a single subtle piece of injustice, like a man bleeding to death from a scratch" ("On the Uses" 62). If that injustice were a faux pas or other public embarrassment, we might describe our suffering in terms of "social death" (as when one is "mortified" by a blunder). One might declare that one's "face" (persona) can no longer be shown in those circles. By contrast, those who find themselves so at ease in their social milieu (as do snobbish elites), or who, by contrast, hold manners in such contempt (as do proud vulgarians) as to be indifferent toward and disdainful of them—well, such people are "so little affected by the worst and most dreadful disasters, and even by their own wicked acts, that they are able to feel tolerably well and be in possession of a kind of clear conscience even in the midst of them or at any rate very soon afterwards" (62).

This book is about the former group—those who (I include myself) feel they might perish from a single faux pas, bleed to death from a social scratch. We meet them regularly onscreen. They are the characters whose gestures depict what Murray Pomerance calls the "tiny moments, tiny gestures, yet gestures at the same time fully potent, upon which the whole structure of a film might stand" ("Three Small Gestures"). Think of Jack Lemmon's urgent patience in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992), or William H. Macy's squirming assurances in *Fargo* (1996). Both are salesmen with their necks on the block. Think of Kirsten Dunst's forced smile in *Melancholia* (2011), or Jennifer Lawrence's frustrated acceptance in *Mother!* (2017). Both are aggressively imposed upon by others and demonstrate simmering restraint. In each example, the actor performs a kind of wretchedness inflicted by the need to maintain decorum when they are, in fact, suffering. It is a performance within a performance: the performance of decorum for the other characters in the drama, and the performance of how torturous that "performance" is for us, watching the film. To communicate the "inner torment," as it were, they must reveal the minutiae of tensions in the body without betraying too much to their fellows. It might be an eye strain or a clenched jaw, the pursing of lips, strumming of fingers, or brief sagging of shoulders. To return to MacPherson's swan, the actor must perform the mannered impression of effortlessness and, at the same time, communicate the torturous effort of maintaining that impression.

To analyze such "torturous etiquettes," this book begins in Chapter 1 by exploring manners in terms of encountering strangers in public spaces via a series of territorial negotiations. In Chapter 2, the problem of engaging strangers raises new issues when moved to the private domestic space, giving rise to the paradox of hospitality. In Chapter 3, the suspension of manners to develop a friendship out of the purely formal modes of interaction is considered, along with the associated risks of (potentially offensive) forms of banter. Chapter 4 picks up the problem of banter by considering the way a joke can either diffuse or introduce tension in the social situation. Chapters 5and 6 offer complementary views of the impact on etiquette of civil rights. Both chapters explore racist etiquettes, first from the perspective of service, and then through the perspective of disservice. Chapter 7 focuses on the relationship between etiquette and clothes and considers

the construction of the "gentleman" and the dismantling of a "lady" on account of fashion faux pas. Chapter 8 considers table manners, and especially moments onscreen when dining etiquette is either jettisoned to make a "pig of oneself," or else coopted to torture one's guests. And the final chapter, Chapter 9, considers the importance of intimate gestures in human interaction, which cannot be governed by etiquette and hence are wide open to abuse. The nine chapters are split into three parts that move from relatively distant encounters inviting first contact ("Initiation"), through more intimate spheres of interaction ("Exchange"), to a final part in which the decorous center no longer holds ("Dissolution").

The book intends to show that much of the nuance in cinematic performance stems from negotiating the tensions inherent to social form. The screen actor allows us "backstage" to glimpse the fury of her pedaling feet in social interactions, to satisfy our instinct for cruelty regarding any social failing. It realizes the suppressed urge in us all to burst from the strictures of etiquette and unleash (and delight in) the destructive consequences. In such lapses, I will argue, is a truth we ignore at our peril.