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HARDCORE HORROR: THE PLEASURES AND DISPLEASURES OF BREAKING CINEMATIC TABOOS

Abstract

Although films of both the “Torture Porn” and “New Extremism” subgenres have been characterized as physically hard to watch, films of the “Hardcore Horror” subgenre push this characteristic to the extreme by purposely tackling taboo issues such as incest, bestiality, child abuse, and fecal consumption, and portray flawed protagonists that the audience cannot empathize with. Because Hardcore Horror films are typically confined to the Internet, and are largely spread by word of mouth, the appearance of such films in the mainstream film industry typically leads to cries of moral outrage and disgust on the part of censors and theater viewers. This essay examines Srdjan Spasojevic’s *A Serbian Film* (2010) and Tom Six’s *The Human Centipede II* (2011), and argues that these films evoke contradictory emotions among different audiences. To those unaccustomed to the Hardcore Horror subgenre, these films induce vivid sentiments of cinephobia, both in their edited and unedited forms. The subjects presented in these films are too taboo and controversial, even if the audience does not physically see these horrific actions being carried out. Conversely, the Hardcore Horror subgenre also has an extremely dedicated fan base of cinephiles, who yearn for the destruction of cinematic taboos, and seek out Hardcore Horror films in their purest and grittiest forms. In using *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II* as case studies in audience reception and censorship, this essay ultimately asserts that films within the Hardcore Horror subgenre are, and always will be too controversial for mainstream audiences.

Keywords: torture porn, hardcore horror, cinephilia, cinephobia, censorship

The term “Torture Porn” was coined in the early 2000s to describe how critics negatively viewed the transition towards more graphic, mainstream cinema in response to the popularity of films such as *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005) (Edelstein, 2013). Claiming that these films cross the line by displaying violence in excessive detail, akin to the genital close-up or “meat-shot” seen in hardcore pornography, opponents often argue that viewers’ experience sexual arousal in response to the manner in which violence is depicted (Jones, 2013:15). Similarly, a slew of controversial art-house films hailing from Europe in the early 2000s, lead to the defining of these films as part of a “New Extremism” movement. Films such as Gaspar Noe’s *Irreversible* (2002), and Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009) exhibit extreme depictions of violence and explicit scenes of sex, to the extent that these films are often said as presenting the audience with a confrontational experience (Palmer, 2011: 57). Although the rise of both Torture Porn and New Extremism films both convey an increased emphasis on violence in cinema, the scope of violence depicted in both of these movements usually adheres to mainstream censorship restrictions within the UK and the United States. Through analyzing two recent controversial films, *A Serbian Film* (2010), and *The Human Centipede II* (2011) I will first outline the censorship restrictions placed on these films, as well as situate their conventions in comparison Torture Porn and New Extremism. After asserting *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II* as part of the Hardcore Horror subgenre, I will then explore how these films were marketed to appeal to fans of the Hardcore Horror genre as opposed to mainstream audiences. Lastly, through analyzing how *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II* differentiate from Torture Porn and New Extremism, I will explain why these

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films were so controversial and how they spark debates about both cinephilia (one's love of film) and cinephobia (one's fear of film).

A Serbian Film revolves around Milos, a retired porn star who is struggling to provide for his family while living in Serbia. Milos is offered one last job, an art-porn that promises to clear Milos's debt and ensure his family's financial security for the rest of their lives. Through taking the job, Milos inadvertently gets mixed up with a controversial scene that includes bestiality, rape, sexual molestation, and incest. Similarly, *The Human Centipede II* revolves around Martin, a mentally challenged man obsessed with *The Human Centipede* (2009), who dedicates his life to replicating the movie and creating his own, real-life centipede. In detailing the basic plots of both of these films, one can see how they were subject to many censorship restrictions upon anticipated theatrical releases, as topics such as bestiality, and the involuntary consumption of bodily excrement, far surpass what we conventionally see in a horror film.

Censorship

Although *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II* eventually met censorship guidelines for theatrical release in both the United States and the United Kingdom, the edits made in order for theatrical release mostly eliminate the visual depiction of controversial topics, but still imply that these actions take place. The explicit intertwining of sex and violence in *A Serbian Film* has led to it being drastically cut in order to meet censorship guidelines, and in some instances, is still illegal to view. To receive an 18 certificate, or an "R" rating, *A Serbian Film* had four minutes and eleven seconds cut from it by the British Board of Film Classification, making it the most cut film in 16 years (Bailey, 2010). According to the BBFC website, *A Serbian Film* was edited to remove "portrayals of children in a sexualised or abusive context and images of sexual and sexualised violence which have a tendency to eroticise or endorse the behaviour" (BBFC.co.uk). Even with the implementation of such edits, *A Serbian Film* still remains banned in New Zealand, Singapore, Norway, Australia, and Malaysia. Likewise, the screening of *A Serbian Film* at Sitges Film Festival, which showcases fantasy and horror movies in Spain, was so controversial that the director of the festival, Angel Sala, was brought up on charges of exhibiting child pornography (Pape, 2013).

The Human Centipede II was also met with extreme controversy and censorship restrictions. The BBFC initially refused to grant *The Human Centipede II* a certificate, which banned the film from being screened in theaters or released on DVD in the UK ("The Human Centipede II." In refusing to ban *A Human Centipede II* a certificate, the BBFC concluded that:

After careful consideration, it was judged that to issue a certificate to THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE 2 (FULL SEQUENCE), even if statutorily confined to adults, would involve risk of harm within the terms of the VRA (Video Recordings Act), would be inconsistent with our Guidelines, would be unacceptable to the public and could be in potential breach of UK law. The BBFC considered whether cutting the work might address the issues but concluded that as the unacceptable material featured throughout, cutting was not a viable option and the work was therefore refused a classification. (BBFC.co.uk)

After resubmitting the film for classification a second time, *The Human Centipede II* was eventually granted an 18 certificate after making 32 cuts to the film, totaling 2 minutes and 37 seconds, which limited the amount of sexualized violence and degradation portrayed in the film ("BBFC Rejects The Human Centipede II," 2013). Similar to *A Serbian Film*, *The Human Centipede II* was also outright banned in New Zealand due to its extreme sexualized violence. Despite lengthy cuts to both of these films, they still remain highly controversial and have faced resistance from mainstream streaming services such as *Netflix* and *Hulu*.

Contextualizing Hardcore Horror

In understanding why *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II* are so controversial, we must first contextualize these films within the larger spectrum cinema that places a large emphasis on violence. Although the term 'Torture Porn' is used as an umbrella term to describe all recent films that depict a more visceral, torture oriented depiction of violence, there are some recognizable differences

between films of the Torture Porn subgenre of horror and more obscure films such as *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*. In defining the conventions of Torture Porn, scholar Steve Jones first outlines a critical perspective of how films belonging to the Torture porn subgenre are typically perceived. Jones states:

First, some objectors claim that torture porn is constituted by violence, nudity, and rape. Second, that violence is read as pornographic. Critics allege that torture porn's violence is depicted in such prolonged, gory detail that its aesthetic is comparable to hardcore pornography's, since the latter is renowned for its close-up, genitally explicit 'meat shots'. Third, the 'porn' in 'torture porn' is interpreted as a synonym for 'worthless'. Since the films are allegedly preoccupied only with 'endless displays of violence', they are dismissed as throwaway, immoral entertainment. Finally, it is proposed that the films are consumed as violent fetish pornography: that viewers are sexually aroused by torture porn's horror imagery. (Jones: 15)

In asserting basic qualifications for what they consider to be Torture Porn, critics often neglect to distinguish boundaries and tend group horror subgenres together as one. Although films classified within the Torture Porn subgenre frequently disrupt the normative questions of "how far is too far," there are vast differences between what Torture Porn will depict or imply and what is presented in *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*. Jones argues that even though the 45 movies he considers to be part of the Torture Porn cycle are diverse, they all convey two main characteristics, which include belonging to the horror genre, and displaying an emphasis on imprisonment and physical suffering (Jones:15-16). Furthermore, films within the Torture Porn subgenre are largely Hollywood productions that are intended for theatrical release and therefore adhere to censorship restrictions in order to see financial success.

In viewing the commonalities shared by *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*, one can note that it is the breaking of these mainstream censorship restrictions in both of these films that make them so controversial. In exploring films that share these characteristics, Jones categorizes films that convey a direct focus on pushing boundaries through the regular intertwining of sex and violence, into a unique subgenre of its own which Jones calls "Hardcore Horror" (Jones:170). Hardcore Horror typically embodies images that critics perceive as indecent because films of this subgenre are largely excluded from the mainstream (Jones: 171). Although 'Hardcore Horror' films are created fairly frequently, they largely go unnoticed by critics and censors because they are mostly independent productions with very low budgets, and are not intended for theatrical release. Finding such films therefore requires research and exploration, as they are not accessible through mainstream content providers. This leads fans of Hardcore Horror to have to utilize illegal methods of obtaining these films, such as peer to peer filing sharing and torrenting. It is this exclusion from the mainstream, and the difficulty to access such material, that provokes filmmakers to push boundaries. As Jones notes, "Hardcore horror's imagery is provocative not because it is transgressive, but rather because it is founded on resistance and tensions" (Jones: 183). In other words, films that fall into the Hardcore Horror genre use the spectacle of breaking cinematic taboos as a way to protest against what the mainstream media labels as safe for human consumption. These films push cinematic boundaries intentionally, as in most cases, they were not made with the intention of seeking a wide release.

In viewing the characteristics of Hardcore Horror, one can note that it bears many similarities to New Extremism cinema, especially in the cases of *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*. In describing New Extremism, Palmer states that these films present "incisive social critiques, portraying contemporary society as isolating, unpredictably horrific and threatening, a nightmarish series of encounters in which personal relationships- families, couples, friendships, partnerships- disintegrate and fail" (Palmer, 2011:58). Likewise, in presenting modern society as heinous, New Extremism cinema regularly depicts the violation of social taboos as well as commonly displays scenes of sexualized violence. New Extremism films are also largely independent productions that likewise see very limited theatrical release, but reside under the context of the art-house film. In describing the visceral nature of New Extremism films, Grønstad explains how these films contain a level of unwatchability based on their desired effect to test the endurance of the viewer (Grønstad, 2012: 3). Whereas Hollywood's Torture Porn ultimately strives to produce a sense of pleasure in the viewer through adhering to mainstream censorship restrictions, New Extremism films purposely evoke

displeasure (Grønstad: 15). New Extremism films provoke displeasure from the spectator through what Grønstad titles as “razorblade gestures,” moments of provocation which entail “the emotional, psychic, and ethical slicing open of the gaze of the spectator” (Grønstad: 6).

Films such as *Irreversible* (2002) and *Antichrist* (2009) convey taboo topics, such as rape and genital mutilation, however, these scenes do not make up the majority of the films. There are limited “razorblade gestures” presented in these films as to not overwhelm the viewer. For example, in viewing *Antichrist*, we can see how visceral scenes are placed strategically in the film, firstly at the films beginning with the death of the child, and then again in higher frequency once the couple arrives at Eden. We see a similar structure implemented in *Irreversible*, through the graphic fire extinguisher death in The Rectum, an underground, bondage-themed night club, at the film’s beginning, followed by a prolonged still-camera rape scene, which takes place closer to the end of the film. The appearance of these “razorblade gestures” thus acts as jabs at the viewers’ senses to stimulate intellectual reflection. As Grønstad notes:

The specific diegetic worlds, and the states of consciousness that emanate from them, expand the scope of human experience, and the often uncomfortable depictions these films offer replenish our ethical imagination and bolster our awareness of moral and existential issues. The films in the unwatchable cinema traditionally may be privileged sites for engendering this type of knowledge and awareness because they engage both our bodies and our intellect in ways that most mainstream cinema or conventional arthouse films fail to do. (Grønstad: 23)

In spreading these “razorblade gestures” out throughout the film’s larger narrative, they are easier to digest because they only place the audience in a temporary state of abjection. Viewers might momentarily feel uncomfortable, but the brief interjections of these graphic scenes enable the audience to reflect on these visceral moments quickly, and move on as the narrative does. The film’s do not dwell on “razorblade gestures,” so the audience does not either.

Contrastively, we see the implantation of “razorblade gestures” almost continuously in *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*. From the onset of both films, the spectator is bombarded with arduous situations and scenes to the extent that it becomes overwhelming and literally unbearable to watch. Whereas New Extremism slices open the gaze of the viewer with “razorblade gestures,” Hardcore Horror outright blinds them. Although New Extremism cinema and Hardcore Horror often use the same tactics to evoke feelings of discomfort and shock among spectators, films such as *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II* provide the spectator with an overload of such images, which is why they were met with such harsh criticism. The limited amount of “razorblade gestures” featured in films such as *Irreversible* and *Antichrist* also explains how these films were able to pass censorship restrictions without any cuts made to the films. In moderation, extremely graphic scenes are acceptable if they can be justified by the underlying meaning of the film. The auteur aesthetic and high budgets associated with New Extremism films elevates them to a heightened degree of respectability, and implies that they do indeed have an underlying meaning.

Marketing

The distinction between ‘Hardcore Horror,’ ‘New Extremism Cinema,’ and ‘Torture Porn’ can be seen through the ways that these films are marketed. In viewing the marketing of both *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*, one can note that they largely present the graphic nature of the films as the predominant incentive to view them. Whereas Hollywood Torture Porn films such as *Saw* and *Hostel* place an emphasis on promoting the films as frightening and controversial, and New Extremism films such as *Irreversible* and *Antichrist* present the content as intellectually stimulating, Hardcore Horror functions as a vessel to over indulge in material that is considered deviant. In viewing the methods in which *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II* were promoted, we can see how these films were geared towards the niche, underground fan base of Hardcore Horror.

A Serbian Film’s premiere at South by Southwest Film Festival in March 2010 marked the beginning of a series of critiques labeling *A Serbian Film* as one of the most disturbing films audience members had ever seen. Although *A Serbian Film* did not receive significant mainstream attention, the controversial nature of the film became a heavily discussed topic within horror subculture through fan magazines such as *Rue Morgue* and *Fangoria*, and also through online blogs and websites such as

FEARNet and Reddit. In November 2010, *Rue Morgue* devoted its cover to *A Serbian Film*, subtitling the magazine issue, “Rage! Perversion! Atrocity!” The magazine issue features a lengthy article with *A Serbian Film*’s director, Srdjan Spasojevic, detailing the backlash the film received upon its initial run through the film festival circuit and presents the film as a political statement against the Serbian government. Although Spasojevic provides an explanation for the graphic nature of *A Serbian Film*, arguing that it is an expression of the real-life horrors he experienced growing up in Serbia, the article describes some of the controversial scenes, such as the Newborn Porn scene, in which a doctor delivers a newborn baby and subsequently molests it, in detail. The article also compares *A Serbian Film* to both Hardcore Horror films such as *August Underground* (2001) and to art-house films such as *Irreversible* (2002), and questions if *A Serbian Film* is “a vile piece of gruesome exploitation or a valid artistic expression of a decidedly extreme experience,” (Ognjanovic, 2010: 17-22) thus placing a clear distinction between Hardcore Horror, and art-house New Extremism. Although the article does not situate *A Serbian Film* as either exploitation or high art, it promotes the film as presenting an intense experience, stating that, “critics who have seen the still-unreleased film during its festival run agree that no other recent work has shocked, provoked, disgusted and angered as many audiences, resulting in it being censored and banned and even leading to death threats against its director” (Ognjanovic: 16). By using trigger words such as “shock,” “disgust,” and “anger,” and noting that Spasojevic received death threats due to the controversial nature of the film, Ognjanovic is essentially situating *A Serbian Film* in the realm of Hardcore Horror, and promoting the film in an outlet (*Rue Morgue*) that is familiar and accessible to fans of the subgenre.

In detailing the film’s controversy, Ognjanovic’s *Rue Morgue* article effectively hyped up the film to viewers, but provided no legal outlet to view the film. Although the article came out in the November 2010 issue of *Rue Morgue*, the US DVD release of *A Serbian Film* was not until October 2011. This compelled potential viewers to resort to illegal means, such as torrenting websites and peer to peer sharing, to obtain the film in a timelier manner and to view the film in its most pure/uncut form. Although it is impossible to gauge the number of people who obtained *A Serbian Film* through via these methods, or which version of the film they viewed, as these sites violate US and international Copyright law, interactive websites such as Reddit.com show that *A Serbian Film* was being viewed frequently prior to its release. The film became a sort of challenge to the audience on the Reddit community. For example, one thread on Reddit states “Let’s play: Who can watch ‘A Serbian Film’ all the way through?” (“Let’s Play,” 2013). Likewise, another thread states, “You don’t want to see A Serbian Film. You just think you do” (“You don’t want to see,” 2013). Over one hundred threads involving *A Serbian Film* were posted in 2010 alone, conveying the film’s cult-like popularity prior to its release, and how labeling *A Serbian Film* as “going too far” enticed viewers to want to see it. In describing how Hardcore Horror films are typically marketed, Jones states:

Hardcore horror filmmakers are reliant on word-of-mouth to form a reputation since their distributors do not have the advertising budgets most torture porn distributors do. The Internet has allowed fans to access and spread word about hardcore horror films on a global scale. Independent production/distribution companies also utilize this route to market... hardcore horror films are clearly differentiated from their mainstream counterparts via those distribution differences. Like pornography, hardcore horror is mostly consumed in the home. With the exception of festival screenings, hardcore horror is not exhibited theatrically, being excluded from the certificated multiplex setting. (Jones: 173)

The fact that fans of the Hardcore Horror subgenre were only able to obtain *A Serbian Film* via peer to peer sharing, paired with the controversial characterization of the film throughout the Reddit community, reinforces Jones’s assertions about how and where films of the Hardcore Horror genre are and should be consumed. In viewing the popularity of *A Serbian Film* on websites such as Reddit, one can note how the Internet enables fans of hardcore horror to search for films that are not part of the mainstream and provides them with an outlet to discuss the material.

Once *A Serbian Film* was released on DVD, there were numerous versions of the film in circulation. The website FlixFling began offering a digital, edited and unrated version of *A Serbian Film* for rental and purchase during the film’s initial DVD release in October 2011. This unrated version was also available for purchase in DVD format on various websites such as Amazon and Best Buy. Shortly

after in May 2012, Invincible Pictures released an unedited version of *A Serbian Film*, packaging the DVD in a see-through plastic case glued to a cardboard square, with “UNCUT” written in bold on the disc, stylized to look as if it handwritten with marker. Distributing the uncut version of *A Serbian Film* in this manner gives the appearance that it is “underground,” almost as if the viewer were about to watch a snuff film, and thus furthermore distinguishing the film as a part of the Hardcore Horror genre. Although this version of *A Serbian Film* was labeled as uncut, negative reviews from fans stating that this version still had material edited out of it, lead to a second uncut release of *A Serbian Film* in December 2013. In marketing this version of *A Serbian Film*, the horror website Bloody-Disgusting states, “After weathering the intense storm of controversy surrounding the film’s unflinching depictions of sex and violence, a limited run of uncut DVDs was released” (Mr. Disgusting, 2013). Likewise, this information is presented as insider knowledge as the article states that Bloody-Disgusting exclusively learned this information several days prior to the new, uncut version of the film’s release. This “exclusive information” presented by Bloody Disgusting is comparable to the word-of-mouth fashion in which Hardcore Horror is typically disseminated; members of this horror community were granted insider information due to dedication to the genre. The avid participation among fans of *A Serbian Film* in both obtaining new forms of the film and discussing the impact of such content displays cinephilic tendencies associated with a film that is largely seen as extremely cinephobic. Although critics characterize *A Serbian Film* as overly graphic and too extreme, fans of the film were persistent in obtaining the purest version of the film, in a manner akin to how high-brow film scholars would cherish lost footage from an Orson Welles film.

The Human Centipede II was similarly marketed to promote the film’s graphic nature and illegal status. Although the popularity *The Human Centipede* (2009) had already created a fan base for *The Human Centipede II*, comments made by director Tom Six in anticipation of the of the sequels release stated both Six’s purpose in doing a sequel as well as insinuated how graphic *The Human Centipede II* would be. During an interview on KPBS, Six stated that, “part one will be “My Little Pony” compared to part two because it’s going to be [a] pretty horrible part two” (Accomando, 2013). Likewise, once *The Human Centipede II* was banned in the UK, both Six and the film’s distributor, IFC Midnight, took advantage of the ban and began incorporating it in their marketing of the film in the United States. The IFC website for *The Human Centipede II* hailed:

Despite being banned in the UK, the wait is over for the most controversial movie of the year, Tom Six's follow up to the cult horror smash, THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE 2 (FULL SEQUENCE)! The opening night selection of Fantastic Fest 2011, the film ups the ante with a brute force unparalleled in motion pictures today. The iconic Dr. Heiter has inspired a real-life protégé, the sickly, disturbed security guard Martin-- who takes his gory inspiration from the original film to horrific new extremes...and one-ups the doctor with his pièce de résistance. (IFCfilms.com)

By presenting the illegal status of *The Human Centipede II* as positive factor, the advertising works to entice fans to want to see the footage based on its apparent deviant status, and works to classify the film as a member of the Hardcore Horror genre. As Jones states:

Prohibition may severely hinder a film’s commercial prospects, but in the case of hardcore horror it also enhances reputation. Banning verifies that the movie contains material ‘not found in the average Hollywood film’. Outlawing also confirms that distribution must occur via ‘alternative’ routes, bypassing the censor’s castigatory gaze. Since censors reflect dominant values, exclusion becomes a sign of unconformity. Regardless of their veracity, these assumptions evince that hardcore horror’s appeal derives from its polarization into the mainstream. (Jones: 173)

Thus, highlighting *The Human Centipede II* as illegal and disturbing made the film inherently more appealing to the Hardcore Horror community. The limited viewing options and controversy surrounding the film turned the viewing of *The Human Centipede II* into a protest against the dominant values of the mainstream media, and empowered fans to convey their agency as viewers. Furthermore, Tim League, the director of Fantastic Fest, had an ambulance and EMTs as well as complementary vomit bags on hand at the premiere of *The Human Centipede II* to imply that the material presented in *The*

Human Centipede II is so graphic that it might be detrimental to one's health (Yamato, 2011). The ability to sit through the film's entirety is presented as a reward to the dedicated fan, a feat unattainable to those who are not active viewers of Hardcore Horror.

Although *The Human Centipede II* had an extremely limited theatrical release in the United States, screening the film only a handful of times in edited form and only during midnight screenings, IFC Midnight also released the edited version of *The Human Centipede II* as a Video on demand feature simultaneously with the film's theatrical release. This enabled fans to bypass the movie theater and indulge in this material from a home viewing setting, falling in line with the discrete manner in which Hardcore Horror is typically consumed. As a final jab at the mainstream media, the unrated director's cut of *The Human Centipede II* was released on February 14th, 2012, presenting a final ironic wink and nudge at censors, as the film was released on Valentine's Day.

Character Development and Allegiance in *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*

In applying the conventions of Torture Porn to *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*, one can note how even Jones's broad methods of classification distinguish both of these films from the Torture Porn subgenre and further separate them from mainstream consumption. In both *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*, the main characters are the ones committing heinous acts of violence, as opposed to these acts being inflicted on them. In viewing the main characters of Torture Porn films such as *Saw* and *Hostel*, one can note how framing and character development work to elicit allegiance on behalf of the spectator; we feel bad for the main characters that are being brutalized on screen. Smith states that "allegiance pertains to the moral and ideological evaluation of a character by the spectator," and that "on the basis of such evaluations, spectators construct moral structures, in which characters are organized and ranked in a system of preference" (Smith, 2001: 41). Although the main characters featured in *Saw* and *Hostel* are presented as flawed, they are in no way conveyed as immoral and in most cases show relatability. In enabling the viewer to find aspects of these characters to which they can identify with, the viewer is prone to sympathize with these characters (Smith: 40). For example, in viewing the character Paxton from *Hostel*, we can see how first part of the film establishes him as an ordinary young man backpacking through Europe and bonding with his friends. Although Paxton and his friends are enthused about the prospect of fornicating with exotic women, neither Paxton nor his friends do anything to condemn the perception of their characters. We see the group exploring Europe and looking out for each other, as normal friends would do. Once Paxton is kidnapped and tortured, the spectator's established sense of allegiance, through presenting Paxton as a morally sound character, enables the viewer to both sympathize and empathize with Paxton in a manner that is absent from *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*.

Likewise, although the main characters in both *Antichrist* and *Irreversible* are more complex, their portrayals are presented as mostly positive. In regard to *Antichrist*, Willem Dafoe's character is predominantly shown attempting to help his wife cope with grief after the loss of their son. Although it is insinuated that while their son was still alive, Dafoe's character was somewhat obsessive with work, the spectator only really sees him trying to assist his wife. As Charlotte Gainsbourg's character becomes increasingly paranoid and psychotic, the audience conveys an allegiance with Dafoe's character as he attempts to escape death. Similarly, although *Irreversible* is structured to purposely confuse the audience through its reverse narrative, the film's later scenes and conclusion work to justify Marcus's conquest for revenge, even if him and Pierre wind up killing the wrong man. In both *Antichrist* and *Irreversible*, it is our allegiance with the main characters that make these films so impactful and hard to watch. As viewers, we are being set up to empathize with these characters.

Conversely, in examining Milos from *A Serbian Film* and Martin from *The Human Centipede II*, one can note how their portrayals as immoral characters from the onset of the films work to immobilize spectatorial allegiance with either character. For example, the first images we see of Milos in *A Serbian Film* are of him violently having sex with a woman. As the frame zooms out, it is revealed that we are not viewing this in real time, but are actually watching one of Milos's old pornography DVD's. The frame then cuts to Milos's son, Stefan, watching the footage, followed by Milos and his wife walking into the room and catching him. Although Milos's wife, Marija, scolds him for leaving the footage around, Milos appears indifferent and somewhat amused by his son's confused reaction. In

presenting Milos as somewhat misogynistic and deeply irresponsible, the audience is given a negative perception of Milos from the beginning of the film. Likewise, in the opening sequence of *The Human Centipede II* shows Martin watching the first *Human Centipede* film and then senselessly attacking and kidnapping a young couple to become a part of his “real life” human centipede. The establishing sequences of both *A Serbian Film* and the *Human Centipede II* reveal major flaws in the main characters that inhibit spectatorial allegiance through repeatedly presenting the characters as immoral. Therefore, as Milos and Martin commit nefarious acts, the spectator is less prone to root for either of these main characters.

The Impact of Cuts in *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*

In viewing the edited and unedited versions of *A Serbian Film*, we can note that the majority of the cuts made to the film mainly take place in two scenes. The first scene to undergo a substantial amount of editing is the “Newborn Porn” scene. The unedited “Newborn Porn” scene in *A Serbian Film* depicts a pregnant woman, sprawled out on a table, ready to give birth. The camera then cuts to a man; dressed like a doctor, beginning to undress himself until he is only in his under garments. As the woman groans in agony as she pushes to expel the baby from her body, we begin to see the baby coming out via a close up of the woman’s vagina. The “doctor” in this scene then successfully removes the child from the woman’s body and smacks it in the behind, testing to see if it is alive. The man then pulls down his underwear and begins to rape the newborn baby. Although penetration is not shown, we hear the baby crying and can see the prosthetic baby’s face as the man is thrusting into it. The mother of the newborn is then shown smiling and laughing as she witnesses her newborn baby being raped in front of her eyes. The frame then cuts to reveal Milos, with his head down in shame. Milos then storms out of the room as Vukmir states “This is a new genre Milos! Newborn porn! Newborn!”

The edited version of the “Newborn porn” scene conveys several cuts to remove the display of physical contact between the “doctor” and the newborn child. Firstly, although we see the “doctor” enter the room, the edited version does not show him remove his clothing and deliver the child in his undergarments. Secondly, although we still hear the doctor smack the child’s behind, the visual depiction of this is removed from the scene. Lastly, instead of showing the “doctor” thrust into the prosthetic baby, this scene was edited to remove the appearance of the child and focus on Milos’s reaction to viewing the material. The clear violation of social norms in this scene, even in its edited form, is highly controversial and provoked viewers to express their disgust in viewing material of this nature. For example, one user from Serbia stated on IMDB that, “This is legalized pedophilia and rape commercial, free of charge, for all sick bastards of the world. Enjoy you sick bastards. Hope you all rot in hell” (Stepp2, 2010). Similarly, a user from Germany stated:

I wasn't able to watch this movie. I love the main character (Srdjan Todorovic) but this is a movie that he shouldn't have to make. I stopped watching at a "raping baby scene". Movies like this should not be shown at the festivals nor on television. It is child pornography - something that we all try to stop in the world and then a movie like this is being shown in theaters- Such a shame and the director and a writer of this movie should be in prison just for the idea of shooting a movie like this. (Japan, 2013)

Although many viewers and critics were offended and repulsed by the “newborn porn” scene in *A Serbian Film*, director Srdjan Spasojevic defends this scene under the guise of political protest against the oppressive control of the Serbian Government. In an interview with Rue Morgue, Spasojevic states that:

That scene, like other violent scenes in the film, is not supposed to look cool or entertaining- it should disgust you and make you scream “Enough!” to such a way of like... The NBP scene is a literal depiction of the feeling we have for living in this region- the baby represents all of us whose innocence and youth were stolen by the dirty and corrupted “authorities” governing our lives, and by those I mean both Serbian and foreign authorities.

Although Spasojevic achieved his desired impact to disgust the audience, the political allegory that Spasojevic states is apparent in this scene is not discernable. Regardless of if Spasojevic really did

put in this graphic scene in the film to convey his detest of the power of the Serbian government, the scenes references to such are too loose and are therefore unreadable. Taking this into consideration, the scene's only function in *A Serbian Film* is that of a "razorblade gesture." By masking this scene as a political allegory, Spasojevic attempts to legitimize his implementation of taboo images, rather than admitting the footage was input to disgust spectators in a new, horrific way. We can see Spasojevic both mock and celebrate the spectator during the "Serbian Family" scene as the film director Vukmir pronounces, "That's Film!" after Milos rapes his wife and son and goes on a killing rampage once he realizes what he has done. One can interpret this as Spasojevic's critique of spectatorship of such graphic material as Vukmir is presented as a negative character throughout the films entirely. On the other hand, we can also take this statement literally. Being that at this point in *A Serbian Film*, the spectator has already viewed the majority of the film, one can read Vukmir's proclamation of "That's Film!" as reflecting cinephilic sentiment regarding films of the Hardcore Horror nature and their graphic depictions of violence. From this perspective, "quality" film contains the ability to shock the audience, to break boundaries, and to rile up censors, all of which are present in both the edited and unedited versions of *A Serbian Film*.

Lastly, although many of the cuts made to *The Human Centipede II* were fragmented throughout the film, one scene was cut out entirely from both the UK and American versions of the film. Once Martin gets his centipede up and running, there is a scene that displays Martin getting an erection while gazing at the centipede. The scene then shows Martin take a roll of barbed wire and wrap it around his penis, and subsequently rape the last member of the centipede. This scene was deemed the most controversial of the entire film and was not shown until the unrated directors cut was released in February 2012. A user review of the edited version of *The Human Centipede II* from November 2011 states:

What a sick, depraved, repugnant movie this is. Why do producers, writers, and directors believe such films need to be made? How is it that they actually gain a following? I'm greatly disturbed by the fact that there's a demand for them. We don't need movies like this in our lives, not even for the purposes of entertainment – which is a funny word to use, because it's inconceivable to me how anyone could possibly find this kind of trash entertaining. If stories like this appeal to you, if you get some kind of dizzy thrill at the sight of degrading, pointless exploitation, you inhabit a world I officially want no part of. There are enough screwed up people in the world without their sadistic perversions being gleefully celebrated in a movie theater. (Pandolfi, 2011)

This user review again conveys that despite edits made to films of the Hardcore Horror genre, such as *The Human Centipede II*, the controversial topics presented in the film are not intended/ received well in mainstream consumption. On the other hand, as noted prior, there is a large horror subculture with active and dedicated viewers that search for and discuss Hardcore Horror. As one reviewer states on IMDb:

This film is way too different than the first sequence of HC. With black and white effect , this film make you feel the real horror. Tom six has done his Horrible Job again bringing this full sequence to all hard core horror lovers. With the mentally challenged obese guy, Martin, this film reveals the new dimension of Human Centipede Movie. Some people out there shouting that this film is SICK. But I don't think so. A film is a film. As a sci-fi horror film, this film is excellent in graphic violence scenes. I'll not comment on Sandpaper and Barbed wire issues as I've seen a semi cut version of this film. Finally it's up to the viewers, whether they watch this EXTREME HORROR FILM or not. (Sabbir31)

A Serbian Film and *The Human Centipede II* raise questions about both cinephilia and cinephobia as both of these films exhibited an array of reactions, from complete disgust to profound admiration. From a cinephobic standpoint, these films are often met with extreme opposition and deemed as unacceptable films from a mainstream perspective. Through analyzing viewer responses to highly controversial scenes in both *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*, we can note how even vast amounts of editing to the films did not favorably alter audience reception of this material. The taboo content featured in both of these films serves as the ultimate cinephobic fret, compelling those who are not fans of the Hardcore Horror subgenre to turn away and never look back. The films were

not intended for mainstream consumption, and therefore, they were met with an appropriate amount of shock and awe from viewers who only watch mainstream horror. On the other hand, the presence of a cult-like Hardcore Horror community also exhibits extreme cinephilia. In viewing the marketing of *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede II*, we can note that there is an active and avid community that is interested in viewing the breaking of cinematic taboos. Although there is a market for films of the Hardcore Horror subgenre, the constant use of “razorblade gestures” and a lack of allegiance with the characters in these films, places them in a category outside of mainstream consumption. When films of the Hardcore Horror genre make their way into the mainstream market, they surpass the discrete, intended viewing platform of the home, and expose mainstream audiences to extremely visceral and taboo images. The backlash from critics and mainstream audiences serves as a reminder that Hardcore Horror films should be kept hidden from mass consumption, and that they should remain in the dark, hard to find areas of the Internet.

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