Ritgerð til
M.A.-prófs

Extreme Horror and the Extremely Horrifying
Demystifying Horror Films, Audiences and Intentions

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Abstract

The focus of my research is on the stability and durability of the horror film genre to sustain the performance of excess and transgression common to extreme horror film. I aim to analyze a series of notorious examples of extreme cinema. My approach is to address the instability of the development of narrative in early Hollywood, to expand context of the horror film genre, as well as the application and result of an active audience, as demonstrated by the paracinematic cult film audience. My first round of analysis will focus on three inherently different horror films that have commonly presented an extreme cinematic experience for viewers. Because of their reference to extremity, the films are vulnerable to being levelled into a single category despite their differences and range. I suggest that cult film culture is an alternative explanation to this phenomenon of accepting different values of taste on the same level. Finally, I will perform a comparative horror analysis of two dominating extreme cinema titles: Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò or 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and Srdjan Spasojevic’s *A Serbian Film* (2010). I will also address their techniques in containing and presenting their transgressive needs, as well the effects the implications of these techniques have on the meaning of the film, and moreover, its intention towards audiences. These films are often presented together for their themes of sexual violence, but they are not critically analyzed together as a levelled subgenre.
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1 Introduction

Snubbed by award granting cultural authorities and designated a scapegoat of behavior by media and a paranoid public, horror is a widely misunderstood genre of film despite its varying subgenres, dedicated fanbase and box office successes. David Cronenberg, a vastly celebrated auteur who explores the genre in his own work states “Most people have a certain understanding of what a horror film is, namely, that it is emotionally juvenile, ignorant, supremely non-intellectual and dumb. Basically stupid. But I think of horror films as art, as films of confrontation”. Horror is the confrontation of not only mortality, but also of the vulnerability of our coping strategies as ordinary people. The genre lends itself to extreme expression, narrative and imagery exploring violence, terror and the irrational. As a film audience, our limits are molded by the self-censorship of Hollywood and the promotion of what’s deemed “normal,” moral, as well as good for business. Still, horror is inherently designed to push the limits of the established and rational, as well as our own boundaries of comfort. Despite horror’s tension with censors, moralists, media and a sensitive public, there is still a demanding and committed audience for it, willing to participate in difficult cinematic experiences. Moreover, consumption of horror, as in building stamina and tolerance for the extreme while independently studying its cannon, grants status amongst horror fans, scholars and audiences. The unique interface of consumption patterns of the horror film, inspired and developed out of cult audiences and rebellion against the mainstream, reveal horror’s capacity as a genre that reflects the deeper truths and fears of the real world while engaging with it.

My research focuses on extreme horror, distinguished by its performance of excessive themes of transgression. My approach is initially to demystify horror titles that are intimidating and commonly misunderstood, to analyze the core of a deeper and critical truth. I apply my analysis to a variety of extreme horror films (and films that have presented an extreme experience). Through comparative analysis, I address the issue of levelling a variety of films into a single category despite their vast differences and capabilities. While this collapse of subgenre into a single level is often a result of rejection and ignorance, I suggest it is equally empowering, and recognizes the influence of the performance of an active audience. As I pursue more notorious and shocking titles, I consider the limits of context as defense and validation. What I aim to suggest is that
through demystifying and analyzing Hollywood, genre, the audience, the act of levelling
genre and the most extreme cinema, I can prove that horror is a durable genre, capable of
sustaining a much needed commentary about reality, society, politics, and film as a
medium itself.

In the first chapter, I will develop a historical context of the film industry of
Hollywood, and its dynamics with censorship and European cinema. Film technology
developed in France in the late nineteenth century but the concept of narrative film
developed in the twentieth century and became a format financially dominated by
Hollywood despite growing industries in other countries like Germany and Italy. Though
successful, Hollywood was still a very new industry. The threat of federal censorship was
looming, and as a means to prevent government intrusion, Hollywood appointed William
Hayes, a Republican lawyer from Indiana, to establish a system of self-censorship to be
used within the industry to prove that Hollywood could contain its own scandal and
produce unquestionable content. These boundaries were established by a very small group
of individuals with specific moral intentions, at the price of artistic freedom. With Europe
competing against Hollywood, I suggest that these limitations established and promoted
by Hayes and the creators of the Production Code had a significant effect on the
development of the conventions of narrative film.

After the Great War, Europe was financially and physically devastated, and
resources were drained. The spirit to unite and create a European counterpart to
Hollywood was heavily supported by Germany and their blossoming industry. Leading
into WWII, nationalism isolated Europe again. After the war, France was particularly
stubborn to stand apart from American cinema. However, in this atmosphere new theory
created that emerged from the French Cahiers Du Cinema promoting the French New
Wave film movement. “The Young Turks,” including Jean Luc Goddard, studied and
absorbed all industries of Cinema merged with philosophy, embracing old Hollywood
and the avantgarde alike to create the theory of the Auteur, a director of a recognizable
sensibility and style who exerts his talents into multiple channels of his work. By
recognizing the advancement the French New Wave has on film, I foreshadow the
blurring of boundaries presented by Postmodernism’s effect on horror, as well as the
paracinematic audience’s embrace of all film subgenres and levels of taste.

The second chapter aims to establish two separate contexts including the defining
core elements of horror film and the role of the cinematic audience. Applying critics
Robin Wood and Noel Carroll, the chapter first focuses on defining what the monster is
and its dynamic in relation to its environment, and thus the monster’s interruption of normality. Carroll argues that a monster is an interstitial and uncategorizable being, while Wood asserts that the monster is representative of “the Other.” As film and the horror genre evolve, reflecting themes of postmodernism, including the blurring of boundaries, the monster becomes more applicable, insidious, and stronger. Wood suggests horror film consists of the monster interrupting normality, instigating a pursuit to defeat the monster and restore normality. Isabel Pinedo continues that under the influence of Postmodernism, the result of a triumphant defeat is not guaranteed nor is it likely. Observing Night of the Living Dead as a turning point in the horror film genre, horror continues to expand its capacity to confront audiences reflections of life while challenging the boundaries of performance.

I suggest that the role of the audience is an active role that can be supported by performance studies, a newer discipline that asserts any behavior can be analyzed as performance. Applying Richard Schechner, a leading voice and academic in performance studies, I portray a parallel of the performance of the audience in ritual to the performance of the audience in cinema. I expand my analysis to cult film audiences applying Schechner to the definitions established by cult film scholars Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik. Introducing Jeffrey Sconce’s terminology of paracinema, I introduce that the cult film audience perform film consumption through ritual and rebellion. I conclude that active audiences, like the cult film audience, portray the ability to influence and push boundaries alongside rebellious and transgressive filmmakers.

The third chapter approaches the analysis of an assortment of three fundamentally different horror films that are commonly recognized as extreme cinematic experiences. I aim to deconstruct how these films function as horror to distinguish their differences from each other, despite a common and misguided urge to group them together. Stanley Kubrick’s The Shining (1980) is an example of a respected and widely celebrated work of horror, both for genre, as well as for the director as an auteur. Reintroducing the dynamics of French cinema versus Hollywood, I will analyze the New French Extremity film Irreversible (2002) by Gaspar Noé. Irreversible is most infamous for its graphic and relentless depiction of a static rape scene, centered in a narrative that is presented episodically in reverse. Last, I will rationalize the impact of Tom Six’s Dutch horror, The Human Centipede (2009). The Human Centipede in its entirety can be summarized by the title alone, and introduces a new force of marketing, creating a viral sensation and internet takeover.
The history of horror fandom, moreover, reveals a kind of alliance with European cinema, the avant garde, and experimental works that were cultivated outside of Hollywood. This connection was the result of the personal study that the horror film fan was anticipated to maintain via underground or midnight screenings, fanzines and film distribution catalogs, all of which cater to a sense of community through knowledge of films, and the experience of viewing them. I conclude that the levelling of the above titles is not only a result of misunderstanding horror film and its capacity, but is also the result of horror audiences actively embracing various films with a paracinematic perspective.

In the final chapter, I embrace two notoriously difficult films that. Pasolini’s *Salò or 120 of Sodom* (1975), an adaptation of the Marquis de Sade, was the director’s last film as he was murdered shortly after its completion. The film is a direct attack on Italy’s attachment to Fascism. *Salò* has ranked as one of the most shocking and extreme films for many decades after its release. It is a cruel and bleak film made by a disappointed intellectual poet who intended to confront his audience over political affiliations and cinematic taste. *Salò* is a notorious film, but it is a supported film. It has achieved a high status not just for its notoriety, but as a work of art, a form of protest, and a piece of history. *Salò* remained debatably uncontended until 2010, when Srdjan Spasojevic’s *A Serbian Film* emerged, shocking audiences with graphic sexual violence that includes sexual assault against children. Spasojevic defends his film as a metaphor of the Serbian government with regard to the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. While *Salò* is often referenced in reactions to *A Serbian Film*, the two films are not commonly analyzed together as one is satire and the other is horror. I aim to analyze both of these films comparatively as horror films, due to the nature of their themes and evaluations of their protagonists as “monsters,” to help decipher their core meanings and intentions past their transgressive and shocking facade. I will also analyze their techniques to contain and present their transgressive themes, and what these cinematic choices reflect about their intentions as a filmmaker, and what is expected of the audience.
2 Historical Context: A History of Early Twentieth Century Film

Film as a medium is a fairly new form of art, culture and storytelling in comparison to the further developed forms of literature, music and other visual and fine arts. Barely over the hill of a century old, the “movie,” the longer narrative format to which we still enjoy, presented a new chapter of opportunity, industry, technology and cultural prowess. What originally began as research for the historical context in which we prudently or hedonistically judge the morality and obscenity of film today, in order to support the dialogue against censorship in favor of the artist, and more so, in favor of the development of society to endure difficult material in the promotion of being soberly critical in the face of challenging film and content, proved to be a greater feat, leading from what seemed to be a humble pursuit of linear historical context, to deeper questions about self-censorship and the stifling of creativity. While film technology, its demand by audiences, and resilience to deliver entertainment, progressed in great leaps over a short period of time, the crisis of the case of censorship became overshadowed by the crisis of the identity of film on an international scale both as an industry but also as a vessel of culture.

While Hollywood dominated the global film market, it fell victim to the demands imposed by American morality and religious groups, forcing an organized system of self-censorship in order to protect the industry from governmental intervention and censorship. Essentially, it was a fear of censorship that created a rigid skeleton of censorship infamously known as the Production Code under the guidance of William Hayes. However, digging deeper into what led to the Production Code and helped maintain the Production Code Era was the motivation of profit, which favored cheaper production and theater sales over artistic freedom and the development of a fresh and malleable medium. The threat posed by finances is mirrored by Europe, who after recovering from the damage of World War I, found themselves desperate to match Hollywood’s output and quality, as Europe was the origin of film after all. The crisis of identity was passed on to Europe as the desire to succeed as an industry brought the debate between the identity of nationalism versus internationalism, and the most acceptable form for European cinema to succeed financially and find success among an international and national audience. Again, this struggle with what film should or should not be is interrupted, influenced and motivated by the pursuit of money, despite efforts to find an earnest solution for its identity crisis.
The history of film remains the context of its cyclical reception issues, including censorship, national identity and competition. But pockets of chaos breed revolution, and in the case of film, it was the need and desire for advancement in the medium as an art form that developed the theoretical movement of the *Cashiers du Cinematique* and the promotion of the *politique de auteurs*. Essentially while the USA and Europe would continue on into the 1950s to struggle with the conflict between identity and finances, in the 1960s, a group of French cinema lovers developed a philosophical film theory whose origins crossed the Atlantic, combining the issues of international and national cinema into a defense, consideration and inspiration for film as art and the director as an artist. Evidently it took a strong and unapologetic reflection of essentially what was wrong in cinema, a short history at this point, in order to bring more recognition to the filmmaker, his expression and his capabilities both technically and philosophically.

2.1 Censorship In America

The debate and challenges of obscenity had been long established in American law in regards to print and speech, starting in 1711 in Massachusetts, borrowing the “common law of obscenity” from England. This law banned “any filthy, obscene, or profane song, pamphlet, libel or mock sermon” but the essence of the offense was in the “mimicking of preaching, or any other part of divine worship” as a means to protect Christian values from sacrilegious threat (Heins 24). By 1835, the law was modified to criminalize “obscene or indecent speech, not just religiously, but rather if it ‘manifestly’ tended ‘to the corruption of the morals of youth’” (25). The definition of obscenity had evolved, creating an even greater threat. Within the first one hundred and fifty years, obscenity went from being a stake against blasphemy, to a larger federal intervention to prevent “corruption” of any flavor, that could be seized and confiscated by the Post Office, a huge campaign led by Anthony Comstock, the namesake of the term for excessive opposition and prudery to a supposed immorality within the arts and media. Well before film even developed as a medium, the government had established itself as an anti-obscenity institution with the power to seize and destroy “any article or thing designed or intended for any indecent or immoral use” (32).

As the twentieth century followed behind a bold and unforgiving system of obscenity laws, film became a hot topic with regard to regulation. In a fit of confusion over who was in charge of the new medium, by 1907 in desperation, even Chicago police began to
intervene with theaters in order to control the screenings of certain films deemed morally unfavorable. Tensions over the power dynamics of who produces or controls film, and its influence on its audience, varied between cities and states (Vaughn 42). Neither the industry nor government had agreed or understood film’s capacity and purpose, but audiences were hooked. By the 1920s, Hollywood had slipped up on many salacious scandals, but even more problematic, the fixation and admiration of audiences with Hollywood romanticism had exacerbated these scandals. All eyes were on Hollywood, all the time (41). With the threat of sound technology to provide one more layer of media to censor, the industry had to act quickly, and give in before the government would fulfill its threats to apply a force of obscenity control.

The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) formed in 1922 in order to deflect governmental intervention in the censorship of the motion pictures (Vaughn 42). By developing a “quasi-governmental body” without direct federal government affiliations, the MPPDA’s objective was simply to “convince a skeptical public that the industry was serious about self-regulation” (43). William Hays, a Republican lawyer who succeeded in blocking federal and state censorship during the 1920s, was appointed president of the MPPDA, and was paid a handsome annual income. Hays, who was ironically against censorship, believed self-regulation was the only solution to the financially devastating threat of government appointed censorship. Between 1924 and 1927, the Hays Office and the MPPDA enforced self-regulation codes including “The Formula,” script inspections, the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” which sported a list of eleven “don’ts” and twenty six “be careful” elements and themes in scripts and films. While regulations were tiresome and tedious for filmmakers, there was little way to actually enforce such regulation (44).

In 1930, as a last resort to heightened threats of federal censorship against the industry, the Production Code was born, a collaboration between the Hays office and the more aggressive and dominating publisher and politician Martin Quigley. A devout Catholic who adamantly detested government censorship, Quigley was a complicated asset who mediated between the Hollywood industry and the Catholic hierarchy (Vaughn 47-48). The Production Code was not only a code drafted to self-regulate Hollywood to the standards of society (morality groups of all kinds were very influential and difficult) to a democratic government. With the inclusion of other religious figures including Jesuit priests Rev. Daniel A. Lord, the code was carefully calculated and negotiated by a Catholic and Jesuit anti-Semite hierarchy, with the intentions to force-promote Catholic
views, blanketed as Judeo-Christian values. While anti-Semitism clouded judgment against Hollywood, the USA also harbored resistance to Catholics. Evidently, Hays felt the need to deny that the Code was “narrowly Catholic” in fear of the “strong anti-Catholic sentiments embedded in American culture” (59-60).

While Hollywood adjusted its industry to accommodate the Production Code in order to obtain a Code seal, there were many films that did not, exposing the cracks in the Hays Office’s attempt to control Hollywood through self-regulation. Exploitation films can be best defined as films that are produced and promoted with the intention of attracting an audience based on salacious or controversial content. More so, exploitation films hone in on a popular theme or trend to exploit for profit, prioritizing output before quality, knowing the film will have an audience. In other words, exploitation film is like junk food; it is not produced to be nutritious per se, but rather to be consumed. Sex, violence, drugs and other undeniable social taboos are common tropes of the exploitation film. Pre-production code, “hygiene films” that covered topics of sex, venereal diseases, abortion, and more were popular among many audiences, while distributors and theaters argued their purpose as education, despite their sultry edge. These “hygiene films” were a nightmare among both morality groups and the MPPDA as they posed a threat. Critics have theorized as the “recurrent culture patterns in which the ‘top’ attempts to reject and eliminate ‘the bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status quo, only to discover that…. It is in some way frequently dependent on that low-Other” (Schaefer 293). In context of the Hays office, films like exploitation films were used as scapegoats or deflectors to protect more mainstream films that would have been threatened with negative criticism and investigation. After all, exploitation films brought on a much needed discourse on the politics of taste in cinema, and how the industry deals with sexuality, nudity, violence and crime in film (294). The MPPDA ruthlessly attacked these films and the theaters that hosted them in the hopes of appearing proactive against obscenity in the eyes of the public and government.

With arguments against exploitation films, who many times marketed themselves as educational, the Hays Office and affiliates attempted to emphasize the purpose of film to be for entertainment only, and that it had no place as a tool for education. This sentiment was challenged by 1936 when President Roosevelt’s new surgeon general initiated a countrywide film campaign to combat venereal disease through education and awareness. The defense used for many sex hygiene films that the Hays Office so adamantly challenged was being promoted on a Federal level (Schaefer 306). Moreover, the USA’s
entry and participation in WWII thus “robbed Hollywood of some of the ammunition it had used against exploitation as the industry began to openly produce films with an avowed moral and educational intent” (308). Afterall, theater audiences were not only shown films, but also newsreels covering the war and anti-fascist propaganda, produced by Hollywood’s elite, like Frank Capra and his documentary Why We Fight.

By 1938, the Production Code was being skirted around creating new tactics to dodge classifications under the “don’ts” and “be carefuls” assigned by the Hays Office, and still be granted the Code seal guaranteeing mainstream showings. Double entendres and implications of speech, and the contrast of what you see versus what is said pushed the limits of taste which still technically followed industry regulated rules. Not only was Hollywood slipping on the code, but so were theaters who took risks in order to draw an audience. Granted, showing Code-challenging films invited risk of backlash from society and legally, including fines or imprisonment, unregulated films generated an audience of their own. By April of 1938, Hays attempted to exert authority over the heads of the major theater circuits to remind them of, or threaten them with the consequences and need to only show films passed with the Code seal. While the Hays Office tried to hold its influence over the major circuits, there were thousands of theaters which the MPPDA had no authority or influence (Schaefer 307).

The question remains, why would a booming industry that dominates on a worldwide scale, cater to such Comstockery. The answer is very simple. Money. At this time, film was not protected by any constitutional rights, but was rather viewed as a business than expression. The daunting conflict of abiding by obscenity laws was that they they were not universally defined Federally, they were instituted by states individually. Therefore, in the wild west of obscenity regulation, “The primary impulse for self-regulation was an economic one as the industry hoped to stave off further censorship and the costly necessity of creating customized prints for each area with a censorship board” (Schaefer 294). Also, it must be considered that these issues of obscenity were being debated within the advent of sound technology. Film was initially silent but the conflict of sound added to the urgency of Hollywood to stave off morality groups and federal censorship as changes would become more expensive and and cuts would challenge the quality of films drastically. Schaefer reiterates “a silent picture with cuts was still playable. The rise in talking pictures posed a potentially devastating problem since scissoring a talkie, particularly sound-on-disk movies, virtually destroyed it” (297). Evidently, what is most shocking is not the objective of self-regulation with regard to finances, but that in order
to preserve, the MPPDA and Hays sacrificed the already confused identity in favor of a veil of convoluted morality and Judeo-Christian values that were forced upon the industry.

By the 1950s, the Code was noticeably crumbling, and its purpose was further convoluted and neglected. The 1950s encountered many changes including those in the general public’s morals after the war, a victory in the Supreme Court regarding the Italian short film *The Miracle* by Roberto Rosselini, granting film with the First Amendment status, “and film business practices [that] led to the reintegration of most of the traditional topics of exploitation film into the mainstream” (Schaefer 309).

2.2 National Identity in Europe

While film was founded, developed and launched by Europeans and the avant garde filmmakers who set the bar for film to be a platform of visually creative storytelling, Hollywood inherited and then dominated the medium. While WWI devastated a global population, it was fought mainly on European soil. Countries who pioneered film, like France, were recovering from the physical wreckage during the period in which Hollywood developed the feature film. It is during the period of the 1920s, the development era of the production code that “Hollywood established its characteristic of modernity. Hollywood quickly came to dominate the European market suffering as it was from the aftermath of the First World War which reverse the previous flow of film imports from Europe to the United States” (Mulvey 42). Furthermore, the economics of Hollywood dominated Europe by asserting “through its economic power and its industrially organised, vertically integrated system of production, distribution and exhibition” (42). The American industry was simply in much better shape financially and production wise, promoting a kind of fantasy of culture. In terms of “fetish” as an object that holds great power over a person, the fetish of film was further enhanced by the fetish of Hollywood. Laura Mulvey continues, “Hollywood, which perfected the mass popular appeal of the movies, stands on the side of illusion and commodity culture, escapist fantasy and the repression of its own processes of production. From this point of view, Hollywood cinema is a symptom of cultural, economic and technical fetishism” (Mulvey 20).

America was not the only audience caught up in Hollywood’s magic, especially after the war. Interestingly enough, despite the war, Germany was a major contender in the film industry. Europeans were dealt difficult truths to accept, apart from America
dominating the European tradition. Kristin Thompson states the other European countries’ dilemma and challenge as, “On the one hand, reacting to Hollywood’s move to hegemony abroad during the war, they sought strategies for regaining their own domestic markets and for exporting successfully. On the other hand, European rivals sought to prevent Germany, which was, ironically, the only European film industry to emerge from the war stronger that it had been at the beginning, from growing stronger and duplicating the American takeover” (281). The individual film industries of Europe had fairly big shoes to fill, which brings into question, the proposal by none other than a German film publication, *Lichtbildbühne*, to unite as an international, European force led by the dominant German film industry. In a 1917 article from the *Lichtbildbühne*, it proposed that German filmmakers and dealers “begin selling to neutral countries while building up a repertory of German films and strengthening the German industry in anticipation of quickly breaking into other markets at the Armistice” (282). Previous tensions between other European countries and Germany during WWI, including France, Britain and the USA, initially distrusted the German film industry, and feared that they would attempt to distribute propaganda films into the foreign markets. However, *Lichtbildbühne* urged German filmmakers to not only eliminate propaganda, but to emphasize internationalism, including production outside of Germany or the creation of fantasy settings. Evidently, German Expressionism, a unique and highly stylized avant-garde visual movement exclusive to Germany, proved to be a breakthrough in exports along with cultural film relations as many critics in other countries embraced films like the prominent *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (282).

In the midst of France’s criticism of Germany’s intentions of internationalism, critic and filmmaker Louis Delluc defended and neutralized the tension, and wrote “Film is an international product, but it is the production which should be international. In place of competition, there should be association… The system of blockades, boycotts or protectionism has never given very good results as a policy. It has always given disastrous results on commercial or industrial grounds” (Thompson 283). *Lichtbildbühne* clarified the economic goal of international European film industry as one that “should simply place the economically weaker producers in the position of entering the world arena armed with the same weapons with which the Americans are equipped” (284). Out of context, it almost sounds like war, but the basic aim, as clarified by *Lichtbildbühne*, was “sincerely for the common good, to stabilise the European film industry as a whole and to build European solidarity,” even if one country may benefit more than another (285).
Essentially when Europe could finally match Hollywood in production, Germany would stop flooding out American films to create room for European productions to succeed.

*Lichtbildbühne’s* call for internationalism proposed a kind of resistance against American cinema in what was called the ‘Europäische Monroe-Doktrin,’ clarifying that the sentiment was “aimed not at boycotting American films, but forcing reciprocity” suggesting that European filmmakers should adopt a common international approach to solidify their industry, stating “If the European film production wants to substitute for the American film, it must be placed on a basis of internationalism and must make films which do not just gain approval in a single country” (Thompson 285). This is an interesting point because while it encourages European filmmakers to work as a unified force to lift each other up, it reveals just how alienated the taste and intentions of American cinema was. American cinema works for the approval of only America, reflected in the moral demands placed by authoritative positions with no reflection of what American cinema translates as an international or foreign film.

Much like the American film industry identity crisis being fueled by the motivation of money, internationalism in Europe transparently promoted motivations for a stronger film industry to match Hollywood at the least. While intentions were good, seeing value in Europe as a united whole, despite the recovery from war, internationalism was not a permanent or viable solution. While internationalism attempted to create a new wave of collaboration and opportunity to promote filmmakers across Europe, nationalism was still recognized as being a compelling selling point, hosting a deeper authenticity. By 1923, Germany found success in large-scale and costly productions of historical films, a genre thought extinct. German critic Kurt Pinthus warned that the emphasis on these productions as a trend to cater to international offices was dominating and suffocating to the industry in its pursuit to develop other independent and unique projects, arguing that “the critical spectator must admit that this concern with foreign taste is prejudicial to the artistic quality of the German cinema” (Thompson 288). Pinthus believed the more daring and “distinctly German” films were more “artistically desirable,” continuing that “the beginning of our quality film, which has not been developed with respect to foreign considerations but to the interests of German technique, mise-en-scène and art… It is our films constructed without taking into account foreign tastes that have gained the greatest success abroad, because they are films of a new type, richly executed, like Lubitsch’s films and *Dr. Caligari* and also the recent films of Fritz Lang” (289).
Evidently, internationalism was commonly critiqued as “a matter of adding qualities to films that would make them attractive beyond borders of their countries of origin” including “subject matter that avoided a strong national identification, the use of expensive or sophisticated techniques and the inclusion of internationally famous stars” (Thompson 282). While this approach focused on catering primarily to the sales of film by massive audiences, it was white washed, eliminating the character of culture. Essentially, internationalism lacked the originality of nationalism when it came to artistic and progressive filmmaking (289). The utopic industry ideal began to fade before it was cemented. In 1927, critic Jean Tedesco thoroughly criticized the idea of international Europe in competition with America as a weakness stating:

The universalization of the cinema is underway. To the economic expansion of the United States, an endangered Europe only responded with vague internationalist sentiments that widened the open breach still further. It remains to us to say, in effect, that in our view the weakness of the cinema will not be solely the fact of American standardisation but also the present methods of the big European produces… The ‘combinations’ that currently flourish on our continent are inspired, in effect, by the most base necessities. Many producers join together and create groups of filmmakers from their respective nationalities. It is the latest recipe for a cinema cocktail. In our opinion, it is a serious indication of weakness, of anemia” (Thompson 289).

While the belief of internationalism contended that the mixing of cast and production teams would create a stronger industry to compete financially with the Hollywood domination, “it also did not go unnoticed that the films that apparently had the most global appeal were of the classical Hollywood narrative type” (289). This poses the question of whether successful internationalism in film is simply a copy of Hollywood in the hopes that the two identical industries could balance each other out for equal opportunity by fulfilling the same demands. This is a very complex demand on Europe. Evidently, Hollywood and Hollywood narrative was dominated by a conservative and moral institution, the church. While the USA is undeniably big, the US government nor the pseudo government of Hollywood cannot possibly reflect that of Europe. While Europe was exploring the idea of a kind of a “united states” to promote security and heal the damage of WWI, it is still a cluster of separate countries, separate sensibilities, and most importantly, separate governments. To aspire to the gagged and limited capacity of Hollywood as an art form is an act of oppression not just on film as art, but of the beliefs and values of different governing societies. Aspiring to be Hollywood threatens the
opinion of an individual culture aspiring to be a very specific and filtered form of American.

2.3 France After WWII: Identity and the New Wave

In reference to French cinema in the debate of a nationalism vs. internationalism film industry, correspondent Georges Clarriére proposed a new definition for French film or rather, French international film:

The view is now more generally taken that a French film should be French at base and from a French scenario; but the foreign artists [i.e. actors] should be employed in certain important roles and a certain amount of foreign influence admitted (as, for instance, American methods of lighting) so as to give French films a wider appeal to spectators in all parts of Europe, certain parts of Asia and in South America (Thompson 290).

As Germany, Scandinavia and the USA had begun to make their mark culturally, other countries wanted to follow suit. France, the motherland of film, understandably desired a distinctly French identity. Despite the idealistic ideas of a united Europe of the 1920s, or the European Idea, nationalism took hold of individual countries, especially Germany, resulting in the finding of the Nazi party, fascism in Europe, and the atrocity against humanity that was World War II, not just in causality, but the capacity of evil in humanity. Prior to, during and after the war, individual film industries became isolated. The united European identity was shattered.

Through the 1930s, Americans had dominated the French screens, but by the 1950s, France had adapted, developed and essentially settled on a specific and exclusively French style. Even more so, this form of French “national” cinema, or cinéma de qualité, managed to squash the longtime competitors of Hollywood. After the government set quotas for American dubbed films, American imports dwindled, and Hollywood negotiators simply gave up on the lost cause of regaining the French audience (Kuisel 122-3). There were many factors to Hollywood’s loss of France, including the rise of communists who saw the Production Code influenced films as a kind of propaganda. After all, the Code was admittedly “narrowly Catholic.” Influence of the Communists and French intellectual community saw through “a combination of cultural snobbery toward mass culture, an aversion for capitalism, stereotypes of America and Americans, and anxiety about American hegemony and French decline,” that American consumption culture, represented by Hollywood, clashed strongly with post-WWII France mentality and sensibility (125). Meanwhile, in response to the culture divide that continued to
spread between France and the USA, there was little interest in French cinema in America (131). These cultural tensions were a result of the national psyche reparations of France after the war, both what they had suffered and the embarrassment to accept aid and protection from the USA (130). France wanted and needed to be an individual country and culture after such devastation and carnage. It was a pessimistic result to a terribly damaged nation turned upside down.

2.4 Results
In the midst of cultural divide and superiority complexes between the USA and France, something really interesting happens. While Hollywood and Europe’s film identity complexes shut film industries off to one another, it was the accumulation of these conflicts that brought something fresh and significant to film history, the birth of theory reflecting Hollywood’s golden age and Europe’s response to it. As a rebellion against what was criticized as dull, traditional French cinema, the Young Turks, a group of young film critics of the film publication Cahiers du Cinéma wanted to do away with the static, practical and widely available French standard, challenging film industries worldwide to adapt philosophy, intent and art into film production. The 1960s movement was called New Wave, and it mimicked the kinds of artistic revolutions that took place in reaction to modernity, much like Impressionism and Surrealism (Mary 160). In a time when many genres had been abandoned by French filmmakers, New Wave embraced genres, and more specifically, genres perfected by Hollywood such as westerns and detective genres (Kuisel 133). By studying the classics of Hollywood in combination with the philosophical sensibilities, the Young Turks developed the theory of the “politique des auteurs,” a critical theory that “is based on the idea that works considered great are those which derive from the stylistic originality of directors concerned about their independence and in possession of a personal or a distinct, cinematographic vision, and who are thus the true authors of their works” (Mary 161). This theory functions off of two basic operations including the creation and support of film that “fits the label ‘auteur cinema,’” or an artist that controls all aspects of collaborative creative works, and, especially in cinema, possesses a distinguishable and consistent style. The second operation is “the devaluation of the other cinema, that of the Tradition Quality” which dominated French theaters and was favored over Hollywood productions by older audiences, “judged unfit insofar as its directors are beholden to scriptwriters, set designers, and stars” (161).
The masters who the *politique des auteurs* was modeled after included Italy’s Roberto Rosselini, France’s Jean Renoir, and America’s Alfred Hitchcock, a truly international group of very national identities. These directors were valued by the young critics for their intentional efforts throughout the production of their extraordinary films. Essentially, the films of these directors, and therefore by those earning the “auteur” distinction, can be recognized and identified as being a product of that director. While the filmmakers as artists were celebrated by the group for their thorough filmic and production identity, the New Wave responded in a direct rebellion against the dull French scene. Phillipe Mary summarizes New Wave as that which “turns upside-down the values of the ‘Tradition.’ The budgets are tight, the funding at times from personal sources, the producers at home in the avant-garde or with artistic documentaries. The shooting is hurried, the settings natural, the team is modest… The screenplays written by directors or their ‘pals’ or else are improvised…” (Mary 160). Pioneered by directors such as François Trufflaut and Jean-Luc Goddard, the French New Wave took the cinematic world by storm. By studying great directors, the group concluded that great directors have thorough intentions, defending film as a form of expression. However, to earn the title of auteur implies the director is not tied to a single role or technique, and moreover, has an intellectual and theoretical understanding and approach to filmmaking and the application of the diverse techniques utilized (Hess 51-52).

The movement of the Young Turks, the developed theory of the auteur, and the French New Wave, essentially identified and celebrated the identity of the filmmaker as an artist, extracted from a history of international identity complexes that stood as an obstacle for the development of film as a medium and a vessel of culture. As stated by Laura Mulvey, “The Hollywood cinema that first fascinated European intellectuals was energetic and cathartic, a cinema of the machine age, streamlined and commodified, able to produce and repeat successful formulas, stories or stars, as Detroit might produce motor cars. The cinema stood in direct opposition to high cultural values encrusted with the weight and authority of tradition. European intellectuals took up American cinema partly in a spirit of political polemics with the traditions and values of their own culture” (20). In the whirlwind between World Wars, Hollywood struggled to find an artistic identity, relying heavily on cheap formulae to appease the Code, as Europe tried to match Hollywood, individually and as a whole. Essentially, these industries were driven by money and the need to appeal to and appease audiences. Still, in the chaos of identifying what film is as entertainment, as education, or as narrative, the result of decades of not
understanding film led to a critical breakthrough of individualized identity, control and intention of the director, defended and regarded film as art.
3 Horror Genre and Audience

Horror as a film genre is as popular as it is misunderstood. Contemporary horror films tend to be a box office success while the genre is still snubbed by high culture and art. When defining modern horror, Loh elaborates that “Horror shakes us to the core and reminds us not only of our own mortality, but also of the vulnerability of our coping strategies” (326). As literary critic Susan Stewart summarizes, “What is at risk in these [horror] stories is our good faith in our ability to know the world by the means of a socially given system of interpretation. Our hierarchies of relevance, our assumptions of the social, and our faith in the reliability of the self and its potential for apprehending the real are all suspended, put into brackets” (328).

While horror is inherently understood and assumed as something scary, horror’s capacity for complex and sophisticated storytelling is beyond conventional scare tactics and shock value related to the excessive and transgressive themes and visuals. Horror’s reputation as low-brow or low-art is difficult to reverse, but, as David White implies, “The fact that audiences tolerate, even seek out and enjoy, a film designed to horrify them, can tell us a great deal about what it is in these films that makes them inspire fear or dread. Conversely these films can tell something about those who enjoy them, and, by induction, about people in general“ (7). What this chapter aims to establish is a foundation to better understanding both the core structure of horror as a genre and the capacity of the cinematic audience, as demonstrated by influential and rebellious cult audiences. By exploring these foundational elements of the horror genre and of audience attendance as a performance, and the audience as a role, I am to provide context, stability, and a method of analysis for extreme films that I will analyze in chapters three and four, all of which have been produced and premiered after the commonly recognized turning point of 1968’s Night of the Living Dead.

3.1 The Variables and Monsters of Horror

While horror is often generalized as a simple or dumb genre, inherently understood by audiences as something scary, horror’s capacity for complex and sophisticated storytelling is beyond. Still, just as any other story or basic film structure, horror can be reduced to a simple form. Film scholar and renowned critic Robin Wood defines horror in five words: when “normality is threatened by the monster” (Wood 14). So much of what defines, develops and advances horror surrounds the analysis of the monster, who it is, what it represents, and what it takes to defeat it. Still, the structure which introduces
and stages the monster remains as simple as Wood’s initial definition, which he extends to a breakdown of three variables that can be applied to the majority of horror films. These variables include, first, “normality,” as in the anticipated normality of those within the film, whether it be the quiet suburban neighborhood of *Nightmare on Elm Street* or the spaceship Nostromo from *Alien*. The second variable, naturally, is the monster. Wood’s definition of the monster expands beyond literal depictions as “the concept of ‘the other’: that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with […] in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself” (9). Along with being a representation of a cultural outsider, the Other also reflects repression from within society or one’s self. Horror confronts directly the issues of the Other, othering, and the threat and fear society endures in the attempt to maintain what they know as normal and therefore safe and healthy (9). This suggests that in the horror film, the Other can take form as monster in a variety of ways including the classic horror tropes or more insidious, an average person. The last variable, naturally, is “the relationship between the two,” normality and the monster. It is in this third variable that the action and thrill takes place.

When these variables are applied to a typical film structure, they can be traced quite easily. The first act of the film is shorter than anticipated by the average viewer, and contains enough exposition to establish normality before what is called “the inciting incident” occurs. This turning point is a catalyst event which sets the story into motion away from what is considered normality to the characters living within the story’s universe. Years ago, in my first screenwriting class, we were warned that the inciting incident of any film needs to take place within the first ten minutes of the film. This implies that establishing normality is quick and intuitive, and is portrayed only to be interrupted. This applies to all films, not only horror. Modes to introduce the monster can differ. Sometimes the monster is upfront, outright, and poses an immediate and recognizable threat, while its intentions, motivations and abilities are revealed at a slower pace through the highs and lows of the second act. Sometimes the monster takes its time to reveal itself until the final climax of the third act.

Noël Carrolls essay “The Nature of Horror” is highly referenced, as well as challenged, as it attempts to define clearer the characteristics of horror, and the audience’s emotional reaction to it. Referencing specifically to the genre as “art-horror,” Carroll builds his definitions off of the groundbreaking work of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and onward. Carroll focuses on the two defining qualities of horror being emotional affect
and more specifically, the monster. Carroll is careful to include science fiction under the umbrella of the horror genre as sci-fi monsters are “a species of horror, substituting supernatural forces with futuristic technologies” (51). Carroll, in turn, is also careful to exclude other ambiguous and horror-like genres, and states that the presence of the monster “distinguishes horror from what are sometimes called tales of terror, such as Poe’s ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’ and ‘The Tell Tale Heart,’ or Hitchcock’s Psycho, which though eerie and scary, achieve their hairraising effects by exploring extreme psychological phenomena that are all too human” (52).

Carroll’s theory of the monster is compatible to a point to Wood’s three variables of the horror film. Carroll addresses that the monster is not a distinguished and unique characteristic that belongs only to horror, and that monsters are present in many genres, including fairy tales, epics, and gothic literature. However, it is Wood’s third variable, the relationship between normality and the monster which supports Carroll’s distinction between the monster of varying genres. Carroll states, “What appears to distinguish the horror story from mere stories with monsters, such as fairy tales, is the attitude of characters in the story to the monsters they chance upon. In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters that they encounter as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order. In fairy tales, on the other hand, monsters are part of the everyday furniture of the universe” (52). Moreover, in gothic literature, the ‘monster’ can be rationalized as something that can be explained (52).

Carroll continues his argument, analyzing the emotion of horror. According to Carroll, audiences mirror the emotion they see expressed on screen. So if an audience has a foundational understanding that the projection of a monster in a film will not automatically materialize into physical form to be dealt with right there within a dark theater, the fear they feel is an empathetic, reactive one. Moreover, Carroll finds the on-screen portrayal of emotion particularly interesting, as it takes fear to a reaction of disgust, a debatably more logical emotion to share and react to (53). The characters do not perform fear simply by screaming, but more effectively, they perform disgust.

Carroll references Mary Douglas’ study Purity and Danger to conclude that this sense of disgust, which is an effective emotional driver, is the result of one’s inability to easily categorize and come to terms with a being. The horror monster, according to Carroll, is not only threatening, but it is also impure by these terms of Douglas’ study, as that which “correlates reactions of impurity with the transgression or violation of schemes of cultural categorization” (54-5). Such violations includes contrasting and conflicting
characteristics. Douglas uses the example of a lobster as something that lives in the sea, and therefore should swim, but rather it crawls. Douglas summarizes the conceptual and interstitial characteristics of feces as impure, not only as something seen culturally as dirty, but as well as “me/not me, inside/outside, and living/dead, serve as ready candidates for abhorrence as impure, as do spittle, blood, tears, sweat, hair clippings, nail clippings, pieces of flesh, and so on” (55). Conclusively, “following Douglas then, we initially speculate that an object or being is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically incomplete, or formless” (55). This theory of impurity can be challenged, but it is fairly compatible with the monster tropes we intuitively recognize as part of the horror genre, combining contradictions such as the living/dead, or zombies and vampires, the animate/inanimate, like a haunted house or object, hybrid species like werewolves and humanoid creatures, and lastly, and majorly popular after The Exorcist, demonic possessions where the “possessee” hosts the possessor, creating a single body of two entities. Further elaborating on the category of incomplete, missing body parts, disintegration and decay are common horror characteristics, often applied to the living/dead, alluding to incomplete life/death (55).

While many aspects of Carroll’s theories and semantics are applicable, in her essay “Horror and Mood,” Andrea Sauchelli challenges Carroll’s definition of horror via monster, addressing that while Carroll’s theory is compatible for many subgenres of horror, it is unable to cover all iterations, especially horror that is nonfiction. Sauchelli posits that horror is not about the elicitation of emotions, as suggested by Carroll, but rather that it relies on moods, which she defines as “mental states that differ from other emotional or affective states in certain important ways, despite their many similarities and inter-connections” (42). Sauchelli’s explanation that “…moods are mental states that may influence our propensity in experiencing connected emotions” adds more meat to Carroll’s emotion argument, and opens up the discussion of the more ambiguous details that create the horror atmosphere. This ambiguity is significant as horror’s monster, in spirit of postmodernism and an evolving genre, challenges its initial boundaries.

As monster types continue to evolve over the development of horror and its representation in film, I suggest that Carroll’s argument can be elaborated to include the physically complete and very human as worthy candidates of some of the most challenging and threatening monsters. In other words, the interstitial categories can elaborate into more personality and action based characteristics rather than just physical. For example, a family man who attempts to slaughter his family is a contradiction of his
role and the inherited persona that comes with being a father or son. Nazis, as well, propose a contradiction of organization and strengthening through the means of genocide and execution of masses of their own citizens, along with the attempt to unify Europe based on the assumption and doctrine of a superior race through means of war and continued eradication of neighboring civilians. In all sense of reality, very real monsters walk among us in the forms of serial killers, pedophiles, and greed driven individuals, all in familiar and complete human bodies.

3.2 The Evolution of Horror
Recognizing a turn in cultural studies to postmodernism, the horror film is a supportive medium of reflecting postmodernism. Horror films from the late 1960s and onward aptly fit postmodernism, as the narrative emphasizes the tension between the rational and irrational, and the blurring between binaries. In her essay, “Recreational Terror Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film”, Isabel Pinedo summarizes postmodernism as “the erosion of universal categories, the collapse of faith in the inevitability of progress, and the breakdown of moral clarities” as well as “a profound loss of faith in master narratives and a disenchantment with the teleology of progress” (17). Specifically, horror film of postmodern times “revolves around ordinary people’s ineffectual attempts to resist a violent monster- a supernatural or alien invader, a deviant transformation from within, a psychotic, or a combination of these forms. In the end, the inefficacy of human action and the repudiation of narrative closure combine to produce various forms of the open ending: the monster triumphs, the monster is defeated but only temporarily, or the outcome is uncertain” (19-20). The terror of the postmodern monster is not its level of grotesque or evil, but rather the capacity and resilience of monstrosity within a human being. We are no longer challenged to categorize an impure contradiction, but rather to accept that what we struggle to even categorize, and are disgusted by, is within us, and that humanity, and thus purity, is impure as well.

Violence plays a major role in postmodern horror and is heavily criticized as being gratuitous. Apart from not being every audience member’s taste, violence of the postmodern horror film “violates” as it continues to expose what Pinedo describes as “the disruption of our presuppositions about the integrity and predictable character of objects, places, animals, and people” considering that “violence disrupts the world of everyday life; it explodes our assumptions about normality” (20). The purpose of violence in the postmodern horror film is to augment the disruption, as not only does the “monster” enact
the unpredictable or regulate violence upon their surroundings, protagonists must meet this level of violence to destroy the monster. In the end, horror film is not so much “propelled” by the violence and extremism of its “monster”, but by the violence and extremeness of which the protagonist must match (23). In other words, the horror is not limited to what the monster is capable of. It is the horror of the protagonist stepping into the irrational realm, leaving behind rationality and control, in order to confront and match the monster in unknown territory. Pinedo states “In the postmodern horror film, either the monster triumphs or, more likely, the outcome is uncertain. Highly ambiguous open endings in which danger and disruption are endemic prevail. Narratives are apt to end apocalyptically with the defeat of the protagonists or with incipient signs of a new unleashing” (25). A protagonist must be as capable of the monster in order to survive it. Granted, this does not confirm survival or defeat of the monster, and even if it does, our protagonist has become a kind of monster themselves as a result.

The postmodernist influence of the monster reinforces Wood’s application of the psychoanalytic treatment of the Other, a tension mirrored by the repression reflected by what is established as normality amongst the protagonists, and therefore a relatable culture to the audience. Wood states about this Other that “it functions not simply as something external to the culture or to the self, but also as what is repressed (but never destroyed) in the self and projected outwards in order to be hated and disowned” (9). Whether the monster is man or an interstitial being, Wood posits the Other is symbolic of real life oppressed groups such as other cultures, women, the proletariat, alternative ideologies and sexuality, ethnic groups within the subscribed culture and children. These familiar Others elicit a political horror to assimilate to rather than have assimilated, reflected in the tension of postmodern horror and the blurring of its boundaries and limits. After all, “it is the horror film that responds in the most clear-cut and direct way, because central to it is the actual dramatization of the dual concept the repressed/other, in the figure of the Monster” (10). This further heightens the tension of Wood’s three variables. If the only chance to defeat a monster is to match or outpower it within the context of its own functions and abilities, this creates more tension in the third variable of the relationship between normality and the monster, as the requirements and demands of defeating the monster impose any chance to return to normality. The hero is no longer pure and the goal can never actually be obtained.
3.3 The Game Changer: Night of the Living Dead Revived and a Legacy Created

In 1968, George Romero released a film that would become a gamechanger on the horror circuit. *The Night of the Living Dead* proved to be terrifying and grotesque to its contemporary audience, with many not understanding the extent of the film’s horror themes and visuals, packing theaters with young children unprepared for the gravity of the graphic content. In his book *A History of Horror*, Wheeler Winston Dixon summarizes, “The film’s scenario is brutal and unrelenting. The threadbare production values, for once, make the film all the more real, and when the zombies feed on the entrails of their victims, we see it in graphic close-up detail. Romero toyed with the idea of cutting out the most explicit sequences (close-up after close-up of zombies eating entrails), but then decided that these scenes gave *Night of the Living Dead* the extra punch needed to distance it from the competition. Thus a new level of cinematic violence was born, and the horror film was changed forever” (116-7). Experienced in the practice of industrial films, Romero claimed he tried to meet two extremes of a chilling and terrifying film completed by a very limited budget. What he did not anticipate was how his film would become “the most scathing condemnations of postwar America imaginable at that moment of social/cultural history” (Sharrett 62).

In summary, *The Night of the Living Dead* portrays the dynamics of a mixed group of people huddled together in a locked-down house as the living dead mysteriously rise from their graves and take to the streets, devouring those in their path. In other words, it is a zombie movie. Moreover, it is the zombie movie. As the strangers band together to protect the group from these interstitial monsters of people, they still cannot settle their social differences resulting in fatal trespasses. However, the obvious hero of the bunch, Ben, is a black man. In 1968, this is bold and highly political casting. The hostility in the group against Ben to adhere to his suggestions reflects the oppression of racism in the real world. Moreover, the hostility against Ben confirms an unrighteous outcome as breaches of safety leads to zombies consuming members of the group and transforming the living inside the house into the living dead, including a child attacking and consuming her own parents. More shocking however, in the new standard to the horror film outcome, Ben survives the zombie attacks only to be shot and killed by a rescue team. Sharrett questions, “is he murdered because they thought he was a zombie, or because he is black? We are never sure, but the film’s images –still behind the credits– show men placing bodies, including Ben’s, on a bonfire, the grainy photos evoking both the Nazi genocide
and Southern lynchings” (62). The fear and surrealism of zombies and the walking dead is thus enhanced by echoed images of the recognizable horror of reality.

Hoberman and Rosenbaum recount that 1968, the same year as Night of the Living Dead was released, “has been called the most violent year in American history since the end of the Civil War, although it would perhaps be more accurate to say that it capped the most violent four-year period in over a century” (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 112). Romero’s film being released in that year may have been a sign of the end of times for many, but it is really more of a reflection of the kind of apocalyptic atmosphere that had been suffocating the States socially and politically throughout the 60s, including the threat of nuclear war, series of political assassinations, citizen tension and protest, widespread racism and the televised and relentless Vietnam war. Hoberman and Rosenbaum write, “One could say that Night of the Living Dead was to the Vietnam war what sci-fi cheapsters… had been to the Cold War – a brilliant open-ended metaphor for topical anxieties. The obvious distrust with which many of the film’s characters regarded Duane Jones, the images of family members feasting on each other’s flesh, and the climatic image of redneck vigilantes shooting down ‘ordinary’ citizens were as apt a projection of 1968 as anything American movies were ever to produce. Night of the Living Dead was not only an instant horror classic, but a remarkable vision of the late sixties– offering the most literal possible depiction of America devouring itself” (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 125). Variety and Roger Ebert’s sensational reviews of Night of the Living Dead beared a warning of their own, but even Variety would have to concede to a phenomenon of horror that was brewing, proving that the audience will take what they need.

Romero’s film did not seem destined for success. Shot in black and white, the film was rejected for distribution as color sold more seats, and furthermore, Romero refused to cut the film to fit an R rating. The film was eventually picked up by Walter Reade, a theater chain owner in New York City. While the film technically premiered in 1968, it encountered success when Reade reintroduced the film in 1971 as a double feature along with Slaves, starring a fresh and upcoming Dionne Warwick. Displayed within a new context to a new and wilder audience, Night of the Living Dead was given a second chance outside of the constraints of a mainstream taste, the results of which included the film grossing over $1 million and a celebratory screening at the Museum of Modern Art (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 113). The phenomenon of the cult film and the cult audience, a rising force of consumption and rebellion capable of catapulting dismissed, rejected and forgotten films to a new status apart from the mainstream through rigorous celebration of
the transgressions of conventions and morality, hijacked and cemented the legacy of Romero’s groundbreaking and game changing horror film.

3.4 Audiences

Horror is not only a genre of acquired taste, it is a genre whose audience is a significant factor in its definition and the challenging of boundaries associated with horror film. While much criticism against horror film focuses on the audience as a passive entity that endures the transgressions of horror and other extreme films, it is important to adapt the perspective that the audience is fairly active in its participation with horror film as well as defining the history and study of horror film. Beyond the act of consumption of horror film, horror audiences commonly follow the patterns, behaviors and politics of both cult and paracinema audiences, resulting in rebellion, the establishment of status and the ritualization of the viewing experience. It is important to recognize and validate the position of the audience to understand its evolution alongside that of genre, cult and transgressive films.

When discussing the identity and behaviors of audiences to validate or challenge the content of extreme film, I propose that an important perspective to consider and apply is that of performance studies. A relatively new discipline, performance studies was developed predominantly out of both NYU and North Western University in the U.S. in the 1980s, combining disciplines of the performing arts and communication/cultural studies (Schechner 20). Within performance studies, any behavior can be analyzed as a performance adapting theories from sociology, psychology, and philosophy. Schechner simplifies the seven functions of performance as: to entertain, to create beauty, to make or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach or persuade, and to deal with the sacred and demonic (45). Film as a performance is an accepted and implanted concept, as film requires the performance of actors and other cinematic professionals. Therefore, it is not a stretch to affirm that depending on the content, quality and success of a film, any or all of these seven functions can be distinguished and defined. The boundaries of performance studies, after all, are flexible and adaptable, in an attempt to absorb anything and everything under the study of performance.

If any behavior can be analyzed as performance, this confirms that the audience performs as well. In chapter four, in which I will address more the intentions of filmmakers of extreme films, I refer to the audience in the sense of their “role,” elaborating on the question of what the intentions of a filmmaker translates to and what a
filmmaker anticipates the role of the audience should be. The role of the audience can be summarized depending on where it is performed. The audience’s role in a theater, for example, includes certain expected behaviors or etiquettes, which include sitting in the dark of the theater, amongst others, in silence, and allowing oneself to indulge and focus on the performance of the presented film. Snacks, quiet socializing, and genuine reactions are within the boundaries of the theater viewing experience. As the conditions of viewing film changes over time, including the accessibility to view and screen films at home, the boundaries of the audience’s role changes as well. But not all audiences are the same, and therefore, do not play the exact same role, resulting in a fringe performance of rebellion that challenges the intention of film and how it is consumed.

3.5 Cult Films and Ritual

An operative term that comes up within both cult is ritual and ritualization. Again, performance studies is an effective source of the context and weight of this type of behavior, and its functions and implications. Schechner defines rituals as “collective memories encoded into actions” in which “ritual and play transform people, either permanently or temporarily” (52). Ritual can be either religious or secular, temporary or permanent, but its core process is similar. Ritual does not have to perform a transformation, as implied by a “rite of passage,” but it always performs a kind of transportation. Schechner describes, “In a transportation, one enters into the experience, is ‘moved’ or ‘touched’ (apt metaphors), and is then dropped off about where she or he entered,” the emphasis placed on that “no matter how strong the experience, sooner or later, most people return to their ordinary selves” (72). While rituals commonly transform their subject, they even more commonly transport the subject. While film can most definitely transform a person, especially as audience cultures designate specific films to be their own kind of “rites of passage,” film viewing always transports an audience. I propose that film’s inherent ritualistic qualities, as defined by performance studies, invites and promotes other ritualistic applications, as seen commonly by cult film and cult film audiences. Cult film audiences provide fascinating evidence of the range of influence the audience has on the legacy of a film, as well as imposing the traditional boundaries of behavior and performance by the audience. The combination of the wildness of rebellion and the stability of ritual empowers cult film, and therefore other genres, to promote change in the role of the audience and film itself.
Leading writers on the topic of cult film, Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, highlight the influence of the audience in their summary of cult film and cult film culture. They describe:

A cult film is a film with an active and lively communal following. Highly committed and rebellious in its appreciation, its audience regularly finds itself at odds with the prevailing cultural mores, displaying a preference for strange topics and allegorical themes that rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics. Cult films transgress common notions of good and bad taste, and they challenge genre conventions and coherent storytelling, often using intertextual reference gore, leaving loose ends or creating a sense of nostalgia. They frequently have troublesome production histories, coloured by accidents, failures, legends and mysteries that involve their stars and directors, and in spite of often-limited accessibility, they have a continuous market value and a long-lasting public presence (11).

Cult film, essentially, is an unconventional celebration of film for film’s sake, bypassing the authority of what constitutes good film via theory, history, critics and audiences. As established by chapter one, the development of Hollywood, and therefore world cinema, is compromised and stunted by the control of a limited and insulated sense of morality and taste, along with the intentions to sustain and expand business. The rebellion displayed in cult film challenges this core issue, exposing that audience’s taste and desires are not inherently predictable and unanimous with the mainstream pushed by dominating film industries like Hollywood.

When dissecting the defining characteristics of cult film, Mathijs and Mendik narrow down four elements including the anatomy of the film, the political economy, its cultural status and finally, the consumption and reception of the film’s audiences (1). The anatomy of film includes themes of the innovation of a film, its badness (as this perspective celebrates failure as a means of revealing innovation), genre, gore and transgression. Transgression, in this context, is interpreted as “beyond the basic poles of good and bad, a lot of the competence of a cult film lies in its ability to transgress the barriers of good and bad: to obliterate them. A common way of achieving this is through the challenging of one of more ‘conventions’ of filmmaking, which may include stylistic, moral or political qualities” (2). It is effective to frame transgression as a means to challenge conventions of film and filmmaking itself. This provides more weight and validation to the efforts to push boundaries, not just as a means to rebel against and/or insult the greater mainstream audience.
The defining points of the political economy of cult film include production, promotion and reception. Labelling film as “cult” implies a kind of notoriety that the film is not only against the norm in subject, but also in reception. This can be a financially beneficial reputation, despite its common anti-mainstream transgressions, often providing a second life to a film, as was demonstrated with Night of the Living Dead and the influence of its new audience. Mathijs and Mendik regard the social aspect of cult, stating, “Cult films rely on reputations, and reputations are the result of specific types of presence in a public sphere” (Mathijs and Mendik 7). As a result, cult film is often produced to profit off a cult audience. This approach is commonly referred to as exploitation film, which exploits the popularity of a theme, genre, or transgression for revenue, regardless of quality.

Methods of promotion are commonly part of what defines cult film, and will continue to be used for future extreme genres of excess and manufactured notoriety. If cult film has the capacity to be financially beneficial, especially when production is cheap, as it commonly is in cult horror for example, cult status may be established and applied by promoters before it is assigned by a theater or audience. Opportunities to create or inspire a cult status are developed within special screenings such as festivals, midnight screenings, and/or limited releases (Mathijs and Mendik 8). Still, these attempts to manufacture a cult status are not guaranteed. As Mathijs and Mendik point out, “Something always goes wrong with cult films – there is always something unplanned intervening in one of the levels of production, promotion and reception” (7). This implies that even when trying to profit off of cult, which may be warped by accidental production or edgy transgression, there is an element of “wild” that cannot be contained, guaranteed or authentically fabricated. This unpredictability is reflected by the audience itself.

3.6 Consumption: Ritual and Rebellion

The element that may be most significant to focus on is that of consumption, which includes the recognition of participation amongst audiences. It is within this element we observe the “role” or “performance” of the audience which helps define a film as cult via fandom and ritualization. Mathijs and Mendik summarizes that “the consumption of cult cinema relies on continuous intense participation and persistence, on the commitment of an active audience that celebrates films they see as standing out from the mainstream of ‘normal and dull’ cinema” to which the audience “aligns itself fully with what they perceive to be an attitude of rebellion or a sense of shared belonging” (4). By rebelliously
celebrating film for its traits and “anatomy,” a sense of community is created. The element of consumption and reception of cult consists of six components that can be divided into two groups. Active celebration, communion/community, and liveness, demonstrate the ritualization aspects of cult audiences, while commitment, rebellion and alternative canonization promotes a armoured communion to challenge the boundaries of taste and status (1).

The dynamic between ritual and cult considers that “as with traditional cultism, cult cinema reception relies on ritualized manners of celebration, sometimes with hierarchical orders imposed on the activities, and with fairly strict delineations for roles in the ceremonies” (Mathijs and Mendik 4). Ritual terminology is appropriate when applied to cult film audiences, as Schechner recognizes that “the need to build community is fostered by ritual. And if official rituals either do not satisfy or are egregiously exclusive, new rituals will be invented, or older rituals adapted, to meet felt needs.” (83). As “communion and community” are an important aspect of consumption, ritual is a natural process of building and maintaining that community. Moreover, the performance of ritual lends itself to creating stability.

Expanding on the theories of anthropologist Victor Turner, ritual lends to the phenomenon of “communitas” and “anti-structure,” or rather the sense of a communal spontaneity within the suspension and liberation of restraints and boundaries (Schechner 71). This can be witnessed in churchgoers speaking in tongues while overcome by the “spirit”, or cult film audiences cheering, howling and laughing at a midnight screening of a campy horror film. Organized or spontaneous, a major component to the consumption and therefore ritualization of cult film is liveness. Concluding the relation to ritual and therefore performance, Mathijs and Mendik propose the significance, function and style of cult film audience’s consumption are “‘lived’ experiences either physically or by proxy” whereas “Many celebrations of cult movies are in fact live-events, within an atmosphere akin to theatrical performance, in which ‘being there’ and ‘being part’ become important” (4). Afterall, as Schechner summarizes, “Ritual is also a way for people to connect to a collective, to remember or construct a mythic past, to build social solidarity, and to form or maintain a community. [...] During their liminal phase, ritual performances produce communitas, a feeling among participants that they are part of something greater than or outside of their individual selves” (87).

If ritual builds and stabilizes community, it is important to recognize what type of community is developed and nurtured. The component of commitment is a reference to
fandom, which can range in intensity. However, Mathijs and Mendik describe, “there is a sense that the term fandom is too generalist and tame to actually capture the particular kinds of persistence and dedication involved in cult. Perhaps the difficulty of cult fandom is that it always needs to be of an offbeat kind” (5). Fandom is not an uncommon act of appreciation of audiences, but traditionally, fans accept “the film’s interpretive integrity” while cult audiences display of commitment “involve challenges to its interpretations, either by robbing it of its meaning, or by replacing it with one that might counter its intentions” (5). In other words, the difference of consumption all comes down to rebellion.

Rebellion within the cult audience can be expressed in many ways of attitude as well as consumption. Common film audience archetypes include the cinephile and the buff, which differ in the sense that “Cinephiles are viewers who pride themselves on expert opinions on the topic of cinema” while buffs “are the extreme opposite of cinephiles, revelling in their appreciation of, and trivial knowledge of, literally every single film, loving it simply because it is the part of the medium, and loving film facts simply because they are film related facts” (Mathijs and Mendik 5-6). While cinephiles and buffs can be committed to any genre, they “come close to cultist consumption because of the way their extreme nature of appreciation challenges traditional forms of liking or disliking films” (6). In terms of extreme films, cinephiles are apt at defending transgressions using the conventions and history of cinema, while buffs, perhaps, challenge and intimidate outsiders with their unabashed celebration of misunderstood film, like the horror buff who “specializes” in slasher films.

In the end, cinephiles and buffs both play on hierarchies of status through experience of testing limits, and reflect an exuded effort of personal study of film and genre through extensive viewing and consumption. This leads to the final component of alternative canonization. As cinema studies continues to develop and assign a canon of the great works intended for study, rebellious audiences who are independent in their pursuit of their own individualized studies or development of status apart from the norm, construct an alternative canon. Jeffrey Sconce coined the term paracinema in his essay “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” in which fans accept all forms of dismissed cinema equally as a rebellion against the politics of taste and high art. Paracinema audiences suggest a new way of reading film and its structure by celebrating excess in performance, themes, gore and camp (391). I will elaborate further on the influence of paracinematic audiences on films in chapter three.
Returning to the themes of performance studies, cult cinema audience consumption and reception are driven by two kinds of performance, the performance of ritual and the performance of rebellion. Ritual brings structure and creates community, and when applied to cult audiences, ritualization becomes a form of rebellion, validating an alternative celebration of film and performance as an audience or even an individual fan. Ritual, after all, has the ability to promote change as “the ritual process itself encourages innovation by opening up a space and time for anti-structure,” Victor Turner’s concept of the suspension of limits and constraints (Schechner 88). I conclude that while cult films, and therefore horror films and extreme films, actively test boundaries of both audiences and conventions, the audience responds by playing with the tension between old/new or “conservative/innovative” through ritualized behaviors and organized rebellion against the traditional role of audience. In other words, the boundaries are being challenged by both sides. As film changes, audiences will adapt. And as audiences change, film will adapt.
4 Levelling the Extreme Horror Film

When I began studying filmmaking, I regularly lost myself in a list of the “100 Most Controversial Films of All-Time,” hosted by AMC’s Filmsite. With pages organized by decades, the site hosts a wide range of films that have earned the title of “controversial” due to their content and contextual reactions. I studied this list thoroughly, and was inspired by how many films’ controversy was outdated and tame, yet others remained validated and haunting. It was curious to me that all of these films could be listed together despite their differences in genres, content, controversy and quality. I became familiar with the titles, and slowly through my studies, have confronted many of these films myself with surprise, disgust, agreement and opposition. As the interweb continues to expand infinitely, critics, journalists, fans and average audience members alike continue to produce lists that explore and debate the ranking of more cutting edge films and their disturbing narratives and imagery. While the same titles tend to reappear in rather predictable rankings, these lists repeat the inherent challenge of differentiating the quality of the films. In other words, by grouping films of a certain reaction, whether it be shock, horror or repulsion, the purpose, message and delivery of individual films becomes lost and confused in favor of its sensationalism. To level an Academy Award winning holocaust film like Spielberg’s Schindler’s List with Hustler’s semi-pornographic production of Caligula says nothing about the films themselves, other than that they have upset or disturbed audiences. Lists are hardly a new phenomenon of pop culture consumption, and in the digital age of user generated social media, lists continue to reproduce abundantly as an easy solution to shareable content.

Three films that are commonly seen together as representations of disturbing, difficult and memorable film experiences are Stanley Kubrick’s masterpiece The Shining (1980), Gasper Noe’s notoriously raw Irreversible (2003) and Tom Six’s disgusting and shocking The Human Centipede (2007). These titles create extreme experiences and reactions via distinct and different deliveries, narratives and imagery. On the surface, they do not appear to belong together as The Shining works in the psychological realm of the family dynamic, Irreversible with the disturbing reality of sexual violence and its aftermath, and The Human Centipede with the indulgence of the unimaginable and completely heinous mutilation of the body. However, all these films are recognized as belonging to the broad and variant genre of horror, albeit they hang from very different and distanced branches. This analysis aims to distinguish the films from one another, but
also to investigate their context and classification as horror films, as well as how horror audiences are prompted or conditioned to group these films together, levelling their status to a merit of “extreme.

4.1 The Shining

There are many things to consider in context of The Shining. By this point in his career, Stanley Kubrick is a celebrated auteur. His career developed over twenty years prior to The Shining and includes films such as Dr. Strangelove (1966), 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), and A Clockwork Orange (1971). Kubrick was no stranger to controversy and, moreover, was developed enough to exercise an individual auteurist style of profound narrative and visual storytelling. His films are regarded with hosting such conscious intention, providing massive amounts of clues and references to interpret. Another important element of the context of the film is that it is an adaptation of Stephen King’s 1977 novel of the same name. King is also an established and recognized artist at this point in his career with novels including Carrie and Salem’s Lot, and soon after The Shining, The Stand. However, Kubrick’s adaptation is hardly authentic in terms of fidelity to King’s original novel. King has openly criticized Kubrick’s film, and eventually rebutted with his own televised version of the novel. Still, neither the novel nor King’s televised adaptation have matched the notoriety and respect of Kubrick’s film.

The Shining features a small family who move to a secluded mountain hotel, to look after the grounds over the winter months. Jack Torrance, iconically played by Jack Nicholson, is a writer and recovering alcoholic. The decision to take the job is expressed by the family as an opportunity for time and isolation to write, but there is an element of escape from the life of Jack the alcoholic, and what he must have inflicted on his family, including his fragile wife Wendy, played by Shelly Duvall, and his young son Danny. Danny introduces an element of the supernatural as he is not like an ordinary child, often speaking as another entity or personality named Tony, someone or something that is more knowing and protective of Danny. Life alone in the hotel begins innocently enough for the Torrances, but over time, Jack sinks into an altered, possessed state of mind, disconnecting from reality and exhibiting alarming bouts of anger while Danny begins to see the ghosts who manifest physically to harm the family. First, a crone like woman in the bathtub of room 237 strangles Danny, followed by the bartender and hotel staff who provide Jack, the recovering alcoholic, with alcohol and a proposition to kill his family. The remainder of the film follows Wendy and Danny’s dizzying escape, the family further
isolated by a blizzard. Finally, Danny outwits his father, who has followed him into the hotel’s hedge maze wielding an ax. Jack, demented and ravenous, searches for Danny until he freezes to death as Wendy and Danny escape the grounds. The next image centers on Jack’s frozen and hateful face, seemingly the next morning, before revealing an old framed photo inside the hotel, from a roaring party of the 1920s, where Jack, or his likeness, appears to be in the front and center of the crowd.

*The Shining* is recognized widely as a horror film, while it hosts very little gore in comparison to other films in its category. There is usually one of two responses by viewers who reference *The Shining* as a memorable and disturbing experience. Many who celebrate the film respond that the terror and discomfort resides in the disturbing theme of a man slowly willing himself to murder his family, a much more general but heavily weighted response. However, more impulsive reactions tend to reference an inexplicable and unsettling moment when Wendy escapes one of Jack’s violent pursuits. As Wendy escapes down the staircase in their personal quarters, she sees at the end of the hallway, two men. The camera zooms in, revealing one man dressed in a bear suit, on his knees with his rear exposed, hovering over the lap of another man who lays on a bed. They simultaneously rise up to look directly at Wendy. The shot is incredibly quick, and Wendy, shocked and terrified, is quick to move on in search of safety. The scene is explicit though it is not particularly graphic, and implies something sexual in the midst of the supernatural presence of unexpected “guests”. The lack of explanation before or after, and the haunting feeling of interrupting a moment one was not intended to see, seems to stick with people who are not inspired to identify with the rest of the film on first impulse.

In the beginning, as the staff is moving out and the Torrances move in, chef Dick Hallorann picks up on Danny’s special nature. He explains to Danny that he has the ability to “shine,” an ambiguous power including telepathy. Understanding the legacy of the hotel, as a previous caretaker had ultimately murdered his family on the job, Dick explains to Danny that the imagery he may see in the hotel, the ghosts and their history of carnage, are projections that cannot harm him. He describes it as the same as cartoons on TV. Dick attempts to prepare Danny to recognize the difference between what is real and what is not, but these boundaries collapse as the ghosts physically manifest, enough to assault Danny and provide Jack with alcohol. Dick’s wisdom fails legitimacy, just as he fails to protect that family when he arrives, a shining knight for less than a minute before he is hacked to death by Jack. We as an audience witness and watch a projection as well, the film itself. If Danny is not safe from the projections which Dick promised could not hurt
him, how do we as an audience cope with accepting that we are safe from the projection of a film, or rather what the film reflects about our lives?

Further blurring the boundaries of the real and the projected, the lines between good and evil are compromised as the postmodern monster is not always a literal and physical monster. Noel Carroll posits that monsters can “take the form of fusion or fission figures.” A fusion figure “combines contradictory elements in an unambiguous identity” creating a kind of hybrid figure closer to a conventional monster, using the example of the possessed Regan from *The Exorcist*. On the other hand, the fission figure “combines contradictory elements in two identities that become connected over time in the same body” revealing a slower development of possession and an emphasis on the host of a character and a new or separate and more monstrous personality (Pinedo 20). This is commonly applied as alien invasion, supernatural possession or, more realistically, a kind of psychotic break. Jack Torrance of *The Shining* is a fission figure, as he becomes possessed over time, as well as revealing the monster of alcoholism that inhabits, albeit dormant, his body as well.

My initial interpretation of the monster within Jack was not a possession of the spirits of the hotel, but rather Jack’s alcoholism. This is emphasized more in King’s book, but much of Jack’s monstrosity lies in his capacity and desire to destroy his own family. At the hotel, it manifests in connection to a seemingly extended curse that had taken another family before the Torrances. However, Jack’s past as an alcoholic implies that spirits, curse, hotel or not, Jack always was capable of this destruction. It is a monster inside of him. Alcoholism, moreover, is a monster too many families live amongst, attempting to maintain a stable and rational home with an irrational and destructive force. It is a very real life horror of humbling and heartbreaking statistics.

However, we must trust and anticipate that Kubrick’s intention goes even deeper. Many theories and interpretations are far fetched and easy to dismiss that do not always honor the quality and depth of the film itself. For example, the most notorious conspiracy remains that *The Shining* was a confession of Kubrick assisting in the production of faking the NASA moon landing. While conspiracy theories and interpretations are a fun exercise of analysis for a film with replay value like *The Shining*, they still do not explain what is so disturbing about the film, yet so difficult to identify. However, an interpretation by Rob Ager on Learning Collative, which is also translated into a video essay on Youtube, makes a valiant and successful attempt to reveal a very real horror underneath the supernatural air of the Overlook Hotel, and the monster who haunts and torments the
Torrance family. According to Ager’s interpretation, the film is not so much about alcoholism as the monster, as it is about sexual abuse. This implies that Danny had been abused by Jack in the past, and the abuse continues in the isolation of the hotel (Ager “Mazes, Mirrors, Deception and Denial”). This interpretation is successful when applied to the infamous and highly referenced scene of the bear suited man and partner. The scene is not only off or taboo; it feels deeply wrong.

Pinedo asserts that the horror monster is not susceptible to reason, but rather violence. She reiterates: “Characters who survive must come to terms not only with the irrationality of the situation but with their ability to be as single-mindedly destructive as the monster” (22). Wendy is unable to match Jack’s monster. And if applying the theory of sexual abuse, it creates more depth and weakness for a woman to navigate a minefield of guilt and responsibility, unable to confront what is happening to protect her son. The toughest we see Wendy is when she believes that Jack has hurt Danny, before learning of the woman in room 237. She is quick to believe that Jack is capable of strangling his son, but when she hears of the woman in room 237, she is just as quick to return to Jack as the leader. Whatever it is that Wendy does or does not know, she is unable to protect Danny from Jack. In the end, Danny, a young vulnerable boy, defeats Jack. Danny is not so much a hero for saving himself and his mother. A child should never have to be a hero in postmodern horror, as this requires the ability to work in the irrational realm of the monster, match the monster and, moreover, triumph.

4.2 Irreversible
Dealing with the most authentic display of violence, Irreversible is recognized for two major elements. One, Gaspar Noé’s uncommon story telling which is performed episodically in reverse, and a relentlessly long, static rape scene. While the term “brutal” is used a lot to describe this viewing experience, famed critic Roger Ebert’s review is clarifying, sensitive and thoroughly defensive of the film’s intentions and implications. Ebert presents a very strong point when describing the film that begins with a murder, and works its way backwards to a graphic rape, the actual catalyst of the murder, that if told in chronological order, it would be a completely different film. The cleverness (and ammunition against the spirit) in Irreversible’s reverse storytelling manipulates and reveals information, intentions, and loyalties of what is intended to be debatably “virtuous” vengeance, but painfully does not succeed. Ebert states “By placing the ugliness at the beginning, Gaspar Noe forces us to think seriously about the sexual
violence involved. The movie does not end with rape as its climax and send us out of the theater as if something had been communicated. It starts with it, and asks us to sit there for another hour and process our thoughts” (Ebert).

In context to the brutality of Irreversible, 2003 was another memorable year for French cinema with the release of Haute Tension, a film that would become an ambassador of the wave of the New French Extremity movement. Haute Tension is intensely graphic in its violence and mutilation, demanding an advanced audience of strong stomachs. Other notable films of the French Extremity include Martyrs (2008), a film I personally defend as philosophically brilliant, but is divided by an audience who resents the exposure to such violence and torture (also commonly referred to as “torture porn”) with absolutely no redeeming justice. Irreversible is not so much about pushing the limits of the body or the audience as it is an utterly bleak and devastating meditation of shockingly common violence, a fear that is a reality for women, especially. Ebert’s review defends that Irreversible “is unflinchingly honest about the crime of rape. It does not exploit. It does not pander. It has been said that no matter what it pretends, pornography argues for what it shows. "Irreversible" is not pornography” (Ebert).

Irreversible takes place in chapters or segments arranged in reverse order, so for the actual beginning of the film, we are introduced to our protagonists at a kind of “end” of their own story, a point where their lives are irreversibly changed. The story of the film, separate from the plot or script, is about Marcus, his girlfriend Alex and his friend Pierre. After an argument about Marcus’ behavior during a party, Alex leaves to go home in protest, but is attacked and raped in a pedestrian tunnel. Marcus and Pierre learn about the incident after they stumble upon the scene where Alex is being taken by paramedics. Enraged, Marcus intends to avenge his now comatose girlfriend and pieces together his own mystery of who committed her assault to confront and attack her abuser. Pierre accompanies him, but tries to act as a voice of reason to stop Marcus from making an irreversible mistake. When he finally confirms the name and location of Alex’s rapist, still not knowing his identity, Marcus confronts the man at a gay BDSM club. The man in question breaks Marcus’ arm and attempts to sexually assault him before Pierre, who had refused to take any further part, saves Marcus by fighting off the the man with a fire extinguisher. Pierre is arrested and Marcus is taken to the hospital. When reversed, the motivation behind each segment is shrouded in mystery until we have backtracked far enough, about a third into the film, that Marcus’ vengeance is over a rape. What is absolutely devastating besides the graphic and relentless violence, and a static view of the
evil amongst us, by reversing the order of the chapters, we learn that Marcus confronted, and thus Pierre murdered, the wrong man.

*Irreversible* is commonly absorbed into the category of “foreign film” a bad habit among American audiences, but is actually a very extreme example of psychological horror. Descriptions of the film’s graphic violence do not translate the mood and ambience of the film, which is truly terrifying. Common in Noé’s films, the camera lens is not human in the sense that it is neither grounded nor leveled. The camera floats and spins within the space, distorting imagery and disorienting the audience. The film begins in an unconventional location, a BDSM club. Before Marcus and Pierre arrive, the camera explores the club revealing mostly darkness with waves of red light and closeups of tortured and compromised bodies, soundtracked by moans and cries of men along with the deep unsettling drone of an electronic score, which continues to build tension as the imagery slowly becomes more clear, revealing violent and exploitive sex. The location appears as an abstracted nightmare to the audience; however, Marcus and Pierre enter this intimidating space already traumatized by Alex’s assault. Looking back and understanding the extreme lengths Marcus pushes to seek vengeance is gut wrenching. He is not only out of his element; he witnesses a multiplied figurative replay of his girlfriend’s assault, only to become a victim of this violence as well.

Continuing the analysis of what it takes to confront the monster of postmodern horror, Marcus and Pierre are thrust into a realm of the irrational in order to confront and avenge the irrational assault on Alex. However, due to Noe’s reverse story telling, it is not clear who the monster is, as the role shifts between the protagonists, the rapist and the other man. Without the context of the rape, the first thing that the audience learns about Marcus as he enters the club is his intention to avenge, as Pierre tries to stop him. Pierre pleads with Marcus and ultimately declares “You’re not human anymore. Even animals don’t seek revenge, Marcus.” The single clue that Marcus’ intentions are debatably and objectively virtuous are immediately negated. Marcus, no longer human, and not even animal, has lowered himself to a new base level. As the film scales back, we learn that Marcus is not so much a monster as he is a man who is devastated and desperate to gain control in the irrational world of random sexual violence. However, in the pursuit to restore an urgent yet unstable order, Marcus inadvertently makes a monster out of his friend Pierre, who has tried to stop and protect Marcus on his rampage. Ready to fight and kill the man he assumes is responsible, Marcus is unable to fulfill his desire and need to restore order. Despite refusing to participate further in Marcus’ pursuits, Pierre emerges
to save his friend. However, he does not simply defend Marcus; Pierre slowly and repeatedly bludgeons the man in question. The entire incident is a single take and nothing is hidden from the lens. We, as the audience, can see the damage done to the man’s face, after each blow. After thoroughly mutilating the man, Pierre still continues. He may have defended Marcus, but neither of them has avenged Alex. Pierre has slaughtered a man. Both Marcus and Pierre have sunk to match their target, becoming monsters themselves. Their sacrifice does not prevail in restoring order. As Pinedo states, “The postmodern horror genre constructs an unstable, open-ended universe in which categories collapse, violence constitutes everyday life, and the irrational prevails” (29). The events and results of the evening are utterly irreversible, and the only figure to walk away unscathed is the original figure to shatter order, Alex’s rapist.

4.3 The Human Centipede

As described by Laura Wyrick in her article “Horror at Century's End: Where Have All the Slashers Gone?” following the late 90s and the Bush administration-influenced paranoia of the American public psyche of the 2000s, horror critics and academics noted a stall or “slump” of creative horror in Hollywood. Remakes of earlier slasher successes dominated the box offices, creating more scholarship and discussion of the canons of earlier 70s horror, and influenced fans to “study” independently these foundations of the genre. In the meantime, amongst remakes and the studies of canonization of classics, “torture porn” found its way to the forefront of 2000s contemporary horror. Coined as “Gorenography” by Caputi and Russell in their analysis of the parallels between horror film and pornography, the reference to horror as porn implies a sensational and gratuitous delivery of bodily violence (Boyle 40). While “torture porn” was a term more associated with negative criticism of films that lacked substance to reinforce gratuitous violence, it developed as more of a proud subgenre that challenged average moviegoers to a new level of cinematic narrative, and a revival of the heightened violence and tolerance of the slasher film. These films, however, tired quickly. Violence of this magnitude risks stability as the structure of the film becomes transparent and weak. While enjoyed in the safety of a movie theater for a limited experience, or in the home, these films still reflect a lack of evolution in the genre’s storytelling progress. More blood and realistic effects did not elevate the horror genre that was looking more to its past than having faith in its future. Mainstream shock value had reached its limit, or so it seemed. Enter Tom Six’s *The Human Centipede*. 
While a film like *Irreversible* demands a higher word count to properly describe its plot and delivery, *The Human Centipede* only needs one sentence. The plot can easily be simplified to a maniac German scientist, reflecting the Nazi doctor archetype, who kidnaps three travellers, two American female friends, and a lone Japanese man, all of whom he submits as subjects in his experiment to create a human centipede via a single digestive tract through multiple bodies. In simpler and more vulgar words, he surgically connects his tortured victims from mouth to anus. There is no more mystery beyond that. The victims are captured, undergo surgery, exist as a “human centipede,” attempt to retaliate but are defeated.

What is most interesting about *The Human Centipede* is its trailer. There is nothing particularly significant discovered, solved, or really explored in the film that is not already effectively introduced by the trailer. Apart from a few extra characters and a failed escape/retribution by the victims, the trailer reveals, step by step, the capture and a clear enough explanation of the procedure itself, all while flashing the text “A demented surgeon will wield any instrument to perform the unspeakable. No conscience, no mercy, and no hope. Your flesh is his fantasy” (“The Human Centipede - Official Trailer”). The film is upfront with its conclusion that there is no rational way out of this conflict. The trailer is explicitly telling us this and upon watching the film, there are no secrets or surprises to contest this conclusion. The film is simply a game changer solely for its extreme content – a reflection and application of Nazi-exploitation horror, not its narrative.

I would argue that this is where the shock of *The Human Centipede* actually ends, but after multiple sequels creating a trilogy to top the number of victims from its preceding film, it is an honest surprise to see how often this film, the first sequence specifically, is impulsively referred to as one’s most shocking cinematic experience. After all, the film is simply not interesting. However, the concept alone is incredibly effective. The marketing of the film was extremely successful as well. The internet age of individual voices and larger established blogs carried a heavy load of the film’s promotion. For festival audiences, where the film succeeded and created its notoriety, viewers may have been introduced to the concept of the film via the film itself. For the rest of us on the other side of our computer screens, this concept was delivered via reviews, news stories and the release of the film’s trailer. I remember distinctly the feeling during the climax of the trailer, when the victims are revealed in their new form and forced to “stand,” or position themselves onto their knees. It is both dramatic, horrifying, and a clear reference to the
Frankenstein franchise, reimagining the classic “it’s alive” zenith. Because of its marketing, I would posit that this film had the widest reach to its contemporary audience. It was shocking and upfront in its content enough that people were moved and disgusted merely by its concept. This promoted more discussion. And since understanding what a “human centipede” is, one can understand everything the film has to offer with that single, short, vulgar sentence.

In retrospect, this film is painfully transparent and while celebrated for its extreme status, it is also criticized for its gratuity and its weakness. If a film’s plot, story arc and imagery is this obvious from the trailer, let alone its title, how did it manage to successfully draw any audience? It is understood that a film called *The Human Centipede* has no happy ending to deliver. It is anticipated and accepted. Afterall, postmodern horror relishes the unstable, the irrational, and the collapse and blurring of boundaries (Pinedo 29). There is a status to consuming film. Mainstream theatergoing consumers had practiced this with the spike in remakes and, moreover, the wave of “torture porn,” developing stamina and tolerance. Coping with the irrational becomes a kind of sport of stamina and status. While new generations of moviegoers continue to visit the box office and build up their own tolerance, this practice is hardly new to the horror genre, committed fans, scholars and critics. Consuming horror is a form of maintenance to one’s tastes and limits. *The Human Centipede* succeeds as an extreme horror film as it has demanded its own status, due to its extreme nature, to validate future developing horror fans who are proving their own status and stamina by working through the established horror cannon, which has absorbed *The Human Centipede* alongside *The Shining*. 

### 4.4 A Paracinematic Conclusion

Horror is a successfully consumed genre, and while its merits continue to be debated, there always seems to be an audience for it, no matter what the quality or the limits of the film are. In “The Poetics of Horror: More Than Meets the Eye,” Dennis White defines the object of horror film as “the triggering of our basic fear of the unknown, our fear of being unable to deal with our environment” with “the most obvious embodiments of this fear are monsters and nightmarish situations beyond our comprehension and control” (8). He suggests that “The fact that audiences tolerate, even seek out and enjoy, a film designed to horrify them, can tell us a great deal about what it is in these films that makes them inspire fear or dread. Conversely these films can tell something about those who enjoy them, and, by induction, about people in general” (7). The interesting thing about
horror as a genre is that it reaches a very broad spectrum. Clearly the three films dissected and digested above are completely different from one another, exploring unique and distinct approaches to film, and how we produce and wrestle a monster with a root of an all too real horror. Moreover, the culture surrounding horror in film has a distinct and traceable history of levelling and grouping, for better or for worse.

Jeffrey Sconce coined the term “paracinema” in “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” as a means of categorizing the phenomenon of what may be commonly understood and assumed as “cult.” Paracinema references not a specific genre or category of film, but rather a collection of diverse subgenres as a counter-aesthetic to Hollywood and high brow film culture. This includes a range of Japanese monster movies, campy slasher films and their accompanying sequels, to Elvis beach parties, and all forms of exploitation and cult in between. Sconce describes paracinema as a “most elastic textual category,” which rebelliously aims to “valorize all forms of cinematic 'trash', whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture” (372).

Paracinema as a concept truly manifests within the pages of film catalogs in the early days of home video distribution. These catalogs did not organize and distribute based according to genre or demand, but rather as an attitude against the mainstream, celebrating films that were dismissed, looked down upon or met with censorship and scrutiny. Horror and european art films appeared side by side, bridging genres, styles and auteurism on a single platform. Catalogues enhanced and encouraged the customer experience, providing descriptions to guide buyers to find what they were looking for, as well as to teach newcomers how to watch or appreciate the films in question. In a way, a catalog doubled as a lesson in film, genre, and appreciation. This kept customers happy as it broadened their horizons while catering to their specific tastes (Hawkins 20). The Paracinematic attitude did not only function within the lowbrow rebellious circles, as catalogues were not the only providers of European art films. European cinema could be accessed via more upscale video companies who hosted a wider selection but also higher quality of the video itself. Interestingly, these companies also catered to horror audiences, creating a kind of parallel of audience and taste between two very different genres and sometimes quality (19).

The alliance of horror and European cinema, specifically that reflecting high European art culture rejected by threatened American moralists and censors back to the production code era, continues today as does the debate of high and low culture. Hawkins
further suggests that while this conflict of classification and high/low art crosses over to other genres, “the European art film prestige import cinema-horror is perhaps the best vantage point from which to study the cracks that seem to exist everywhere in late twentieth-century ‘sacrilized’ film culture. Precisely because it plays so relentlessly on the body, horror’s ‘low’ elements are easy to see” (26). Horror fans have developed their taste, and status, in exploring their genre parallel to European art films, and vice versa. This consumer history influences the trajectory of future audiences. While *The Shining, Irreversible* and *The Human Centipede* cater to distinctively different audiences, naturally there is an overlap of partakers. The overlap audience provides stability to these significant films that are at times threatened by their own extreme status. The overlap audience commonly consists of the special horror fan who's cinematic taste is built on the context of the independent study of the horror canon as presented by Wyrick, the welcoming and absorption of all levels of arts as presented by Sconce, and by the consumption and consumerism to validate horror, European art film and the extreme on the market. There are plenty of forces that threaten the horror genre, including censorship, moralists, and audiences of contrasting taste, creating a public of fear. Horror is a vulnerable genre, especially as postmodern horror suggests that we are not safe from the projections. But the point commonly missed is that real horror exists around us, as well as at the root of these films. In defense of shutting down difficult material, Karen Boyle asserts that “While there is certainly a place for examining how media texts attempt to position their audiences... without empirical audience research we can say very little about how audiences actually engage with and make sense of these texts in their own lives” (40). Extreme film experiences can be memorable, haunting, even traumatizing. But evidently, the purpose, whether it is as successful as *The Shining*, as painful as *Irreversible*, or as exploitive as *The Human Centipede*, is to exercise our ability to cope and continue in a world that challenges us to make sense of the irrational, and exist within it.
5 From Salò to Serbia - Two Giants of Extreme Cinema

In my previous chapter, I aimed to analyze the differences between the previously grouped horror films not only to define their place within the horror genre, but also to create a distinction between the films to reveal the wide range into which horror can be achieved. I concluded that there is an established history of audience culture that influences the connections between these films, and that these connections are heavily shaped by paracinematic perspectives traced to, and established by, cult film audiences. Moreover, this history and tendency to level and view film, and art, on an even paracinematic level, is used as a defense against outsiders who look down upon horror cinema as a form of “low art” and exploitation, despite its capacity for grand and ground-breaking storytelling, as displayed by *The Shining* or *Irreversible*. By now it is established that film consumption is an act beyond entertainment, but also one of catharsis, rebellion, and status. While *The Shining*, *Irreversible*, and *The Human Centipede* are memorable cinematic experiences for individuals, as well as creating legendary reactions from audiences, to fairly analyze the levelling of extreme cinema, there are two films that must be confronted.

When I began my studies in film, conducting my own research in controversial cinema, in particular its context, reactions and status, there was one film that ranked highest in terms of shock factor, controversy, and debate. Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Italian shock-satire *Salò, or 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) is a contemporized adaptation of Marquis de Sade’s novel of the same name, featuring a group of fascists as a commentary Italy’s political environment, as well as a reaction by Pasolini towards his audiences and their accused misunderstanding and misuse of his work, and therefore ideology. Featuring bleak and confrontational themes of violence, rape, sodomy, and coprophagy, *Salò* remains a defining example of how far art-house cinema can push and retain a level of recognized art, albeit, not by everyone.

By 2009, the previously addressed film *The Human Centipede* encountered a wave of reaction and disgust after its premiere and a subsequent barrage of online reactions to the trailer and eventually the film. Once it was finally available for home viewing, including Netflix, the conversations about the film changed. Yes, it was crude and vulgar, but its impact did not seem to match its reputation and marketing. The legend of *The Human Centipede* was debatably more interesting as a legend, not as a filmgoing experience. While the aughts inaugurated mainstream torture porn and the New French
Extremity as staples of horror and cult cinema, the decade ended with a new assault to challenge the ranks with Srdjan Spasojevic’s *A Serbian Film* (2010). Rumored for its shocking graphic content, explicit details of the most upsetting scenarios led the discussion. Before knowing the actual plot of the film, I knew this was a film that included themes of snuff and sexual assault against children and infants. It seemed as if nobody I knew had seen *A Serbian Film*, nor were they willing to, myself included. Over thirty years after Pasolini’s Dantesque Circles of “Mania,” “Shit,” and “Death” chapters, they had been outdone by Spasojevic’s “newborn porn.” It was an unofficial contest that did not feel much like a win for any audience, cinephile or buff.

There is power in demystifying these films to analyze the core of what it is that contributes to their disturbing themes. As Jeffrey Sconce suggests with paracinematic audiences, there is an art to seeing past performance in order to adapt towards new structures of reading cinema. Despite their transgressions, both films attempt to function and embrace the conventions of cinema to perform a level of excess. Considering that *Salò* has long established a reputation both good and bad, I posit that the comparison of these two films, though thought incomparable by more elitist circles, will aid in demystifying both films’ performances of excess and transgressive themes. to reveal the core of a disturbing, but real truth. *Salò* is not classically categorized as horror despite the plethora of horrific themes; *Salò* is satire. *A Serbian Film* is recognized as horror. Considering, however, how difficult these films are for audiences to process, I propose that observing these extreme films and their horrific themes as parallels of horror can assist in organizing the separation of shock from the core of what is truly disturbing and the message the filmmakers intend to deliver.
5.1 Salò

From the beginning of his career in cinema, Pier Paolo Pasolini was a notorious and controversial figure. From his debut film Accatone in 1961, Pasolini produced groundbreaking, provocative, and challenging films for the next fourteen years, before his life and career ended with the completion of Salò. Pasolini’s work explored and challenged the limits of taste regarding consumption and capitalism, religion, and sacrilege. Pasolini’s politics and beliefs were a confrontation against the religious and conservative forces of an Italy that struggled to emerge from its fascist history, the growing strength of the Mafia, the targeting of anarchists, and police corruption. Michael Syrimis suggests that Pasolini’s career can be observed as three phases including a revisionist-neorealist phase, a modernist phase “placing him in the canon of auteurs,” and lastly, the popular/commercial phase (510-12).

In reference to this first phase, Pasolini describes that ”Neorealism is finished. It was a rational and humanistic movement, inspired by the feelings that Italians lived through during the immediate period after the fall of Fascism. This neorealist creative tendency was gradually abandoned as Italy, instead of maintaining the principles of the Resistance, let itself fall into reactionary clericalism”’ (Syrimis 511). Initially, Pasolini maintained elements of Italian neorealism with respect to his production style, which commonly moved the camera from an indoor movie sets to outdoor and authentic locations, as well as including nonprofessional actors. In contention with the reactionary clericalism and postwar attitudes of Italy, Pasolini often applied both Marxist and Freudian theories, romanticizing the proletariat while interpreting Gramsci’s Marxist writings in which alienation may also “be caused by the loss of a sense of mythical identity, a sense of harmony with nature destroyed by industrial civilization” (Bondanella 419). Pasolini asserted that the middle class, in their post-WWII growth and proliferation, had destroyed this sense of “the sacred” (421).

The third phase of Pasolini’s career - the popular/commercial phase - suggests that Pasolini began to embrace cinema as mass entertainment, foregoing the smaller intellectual audiences for a larger crowd and a larger message. In Pasolini’s Trilogy of Life, which included The Decameron (1971), The Canterbury Tales (1972), and Arabian Nights (1974), all three films are literary adaptations. Already a massively controversial and intellectual figure, Pasolini’s intent was to shift focus from his films taking up a position of social criticism, to that of a “celebration of the revolutionary power of
sexuality [...] a force he identified with the non-bourgeois subproletariat” (Bondanella 423). This change in focus can be seen as somewhat contradictory as “the sexual revolution of the period during the political upheavals was largely the product of middle-class protagonists” (423). Pasolini meanwhile would continue to be confronted with other issues that challenged his sexual identity and ideology. *The Decameron* concludes that, “human sexuality is no longer a sin,” but it’s sexual explicitness helped to bring in a large audience, one of the largest box office grosses in postwar Italy, as well as criticism of his work on a larger scale. Many of Italy’s intellectuals at the time dismissed Pasolini’s work as the film was later produced into non-franchised “semipornographic sequels” (426). Also, thanks to his cinematic success, Pasolini, a Marxist, became a very rich man. Plagued by such contradictions and complications, Pasolini soon denounced his *Trilogy of Life* and began work on his *Trilogy of Death*.

*Salò: or 120 Days of Sodom* is an adaptation of the Marquis de Sade’s infamous *120 Days of Sodom*, a heavily challenged and provocative book written from the Bastille in 1785, but not published until 1904. Pasolini’s adaptation modernizes the four noblemen of the novel - the Duke, the President, the Magistrate, and the Bishop - and reimagines them as Italian Fascists in the final days of Italy’s involvement in WWII. These four figures that represent the institutions that control and govern Italian society, retreat to a villa with eighteen kidnapped and carefully chosen teenagers, female and male, four women who act as escorts and narrators, and a handful of rowdy young guards. Following their own established laws and rules that ‘allows them to completely disregard humanity and live out their most savage and salacious fantasies, the fascists pass the days brutalizing the teenagers through a series of actions that involve extreme degradation, humiliation, exploitation, abuse, torture, and sexual violence. The film is nothing short of cynical, and that is its point; Pasolini’s mirror to Italy is the reflection of the celebration of the circle of power that not only abuses and corrupts, but in turn normalizes abuse and corruption.

*Salò*’s opening credits offers little suggestion of what is to come. Soundtracked by a languid and relaxed jazz composition, the classic black text against a lighter background spells out few recognizable names including Pasolini, and the highly successful composer Ennio Morricone. Before the conclusion of the opening credits, Pasolini actually supplies a rather unusual and short bibliography of de Sade and philosophical concepts that are based on his works. As *Salò* is already an adaptation of de Sade, as well as the use of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* for the film’s episodic narrative structure, this unique
reference implies a certain historicism, intellectualism, and academic stability inherent within the film. By suggesting referential texts, Pasolini suggests the audience has a bit of homework to complete in order to truly understand what the film has to say. Moreover, in the way it references canonical works of literature, it also implies that there is something inherently true about what is about to happen, as if the oncoming transgressions somehow have a citation that will in turn validate and explain them.

*Salò* as a film is not a direct example of the horror genre, but it displays some of the most horrific themes and scenes analyzed within cinema. More importantly, the film stars a slew of real monsters, the main and most powerful being the four fascists themselves. What is interesting about this circle is how entwined they are with each other, creating a single dooming force of evil. The film wastes no time in establishing the breadth and depth of the fascists’ absurdity and monstrosity. The opening scene shows the four men sitting together as they pass and sign a book as part of what seems to be a binding contract, all the while assigning this meeting with an aspect of officialdom as they address each other by their titles with great respect. Next, their four daughters are escorted into an office, where the the men announce their intentions to trade their daughters amongst themselves to marry, in order to further conserve and consolidate their standing and power, as well as their metamorphosis into a protected indistinguishable force. It is political incest. The behavior of announcing their intentions and actions to a diplomatic fault is the default language and manner of the fascists. Throughout the film, in between willingly humiliating themselves and abusing those around them, they continue to speak to each other within the same tone and style of their positions, always addressing each other by title. Their conversations are diplomatic, refined and laborious, exposing a banality and shallowness of evil. At one point, they are inspired to improvise a twisted contest of beauty and form between the teens. They indulge each other in their votes, debating back and forth diplomatically as all of the teens pose naked on their knees with their rears in the air. The best “physique,” the fascists agree, will be awarded a death of unimaginable pain. Their cruelty is inhumane, but the truly disturbing notion with these men and their actions is the sense that nothing has changed. Their work, statuses, and personal lives are a single flat entity. They are not possessed, they are not transformed. They are neither a fission nor a fusion character, and they confront no challenge to change. These men of power are at their utmost evil, which is doubtful to exceed or heal its current permanent state.
A conflict that arises for the audience in processing the level of the “monster” in *Salò* is also based in the atmosphere which surrounds and enables this retreat. Robin Wood suggests that the horror structure is the introduction of normality, to be interrupted by a monster, only to attempt an effort to return to normality. Within that frame, *Salò* proposes bad news for its victims and therefore the audience. Much of the problem with the level of evil possessed by the fascists is that it is not new, and it is seemingly unchallenged. Scenes of a mix of military and mafia like forces gathering teen boys from small villages host an air of complacency amongst bystanders. Groups watch from afar, unflinched, a mother chases after her son with his scarf, her final attempt to somehow protect him, and a child formally and coolly says goodbye to one teen boy as he responds with the same tone and brevity. As these boys are gathered, they are presented by another individual outside of the fascists immediate circle who displays the boys as if they are cattle, with an enthusiasm and effort to impress. It is left unanswered what this man has to gain in participating in this trade.

The teens themselves are hardly prepared for what is about to happen to them, as this appears to be the first round of this kind of holiday the fascists stage. Still, there is an acceptance that they, as innocent civilians, are physical property of these four men, and therefore the state. Another piece of evidence of what is “normality” lies in Syrimis’ observation of how the boys undress. They do not remove their clothes to show their full naked self, but rather pull up their shirts and down their trousers to expose what the fascists are actually interested in. Syrimis observes that the teen boys are “innocent yet pragmatic. They know all this *instinctively*, because the regime is like nature” (524). What is more challenging than to accept these men as the monsters they transparently present themselves to be, is to accept the environment that normalizes these requests and actions. In the context of this film, where normality has been established that this is completely acceptable, it is a difficult truth to accept that monstrosity is enabled and therefore committed by average people.

### 5.2 *A Serbian Film*

Premiered at South by Southwest Film Festival in March 2010, *A Serbian Film* unleashed shook audiences of the popular Austin, Texas festival. An American audience would seem to be a fit for co-writer Alexsander Radivojevic, who states “We were big genre fans, especially of American 1970s cinema. [...] So we adopted a genre we loved to say some really important, if brutally harsh, things about our shared experience” (Kimber
The 1970s was a romanticized age of horror in which the boundaries of transgression and aesthetic excess were shifted. The shared experiences Radivojevic, and thus the creative team behind *A Serbian Film* refers to is one lost on a young American audience. Director Srdjan Spasojevic contextualizes *A Serbian Film* as:

> The break up on Yugoslavia, Slobadan Milosevic, Kosovo - it’s all been depressing, frightening and completely impossible to function properly within the country. It has been an environment where anything can happen, and usually for the worse. Our destiny has never been in our hands, through constant oppression and it’s those feelings we wanted to give voice in *A Serbian Film*. It’s a literal metaphor about how violated we feel as a nation, how abused we have been by our own government (Kimber 110).

If Pasolini uses precision and structure as a vehicle to drive difficult themes, Spasojevic is speeding recklessly.

*A Serbian Film* is a fairly difficult and uncomfortable film to summarize as its themes and content are very much integrated into its plot. It is suffice to say that the atrocities in *Salò* are extreme, devastating, and disgusting, without needing to explain individually how the actions and events influence the plot. The point of the matter is that the fascists are capable of committing the worst of atrocities against their own citizens, let alone youth. *A Serbian Film*’s plot and themes are synonymous and individually relevant. With great effort to bypass its shock value, the simple synopsis of *A Serbian Film* is as follows: Milos, a retired pornstar, is recruited to work on a new project which would guarantee financial stability, not simply for him and his wife, but for the rest of his young son’s life. The director of this upcoming film, Vukmir, declares himself an artist who aims to elevate pornography. What Milos encounters is a series of violent and dangerous sexual encounters with the looming threat of child exploitation. When he tries to quit, Vukmir reveals the intentions of the project, that these productions are for a foreign market which values above all the exploitation of victims. Milos leaves Vukmir’s office with the intention of never returning, not realizing he has been drugged.

Milos wakes up at home, covered in blood with no sign of his family. Milos returns to Vukmir’s office and the set, following a series of flashbacks of the places he has supposedly been while drugged. Milos pieces missing time back together, presenting a series of escalating sexual violence committed by the drugged Milos and filmed by Vukmir’s crew. As portrayed through flashbacks, Milos is brought back to set to perform with animal like where he violently rapes and kills a costar, only to be led to a new set in which he ultimately, and unknowingly, rapes his young son as his brother, Marko, rapes
Milos’ wife. As the victims wake, and Milos begins to sober, both he and his wife attack and kill the crew, Marko and Vukmir. The film ends with an unspoken understanding that there is no way to recover from the atrocity the family has endured against their will, yet simultaneously at the hands of their patriarch. They commit suicide together. When death appears to finally have brought them peace, it is revealed that another crew is in their bedroom as the director gestures for them to “get on with i,” signaling the rape and desecration of the family’s bodies in the continuation of production.

*A Serbian Film* is similar to *Irreversible* in a sense considering that the villain and the monster are not necessarily the same character. Milos, the protagonist, can be observed as the monster, as he exists and performs as two contrasting identities, Milos the porn star with a heart of gold, and Milos the drugged and violent animal who has ravaged his own family. Even more, Milos is disconnected to this other way of being, only being able to connect to the most atrocious acts through flashbacks and desperately piecing together evidence through locations and found camcorder tapes. The film initially teases Milos capacity for sexual aggression as he performs in his initials scenes including being pressured to beating a battered woman after she performs on him in front of her preteen daughter Jeca, a recurring character on set who participates in pressuring Milos beyond his boundaries. Milos storms off set, telling Vukmir that he is “not into beating women in front of kids and cameras.” This is an unstable line as it does not truly perform the distaste Milos assumingly is feeling for the position he has been forced into. He groups his issues all together, as if he has a problem about the combination of them, not the issues individually. Vukmir defends that his performers, including the child, work within full autonomy and that he would not force it on anyone, to which Milos defends that he had himself been forced. Still, Milos returns to Vukmir again, to quit, again, and makes himself vulnerable to the unforgivable acts he will soon commit after he has been drugged. In one of many flashbacks, as Milos pieces together the evidence of what occurred during his blackout, he remembers a production scene in which a grandmother figure presents Jeca, the young preteen girl to him. Resisting the urges caused by the drugs, Milos has a moment of clarity, escaping to the kitchen to find a knife. At this point, Milos is aware of his other side as he feels himself slipping into this other state. His solution is to disarm himself. If his violence is sexual violence, then his erect penis is the weapon. The crew attempts to stop him, but Milos throws himself out the window instead, a nod to the heroic triumph of Father Karras in leading horror classic *The Exorcist* (1973),
in which he invites the demon to possess his own body, and immediately throwing himself out the window to his own death.

Excess in *A Serbian Film* is heavy, especially in the delivery of exposition. Vukmir is the obvious villain of the film, but apart from orchestrating a rather complex setup in order to omit information to his main performer, Milos, Vukmir lacks dimension and subtext. He is bad for the sake of being bad, and audiences are not provided with evidence to read him any other way, especially after he reveals his latest porn genre to Milos, “newborn porn.” Vukmir is frustrating in his flatness. When questioned of his motives throughout the film, he constantly stresses that he is a “professional” and an “artist.” It is weak development. But in the attempt to pull some value from the shell of which Vukmir encompasses, he is not so much a monster, despite his monstrosity. He is, perhaps, more of a reflection of normality. The intentions of the filmmakers will be discussed later in the chapter, but during Vukmir’s most notorious scene, Vukmir describes “Victim sells, Milos. Victim is the priciest sell in this world…. We are victim, Milos. You, me, this whole nation is victim.” Just as the fascists as accepted by the community of *Salò*, Vukmir reflects the government who Spasojevic suggests has exploited and drained an entire nation and region.

5.3 Excess Through Filters

As we have explored before in chapter three, connections between films do not have to represent an actual similarity. Both *Salò* and *A Serbian Film* have garnered immense and notorious reputations for their transgressions and performance of excess. For sake of paracinematic rankings and internet buzz, the films have reached a shared status despite their extensive differences. Shadowed in controversy, *Salò* is also a critically acclaimed art-house film, recognized for the weight of its message and intent, delivered by its transgression and excess. What *Salò* has established as a piece of Italian cinema history, as well as the exploration of the limits of film, to compare the new horror that is *A Serbian Film*, strikes many cinephiles as insulting. Critical study has greatly benefitted *Salò* as well as Pasolini’s transparency and participation in the discourse about his films, providing a philosophical and literary context as a method to his “madness.”

It is easy to understand the factors of which join these separate films together. They both have overwhelmed censors and caused outrage amongst a misunderstanding public. Both films are placed within a highly charged political climate and reflect a personal regional trauma of its directors. Moreover, both of these films explore themes of power,
its limits (or lack thereof) and the exploitation of innocent people, facilitated through the themes of sexual violence. However, both of these stories describe their source of power and its fantasies quite differently, a topic that could be reserved for extensive research of its own.

My goal initially was to entertain a paracinematic perspective to analyze the newer and therefore less scholarly subscribed *A Serbian Film* against *Salò*, as a means to read beyond the performance of excess and find evidence and a defense for a film that can be accepted as a political protest. What I discovered however, was just how much *A Serbian Film* fails in its attempt to match higher ranking nightmares, such as *Salò*. Over the years, the more I have come to learn about *A Serbian Film*, the more stable its monstrosity threatened to be. My initial introduction was right after its premiere when online commentary included terminology like “newborn porn,” suggesting that something so horrible not only was a major component of the film, but it was something that was visually performed. Preparing myself for the worst, I committed finally to viewing *A Serbian Film* only to encounter an unexpected and hard to explain truth that the film was not as shocking as I had prepared it to be.

The issue at hand was that I had already done my homework and demystified what would happen. This allowed room for a clearer reading beyond shock. What I have come to realize is that despite their attempts to shatter limits, both films exercise a great deal of restraint and have not, in fact, gone *all the way*. This is not to say that a film would actually benefit from even more graphic and upfront violence and assault, but rather that the very nature of being film creates a strong limit on what can actually be done and yet remain acceptable and digestible as film. Both of these works implement a kind of filter to deal with their performance of excess. Pasolini carefully structures his compositions, foregoing reality to create a stable setting for metaphor and allegory. The camera, when applying apparatus theory, positions the audience in a vantage point, for better or for worse, inciting implications on how Pasolini chooses what the audience can and will see, often in favor of the fascists. *A Serbian Film* uses the concept of “film within a film” to not only create commentary on the medium itself, but also to perform its most savage and brutal scenes in a safe past tense, through the use of flashbacks, color stylization, and literal framing of television/film screens, suggesting another layer of distance between the audience within the film, and real and authentic audience watching the actual film. Both films’ techniques are designed to assist the narrative by positioning the audience.
In an interview conducted during production of *Salò* in 1975, Pasolini describes the departure of his more loose, personal style of filmmaking in favor of structure and precision. In regards to all the formal elements of filmmaking he carefully applies to *Salò*, Pasolini reflects,

I am seeking perfection, since the modernistic disregard for forms seems to me to be an element of alienation for the viewer used to a certain cinematographic language. The whole structure serves as a sort of fancy wrapping for the horrible contents that is de Sade’s contribution, and that of the fascists. I want to convey a sense of elegance and precision, or irreality. My old, magmatic way was more realistic, because a thing badly done and haphazardly stuck together is more real than something done well within the rules. This one is less real because it’s more perfect (Bachmann 43).

Through perfection, Pasolini suggests that the film is not real. The film is a metaphor, or allegory, which suggests an interpretation of a deeper truth. But in coping with the analogies of the most base level, like the elements of coprophagy for example, the film’s structure is stable and confident enough to deliver the extremely horrific. Structure does not water down the themes of *Salò*, but rather organizes the film in order to communicate something larger to those who are willing to listen, while the trauma may communicate enough to those who are not. This is not to say that the haunting and static tableaux shots of the fascists seated amongst the youth, listening to depraved stories told by the featured narrators, are facilitated to ease the viewer. But rather, that the depth of irreality that the film travels to in order to express Pasolini’s message, is unsustainable as film, in the context of film. Irreality, in this context, does not mean untrue. If anything, by removing the mask of reality and therefore familiarity, as film is never authentic reality, more truth is exposed.

Crossing over into the discussion of intention, it is important to consider the apparatus theory as the camera acting as the eye of the audience. Pasolini’s precision implies that everything the camera sees, Pasolini wholeheartedly intends the audience to see as well. Power is undoubtedly performed by this notion of what is seen and how. For example, the subtlety of the camera angles when positioning eye levels and interactions between the fascists and the teens implies “that the power structure has become like nature—inconspicuous and inescapable” (Syrimis 523). The use of camera in this dynamic provides evidence to the power the fascists not only have, but have held. It naturalizes these power dynamics.
A major shift in composition and camera takes place at the climax of the film, as the fascists ritualistically torture their chosen teens to death. The event is portrayed from the window of an upstairs room, through a set of binoculars, dissecting the greater picture, only once exposed when the binoculars are playfully reversed, to brutal close ups of bodies tethered, burnt, scalped, and brutalized. Even the sound of anticipated screams is replaced with somber music from the radio “thus transforming the static tableaux and the suffering human beings they contain into abstract objects for aesthetic contemplation” (Bondanella 429). It is stated beforehand by one of the fascists, “each one of us will in turn have the philosophical pleasure of contemplation, the particularly abject pleasure of complicity, and the supreme pleasure of action.” This implies that complicity in viewing violence and degradation of this level is comparable to performing violence, or rather, performing violence for pleasure. In that sense, the audience, who is positioned to see what the fascists are watching through the view of the binoculars, still participate in the suggested performance of enjoying the physical torture of the teens.

The “film within a film” self-reflexive plot device is not new to extreme cinema. Ruggero Deodato, director of the notorious Cannibal Holocaust (1979), implements this device to mirror the increased level of violence, death and terrorism on television that influenced the format of news broadcast. With Cannibal Holocaust, Deodata aims to criticize and condemn this change in journalism through the presentation of “found footage” of a documentary of a cannibalistic indigenous tribe of the Amazon, in which the cruelty of the modern and Western film crew eclipses that of the tribe (Dickinson 172). By attempting to reflect reality, the staged documentary footage was often mistaken as authentic, augmenting the shock of its graphic violence. As Pasolini carefully constructs a setting to combat any notion of reality, A Serbian Film attempts something similar. Spasojevic’s use of the “film within a film” device aims to buffer reality from performance through the the stylization, color coding and framing of sexual violence. A Serbian Film also manipulates time, revealing the most violent acts in the form of flashbacks or through the actual framing of scenes on a screen, literally containing transgressive imagery.

The later portion of the film, Milos attempts to piece together what has happened to him, limited to the only physical evidence of a camcorder camera and a number of tapes labeled with vulgar drawings instead of text or dates. This is an unfortunate and juvenile detail, though perhaps it intends to augment the absurdity of the situation, or the irreality as Pasolini would put it. The audience sees the video footage still framed by the
camcorders screen, placing further its events into the past. When Milos returns to set, initiating the series of major final flashbacks and discoveries, there is an obvious shift in color, from oranges and browns to grays and blues. The audience can easily distinguish the difference between Milos standing in the setting against Milos performing in the setting in the past. These techniques are successful as past and present are clearly understood to be separate despite being presented together.

Horror scholar Shaun Kimber suggests that the layers of tensions between what is happening in real time, in the past, or on screen (within the film) “the potential to diminish affect,” all while stylization delivers a more palatable and possibly entertaining experience to some audiences and censors (113). Returning to Vukmir controversial scene in which he introduces his new genre of pornography, newborn porn, Kimber suggests:

...during a particularly controversial scene involving newborn porn, transgressive content is carefully managed formally in three overlapping ways: (1) narratively structuring the scene as a film within a film; (2) careful blocking so as not to directly show violent detail; and (3) framing the viewing of the film within a film through the appalled eyes of Milos and the hysteria of Vukmir. These formal strategies have the potential to draw further attention to the highly constructed nature of the film, enabling knowing viewers the opportunity to distance themselves from its content and find pleasure in both its formal styling and thematic motivations. It is interesting to note the BBFC only made three cuts totalling ten seconds to this scene and prominence in United Kingdom and global media attention and critical reception (114).

Kimber suggests two very important factors in regards to the production and reaction of this infamous scene. That the scene is constructed to create distance from the audience in a way that is successful enough to endure only partial censorship in comparison to other scenes, by the British Board of Film Censorship/BBFC. I counter that this does not create the distance which Kimber suggests. It is the most commonly referenced theme of the film, and is essentially an integral part of the film’s reputation and identity as an extreme film. I would go as far as to say that to individuals familiar with the existence of the film regard its title and plot synonymous with the suggestion of “newborn porn.” Moreover, I believe these layers of distance actually have the opposite effect.

Horror plays with the tension between what is shown and what is left to be imagined. What is effective about this scene is just that; too much is left to the imagination. The first time I actually saw parts of this scene was in a review for the film, not the film itself. I
was not prepared for it and will admit to it being shocking and difficult, despite the use of blurring. However, watching the scene in its entirety, observing these layers of distance, I was reminded of a personal experience from film school. In my first end of semester critique, I screened my 16mm short film, which included a quick close up of the pulling of skin from the palm of my subject. As I had no access to special effects, other than a layer of dried school glue, the first question from my professors was how I did it. They stressed how important it was to keep the close up short, as if it were to linger any longer, it would allow the audience too much time to rationalize what was actually happening on screen. In this scene, there are visual barriers to the actual act of sexual violence and abuse portrayed on the screen within the film. Yes, there is careful blocking to obstruct what is on the screen, while the screen is still partially visible. The man performing on the screen also has his back to the camera. The most that is shown of the infant during the act, is the flash of a limb bouncing into view past the man’s silhouette, before cutting away to a shot of Milos, Vukmir, or another visual obstruction. My point is, there is enough visual information to understand what is being simulated. While the audience is not forced to confront the visual head on, they are also not given the chance to cognitively prove it wrong or to demystify its elements, identifying the use of a doll or dummy. Afterall, a filmmaker would not want their audience to be able to do this during the performance either. The scene does not create distance, but it provides the elements needed to ask the audience to suspend belief. Yes, the audience can assume this is not real. But even an intellectual understanding of the limits of production does not diminish the emotional impact it is intended. It is a vulgar scene, and it is technically successful.

5.4 Intentions and Implications
Being a newer example, A Serbian Film has not collected the same scholarly attention as Salò, but its expansive reputation has welcomed a polarizing reaction from viewers. It is no surprise that critics commonly castigate the film, not only for its excessive and difficult themes, but for its shortcomings of production. In reference to my research of cult and film audiences, and the pursuit to accept and reevaluate dismissed film, it is also not surprising that there are fans who defend the film and seek out a way to interpret, analyze and appreciate the “intellectual exercise” of a “socio-political allegory rich in subtext” which then seemingly validates the content (Kimber 120). Personally, my opinion of the film has flipped multiple times throughout my research from rejection, to defensive, and concluding with disappointment after I finally viewed it. What I find most troubling about
A Serbian Film, especially in comparison to Salò, is the film’s intentions, especially towards its audience. In other words, A Serbian Film and its creators have not concluded who they are attacking.

Pasolini’s career boasted a parallel of Marxist criticism, recognizing the collapse of his own status into the same bourgeoisie group he challenged and hated, suggesting that all audiences were fair game to critique, even Pasolini himself. Pasolini rejected his Trilogy of Life publicly, writing about his disappointments while foreshadowing his Trilogy of Death. A brave and deplorable factor of Salò is that the film is constructed and framed to portray the experience and desires from the vantage point of the fascists, leaving little room to martyrize the victim within an environment that fully enables their exploitation. In regards to the weight of Salò, Pasolini reflects that evidently Salò is about power, not the human spirit:

“I simply plan to replace the word ‘God’ as de Sade uses it, with the word ‘power.’ The sadists are always the powerful ones. These four gentlemen in the story as a banker, a duke, a bishop, and a judge. They represent the constituted might. The analogy is obvious, and I didn’t invent it. I am only adding something of my own and am complicating it by bringing it up to date.” (Bachmann 40).

“I have in no way tried to arouse sympathy, and in fact the film would lose its sting if I had. In this I am also very true to de Sade: I have no shown victims whose site the viewer could be on. Pity would have been horrible as an element in this film, nobody would have stood for it. People who cry and tear their hair out would have made everybody leave the cinema after five minutes. In any case, I don’t believe in pity” (Bachmann 44).

It is important to remember that Salò was the first of a trilogy. What Pasolini’s final conclusion would have been is unknown as he was murdered shortly before Salò’s release. Still, the film stands and functions on its own. From adaptation to production, Salò in its entirety appears to be intentional and fully realized, an admirable feat even if its message punishes. Syrimis summarizes the challenge of Salò as “the harsh images of sodomy, rape, defecation, coprophagy, whipping, mutilation, branding, hanging, electric chairs, and more, are sure to drive away some of the audience irrespective of class, education, venue of exhibition, or the film's accessibility to complex modernist readings. Where to? Pasolini might have asked; that world on the screen that you are fleeing is the very same world that you will enter once you leave the theater” (Syrimis 523). If the viewing, or endurance, of film is a ritualistic transportation, Salò is never an escape, just a reminder of what awaits.
It is unclear what the role of the audience is to *A Serbian Film*. The film has many demands. It demands contextualization to a likely unfamiliar history. After all, the film was premiered at SXSW Film Festival, which is defined by its progressive, provocative and moreover cool taste in film including “genre standouts.” The festival further describes itself as “known for the high caliber and diversity of films presented, and for its smart, enthusiastic audiences” (“SXSW Film Festival”). This crowd may have more stamina for such a film, and is an ideal festival to develop a positive, or rather, memorable reputation. However, the title of *A Serbian Film* implies the significance of an unfamiliar reality to the hipster thrill seekers and the horror buff status builders. Still, SXSW is, by all means, a good choice for a premiere. Therefore, this implies the priority over the automatic cult status that is obviously anticipated. This questions the authenticity of the films intention to express a deep rooted and emotional response to a cultural history of exploitation.

Kimber addresses the conflict of contextualization and states “Whilst *A Serbian Film* in one particular national context, albeit informed by wider global contexts, it clearly has the capacity to construct, carry and mediate meanings that take on specific national resonances in other territories through its international circulation and consumption” (117). I do agree with Kimber, which actually releases *A Serbian Film* from the responsibility of the transparency of its direct and Serbian historical context. Still, my issue continues that the film is telling the audience to confront two very different and very challenging feelings. On one hand, if this film, with all of its offenses, is a metaphor to the best of this artist’s ability to reproduce the feeling of violation, degradation and the abuse Serbians like him suffered at the hands of the Serbian Government, this is supported by the framing of the perspective of the protagonist and his unwillingness to participate in the atrocities he is forced to, organized by a higher power to be sold off to foreign markets. However, at the same time, the film confronts other difficult themes that are a direct attack on the audience.

Vukmir, the sleazy porn director/artist insists that the victim holds value and is consumed by the foreign market. Through newborn porn, he is making a direct metaphor of a higher power breeding its own, only to be immediately exploited. However, the audience is guilty by association. Milos may refuse to participate and cannot stomach viewing the extreme porn which Vukmir brazenly presents. Yet the audience must endure it cinematically. They are watching, through these characters, the kind of exploitation which they are being told is to be consumed by the foreign market. But they most likely are the foreign market committed to viewing the film. Afterall, the film was premiered to
a foreign market before it was present to its Serbian audience. Vukmir and thus the filmmakers are drawing a parallel between the audience and the larger than life evil consumer. This is a dangerous accusation when the audience is also asked to endure the pain and perspective of the protagonist to understand the conflict which Spasojevic declares as an inherent Serbian trauma. It is not as much a clear criticism of Serbia. It is a criticism of the rest of the world. I support that Spasojevic and his team have the right to insult their audience. It is their prerogative. But it contradicts the invitation to experience and have empathy for Milos’ own trauma and his horrific journey of doing whatever he can to restore normality, after he has been forced and exploited into the role of the monster.

I do not suggest that A Serbian Film is dangerous to an audience, but rather a danger to itself. I established earlier that the cult film audience is active, not passive, and many horror audiences subscribe to this dynamic. In reaction to the moral panic amongst the public in response to A Serbian Film, Kenneth Weir and Stephen Dunne’s study of reactions from critical audiences to more regular audience members quantifies written online commentary of the film, codifying whether viewers thought A Serbian Film was a good (morally) film, or a good film (aestically), to determine how vulnerable audiences felt in viewing the film (as well as The Human Centipede II). Weir and Dunne deconstructed these samples to fit a 3x3 matrix to gauge entertainment and aesthetic in relation to morality. Weir and Dunne conclude:

“Interventionist censorship relies upon the model of a passive audience, eminently vulnerable to corruption through extremity exposure. The evidence we have gathered suggests a very different kind of audience, one which frequently regrets watching these films, though not because their character has been corrupted as a result. If there is a need for protection here, it is a need felt much more by those acting on behalf of the audience than by the audience itself. When audiences did eventually watch these films the responses they offered, at least if what they themselves have said is anything to go by, illustrates that they have hardly succumbed to the worst excesses of what was patronisingly feared to have been likely. (Extreme) horror audiences can, in other words, be left to make up their own minds concerning what is and is not good for them. We are not the first to make this point but we are the first to make this point along these methodological lines” (Weir and Dunne 90).

The practice of reading film beyond its performance of excess, or from the perspective and experience as a seasoned self-scholar, is fundamental to the cult, horror
and paracinematic audience. Through their study, Weir and Dunne suggest that the active audience reflects stability in processing difficult material, as well as the tenacity to rationalize negative experiences. These audiences are not in need of guidance nor a babysitter. However, the study suggests that a majority of its observed viewers tempered their reactions, avoiding extreme judgments or commitment. Weir and Dunne state, “Amidst the controversy generated by the release of these two films, audiences themselves, in the majority of cases at least, have shown themselves to be a lot more measured, that is to say, a lot less fanatical/oppositional, in their reception of the films” (86).

* A Serbian Film * is a feat accomplished by its filmmakers, but does not hold the same value of status for its audience. Afterall, * A Serbian Film * was independently financed, succeeding to emerge from an underfunded Serbian industry, unsupported by the Serbian government. Co-executive producer Nikola Pantelic boasts “ * A Serbian Film * is our production answer to all those who said it couldn’t be done, but we made a true Serbian film without any Serbian Government at all” (Kimber 109). This comment, while worthy of celebration, reflects my criticisms that the film and its filmmakers have not committed to who they are attacking, and whose empathy they invite. As Susan Sontag stated in her essay “The Aesthetic of Silence,” “[t]he art of our time is noisy with appeals for silence. A coquettish, even cheerful nihilism. One recognizes the imperative of silences, but goes on speaking anyway. Discovering that one has nothing to say, one seeks a way to say * that*” (Grønstad 200).
6 Conclusion

In review of what has been concluded throughout these four chapters, themes of demystifying and creating stability is repeated, as well as the themes of boundaries and the performances which challenge them. Both the first and second chapters function as important contexts to ground horror as a durable genre and to demystify the stability of Hollywood and its influence. The Production Code was introduced in 1930 as a pseudo-government of self-censorship and self surveillance to alleviate the threat of federal intervention and censorship. This presented Hollywood as an industry that was not only under control but concerned in maintaining the values of Americans. This facade was dishonest, as the Code was established heavily by a small circle of Catholic-saturated influencers, at a time when Catholicism was a minority and topic of prejudice. Furthermore, the main interest of Hollywood remained business and money. Federal censorship was an expensive adaptation to production, and studios were, and still are, more concerned with filling seats than maintaining a universal virtue. I conclude that the level of censorship imposed by the Catholic-influenced Code had an effect on the development of narrative cinema, including other international industries. After all, as Hollywood was the most dominant, European industries desired and attempted to match and outshine Hollywood. Regardless of rebellion against the limits of Hollywood, or the attempt to overcome it, Europeans modeled their industries and films against a restricted, suffocated and therefore unstable prototype. Today, the Code remains an ancestor of contemporary and future film (domestically and internationally), especially to horror, cult, and extreme cinema. This is a significant context to consider as the heritage of limits and self-censorship have not been bred out of distribution patterns, threatening recurring habits of restraint within the industry not to prevent disruption among the public, but again, to cash in at the box office.

In the second chapter, horror as a genre is simplified to the defining core elements of the monster and its dynamic with normality, as well as what makes a monster a monster. Noel Carroll suggests that a monster is categorically incomplete, often hosting contrasting traits and performed in connection to the emotion of disgust to represent fear. Considering the shift to postmodernism, Isabel Pinedo continues that what is more disturbing about the monster is that the protagonist must match or dominate monstrosity in order to survive, though survival is hardly guaranteed. After all, by the 70s, with the influence of political and social instability and the phenomenon of postmodernism, horror
evolves as a genre that challenges cinema as entertainment by dissolving the guarantee of the happy ending. I posit further that the long recognized goal to return to normality is no longer achievable once one encounters the monster, as they too have been made a monster to some degree themself.

A separate but fundamental context established in chapter two is the performance of the audience. I use performance studies to specifically analyze the traits, behaviors and objectives of the cult film audience. Cult audiences redefine the role of the audience through consumption patterns as performances of ritual and rebellion. Expanding on rebellion, I introduce Jeffrey Sconce’s terminology of paracinema, the acceptance of all tiers, tastes and genres of cinema as a means to challenge the limits and boundaries of cinema. Paracinema and cult film suggests alternative canonization that proposes an alternative reading of dismissed film, in spite of or in celebration of their performances of excess. Supported by performance studies, I conclude that cult film audiences prove that the role of the audience is active, not passive. Cult film audiences in particular celebrate the pushing of boundaries by filmmakers and respond in the attempt to do the same. Together, transgression and audience participation challenge boundaries of cinema from both sides.

In chapter three, I chose three separate horror films that are grouped together on the basis that they produced extreme cinematic experiences as reported by many. However, these three films including Stanley Kubrick’s The Shining, Gaspar Noé’s Irreversible and Tom Six’s The Human Centipede are fairly distinct from each other and are not outwardly comparable apart from extreme reactions among audiences and fans. The Shining has achieved the status of masterpiece while Irreversible still contends very wounded reactions from audiences, yet also high critical praise and growing scholarship. The Human Centipede, however, cashed in on an automatic cult film status, exploiting its viral nature of transgressive shocking themes that remain a more secure reputation than an actual film. My conclusion that these films evoke shared, memorable experiences suggests the influence of the paracinematic audience and the alliances it creates between genres. Horror and foreign films remain kindred spirits and have a history as relatable forms of cinema, including crossover references and blurring between genres of horror and avant-garde, as well as parallel representations in press and home distribution catalogs, which doubled as a source of discipline and structure in studying film independently. I assert that while initially the levelling of these three films seemed to dismiss their value, by creating an association between one film’s message against
another films transgressions, recognizing these films together is also an empowered extension of the rebellion of paracinema, creating a greater force by embracing all forms and tastes of cinema. By levelling the films, they can also be elevated.

In the last chapter, I addressed two films which remain colossal challenges of extreme cinema including Pasolini’s Salò and Spasojevic’s A Serbian Film. Both host transgressive, excessive and difficult themes of sexual violence and exploitation of power, both intellectually and visually. For decades, Salò was a dominating example of cinema that is traumatic and brutal. Since its release in 1973, shortly after the murder of Pasolini, many films have continued to push boundaries and host transgressive themes, creating a reputation for themselves and, usually, the horror genre. However, it took over thirty years to challenge the ranks of Salò with the release and tidal wave of a reputation of A Serbian Film. While A Serbian Film is commonly agreed to be horror, Salò is not. It is, however, horrifying. To create stability and compatibility between the two titles, I applied a horror analysis to both films to dissect beyond the shocking themes and visuals in order to reveal what was disturbing at the core of these films, and how it reflected the world in which we live in. Both films are symbolic of a political and regional trauma, reflecting real life horror of the past that threatens the future. In order to explore this content beyond the boundaries of cinema, what I discovered is that the transgression featured in both films was actually restrained by the conventions of the medium, and required techniques of cinematography and narrative to filter the extreme themes and performance of excess, in order to perform as a film. I conclude that Salò is successful as Pasolini’s intentions are reflected in the film not only through emotion, but delivered flawlessly through structure. A Serbian Film, unfortunately, lacks the stability Pasolini provides for Salò, and as a result of the comparison to the notorious giant, reads as weak, exploitive, and underdeveloped. In other words, considering the film, its reputation, and the intentions expressed by its director and team, A Serbian Film’s priority appears to focus on the notoriety of being shocking.

Conclusively, the aim of my research was to explore the limits of context in the defense and validation of extreme cinema which boasts challenging themes and visuals, used as a vehicle to deliver a critical and crucial message. By establishing that the origin of narrative film censored the creative development of artists, and therefore the continuing development of audiences as a critical viewer, it is predictable that filmmakers and film itself pushed boundaries, and continue to do so today. By demystifying horror as a genre as well as the power and intentions of a renegade audience, I aim to provide a clearer
understanding of the durability of horror, despite its wildness, and moreover, its intellect and sensitivity as a brutally honest reflection of our own world. I applied these contexts to analyze why and how horror films are grouped together, despite their differences, and even suggest that this is a result of the active audience, not simply mainstream rejection against the genre. Evidently, the elements which I anticipated would protect one of the most notorious of contemporary titles, rather exposed weakness in *A Serbian Film*, while promoting more strength and artistry to the non-horror yet real-life horror satire of *Salò*.

### 6.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Martin Barker is recognized for his work in cultural and film studies, focusing on audience reception. He is highly referenced in accordance with a collaborative project conducted by the BBFC (British Board of Film Censors), to study the effect of sexual violence in five controversial films, including *Irreversible*, amongst viewers. Barker suggests that “Interpretations have consequences. They take audiences to different places. And films thereby become the embodiments of different kinds of meanings” (114). Barker suggests that the archetype of “Embracer” is a stronger voice of interpretation than Critics (111). Barker states in reflection of his study:

> What is most striking to me is that Embracers of the film are the ones least likely to generate and work their accounts of the film through ‘figures of the audience.’ Their own engagements are rich and complex, and weave together their personal experiences with a way of understanding characters, their experiences and motives. Critics, on the other hand, tend to impute more to others what they themselves, of course, would never do... *In extremis*, these imputed responses become the basis for demands for controls, cuts and censorship (Barker 114).

Barker conclusively suggests there is a need for change in the way film is critically interpreted, stressing in regards to Embracers that “we need as film scholars to learn how to learn from them” (Barker 114).

In 1999, Gaspar Noé was invited by *The Guardian* to write about his film *Seul Contre Tous/I Stand Alone* in an article titled “I'm happy some people walk out during my film. It makes the ones who stay feel strong.” Noé confidently defends his work and its challenges, making goading statements that dismiss accusations against him for creating film about hate or hosting explicit violence carelessly. It is from this article that Noé is commonly quoted, often in reference to *Irreversible*, that he is happy that audiences walk out of his films, negating what I believe to be an even more significant half of that sentence: “It makes the ones who stay feel strong.” Noé’s work is designed to
push audiences away, as he clearly endorses it. However, what is dismissed by this exclusion is that the phenomenon and force of resistance of those viewers who stay is debatably the reaction Noé values most. This point is unfortunately buried and lost in favor of a provocative one-liner, completely misinterpreting the point of the challenges proposed by Noé to the functions and limits of cinema.

Horror as a genre is equipped with a mesmerizing and intimidating capacity, as it embraces and functions successfully as a vehicle for transgressive and excessive themes. Despite rebellion of audiences or filmmakers, horror cannot prove any film to be inherently good, though it can reveal a reality at its core that is worth confrontation to those who are willing to participate. Embracing horror as a tool to make sense of difficult material, not even limited to the genre and its more distinguishable features and tropes, can expand not only the interpretations of more extreme and challenging films, but also can inspire growth and development in audiences who are willing and ready to participate.

In The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe, Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall introduce the adoption of the use of terms “new” and “extremism” when analyzing and discussing extreme cinema. They suggest that “extremity evinced by these films is often as much a matter of asserting particular filiations with artistic, cinematic, literary and philosophical forebears as it is of breaking new taboos” (5). In other words, it is not only social and political boundaries that are challenged, as seen in retaliation to censorship or rebellion against the mainstream, it is also a challenge of the limits of film as a medium. Continuing on the concept of “newness,” referencing literary and cultural theorist Frances Ferguson, they propose that “the idea of newness is something that may also be intrinsic to our understanding of extremity and obscenity, of shock and outrage. By definition, the extreme is dependent on the idea of newness and on the compromising closeness that it is thought to establish between the real and its representation” (5). This suggests that category terms like “new extremism” as such as films like Noés, “reflects this bridging position between newness and indebtedness to the past, to a history of transgression and provocation that is renewed and given a visceral immediacy for the present” (6).

Conversely, the force of newness to tackle shifting boundaries is significant to a genre like horror that fiercely celebrates its past. Matt Hills reflects that “Remembering and nostalgically defending moments of horror involves audiences in struggles surrounding who has the right to speak for, and articulate, horror’s histories (critics/academics/fans/specific generations). Looking back on the horror films that
viewers were fascinated by in their younger days, or embracing the horror ‘canon’ across generations, suggests that horror audiences are somehow inherently past-oriented” (Hills 103). Evidently, tension lies between innovating the new and maintaining its heritage.

Excess in horror is not a solved and settled issue. Often, horror struggles to contain itself under the weight of transgression, resistance, rejection, and the continued desire to explode boundaries from both filmmakers and audiences. This struggle reflects that not only is horror changing as a genre, but also naturally so is its audience and social context. This, however, is not a criticism of horror’s stability. After all, horror is a confrontation of the deeper fears and anxieties of society and humanity. Being a vehicle for this confrontation, and therefore reflection, horror will change at the rate of the society and world it is produced in. In terms of the level of extreme, excess and transgression, this is happening at an accelerating rate. It took over thirty years for Salò to meet its latest contender, A Serbian Film. But the challenge to move the bar again, continues. Just this year, in 2018, festival buzz surrounds Ari Aster’s horror film Hereditary. Starring Toni Collette, and gaining a reputation amongst festival crowds directly reported to the internet, Hereditary implies a reception of sophistication not always awarded to horror. Even more so, the film has gained the reputation as a contender of most disturbing film, not through obvious or boisterous performance of transgression, but rather genuine fear, which is another performance of excess. Still, this is not the final threat of the year.

Two weeks before the conclusion of this research at CinemaCon, Amazon screened a scene from Luca Guadagino’s remake of Dario Argento’s ornamental violent horror 1977 success, Suspira. To remake a film as recognized and celebrated among horror fans, especially those specifically subscribed to the refined and operatically excessive Italian horror of Argento, is a hazardous risk. Guadagino’s recent Golden Globe and Oscar nominee clout for Call Me By Your Name is no defense against devoted horror fans. However, the publicity transmitted from Twitter of the lucky/unlucky audience may say otherwise. Describing the scene of a girl being telekinetically torn apart in connection to the protagonist dancing ballet describes the sounds of bones cracking, skin tearing, and the visuals of bodily fluids abound (Sharf, “‘Suspiria’: The 11 Craziest Reactions to Luca Guadagnino’s ‘Traumatizing’ and ‘Sickening’ First Footage.”). Maintaining an air of mystery despite fundamentally describing the scene leaves a lot of tension to build up and imagine just how graphic and disturbing this film can be. It is too soon to gauge where these films will rank over time, but their publicity proves the pursuit to outrank horrors of the past continues, exponentially.
6.2 Where Can We Go From Here?

The trajectory I anticipate that would follow my research is an extension of the analysis of the dynamics between restriction and resistance in filmmaking. This brings back the subject of censorship and its contribution to the foundational development of narrative film as well as the role and training of the audience. The boundaries that contained Hollywood during the Production Code era have long been collapsed and shifted, but filmmakers still aim to explode boundaries with excessive themes and aesthetics. I suggest the investigation of the direct result of censorship in the past on films today to better understand the dynamic between restriction and resistance. This requires an updated definition of what boundaries are pushed.

What I concluded from my analysis of Salò and A Serbian Film is that film as a medium has its own technical and theoretical challenges to containing transgressive material. Boundaries are commonly shaped by censorship, society, and politics. However, as the technology of cinema advances, there are implications that cinema creates boundaries to imprison itself. If cinema continues to change and evolve, what happens to film theory, a kind of restriction of perspective and analysis itself. Does theory follow or does it collapse?

I have honored cult film audiences for identifying as an active audience. I think this perspective is empowering and moreover, influential. If the audience is active, they too are capable of pushing boundaries from the other side. Active audiences and their anticipated evolution require more research. If film as a medium is destined to change, its audience is destined to lead or follow. I find it utmost important that the growing participation of the active audience, as suggested by Weir and Dunne’s study, is equipped with a perspective to confront, process, rationalize and react to whatever is to come in the future of cinema, transgressive or not.


Spasojevic, Srdan, director. A Serbian Film. Contra Film, 2010.


