

## **The connoisseurship of the condemned: A Serbian Film, *The Human Centipede 2* and the appreciation of the abhorrent**

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### **Abstract:**

The aesthetic appreciation of horror film remains inseparable from concerns with personal and public morality: the reception of *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede 2: Full Sequence* offers two compelling cases in point. Both films were heavily cut by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) prior to their release and both continue to provoke impassioned moral objections. Such moral opprobrium is simultaneously dismissed as exaggerated – hysterical, even – by others. The situation merits empirical analysis. By codifying 1,338 publicly available reviews into a series of response matrices, this essay demonstrates how proportionately significant the question of morality was for these two film's audiences. The essay also compares and contrasts the grounds for assessment used by critical and lay audience members. The work seeks to contribute to our understanding of the reception of the extreme horror/torture porn genre and to provide an empirically grounded account of an audience which is often dogmatically presumed to require protectionist censorship.

**Keywords:** Audience reception, BBFC, censorship, lay and critical audience comparisons, moral responses to film, Horror, Torture Porn

### **Introduction**

I think that the film is tragic, sickening, disturbing, twisted, absurd, infuriated, and actually quite intelligent. I admire and detest it at the same time. And I will never watch it again. Ever. (Scott Weinberg, review of *A Serbian Film* [2010])

One funny joke was at the end. It says ‘this film has been brought to you by Six Entertainment’, and I thought this is clearly a new usage of the word ‘Entertainment’ I hadn’t previously encountered. (Mark Kermode, review of *Human Centipede 2* [2011])

I find it difficult to imagine that the public is going to say there is no issue here, that we should just go away and ignore it all. (David Cooke, Director of the BBFC [c.f. Brown 2012])

*A Serbian Film* (2010) depicts the fate of Milos, a retired Serbian porn star turned family man who, struggling under mounting financial problems, is attracted back to the industry by the shady promises of a lucratively awarded swansong. *Human Centipede 2* (2011), also adopting the film within a film refrain, follows the existential tribulations of Martin, a sexually abused mentally retarded asthmatic underground car park attendant, as he pathologically expresses homage to *Human Centipede (First Sequence)* (2010) by grafting 12 strangers together, anus to mouth. Both films were heavily censored across a variety of jurisdictions (Brown, 2012).

An uncut London premiere of *A Serbian Film* was originally scheduled for the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 2010 at the annual *FrightFest* festival. Rumours concerning the film’s potentially criminal content, however, led Westminster Council to prudently seek film classification in advance of this airing and the launch was postponed because 3 minutes and 48 seconds of material – 49 individual cuts across 11 scenes – was deemed censorious (BBFC, 2010). An abridged version of the film was resubmitted for classification on the 21<sup>st</sup> October and, a week later, it was granted Certificate “18”, subject to a total of 4 minutes and 12 seconds worth of excisions.<sup>1</sup> UK commentators were quick to mark this as the “most cut” (Bailey, 2010) and “most censored” (Shoard, 2010) film for 16 years. *A Serbian Film* was alleged to have been the “nastiest film ever made” (MacNab, 2010).

*The Human Centipede 2*, for its part, was initially submitted to the BBFC on June 2011 and pointedly refused classification on account of its portrayal of the abductees as “objects to be brutalised” (BBFC, 2011). The protagonist’s unrelenting “callousness towards victims” coupled with his evident “pleasure in the pain and humiliation of others” (ibid.) certainly didn’t help the classification-seeking cause. After receiving the initial refusal, then presiding BBFC Director David Cooke has since revealed, the film’s distributor voluntarily proposed a series of cuts in order to meet the censor’s concerns.<sup>2</sup> So began a process of dialogue which culminated in the film being granted certificate “18”, subject to a total of 32 cuts, or, the loss of 2 minutes and 37 seconds of prohibitive material. Reviewers described the film as a “repellent exercise in sexual sadism” (Tookey, 2012), while the director was compared to “that annoying kid at school, the one who sat in the corner trying to get people angry by shouting out rude words” (Mason, 2011).

Formal comparisons between the two films were made even before *The Human Centipede 2* had successfully secured classification (Weinberg, 2011, Tookey, 2011). *The Daily Mail* (Tookey, 2012) was quick to lament how the two films wallowed “in sexual degradation, rape and torture” in a manner symptomatic of a broader moral decline. The very availability of these films, indeed, amounted to an inexcusable abdication of responsibility on the part of the BBFC (Smart, 2010; Tookey, 2011). Readership- and subscription-motivated conservatism held nothing like the monopoly on *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede 2* derived principled outrage, however, as we will see shortly.

The story of the reception of these two films – that is, the story of moral panic and viewer vulnerability – is certainly not a new one. Anybody familiar with the Torture Porn and/or the Video Nasties controversies of yore (see Walker, 2011; Cashmore, 2010; West, 2010; Barker, 1984) will sense here the treading of already well-worn boards. For just like with *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede 2*, the very existence of something like Torture Porn, let alone the demonstrable popularity of such an apparent abomination, is taken to represent a fundamental challenge to social standards of taste and decency, indeed, to our very sense of civilisation (Jones, 2013; Hills, 2005; Kimber, 2002). Torture Porn’s audience, according to David Edelstein (2006), craves the sort of “blood, guts and sadism” observable within prolonged torture sequences. This leaves us with a far from wholesome account of human desire, a fundamental departure from the gratification provided by the earlier ‘Slasher’ movie where “the spurt of blood” following the knife’s penetration can be seen as “equivalent to the money shot in porn.” What’s not to dislike?

The broader controversy derived out of such hand-wringing social psychology has, in large part unwittingly (Jones, 2013: 34), become an exploited ingredient within the marketing strategies underpinning so-called Torture Porn in particular, and contemporary (extreme) horror more generally (Bernard, 2014). But while the opportunity to be found in adverse publicity cannot have been lost on the economic interests underpinning the dissemination of *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede 2*, the analysis undertaken here considers their (im)morality not at the level of production or dissemination but at various levels of consumption. Not everybody has read a moral counsel of despair out of *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede 2* in particular, or of Torture Porn, more generally (see also Barker et al., 2001, Mayne 2002). The vast array of responses which these films have provoked, we argue, should be considered before we jump to any conclusions concerning their moral failings and/or the moral failings of their audiences.

Rather than prioritising censorious judgment, rather than subjecting the films to moral and aesthetic interpretations of our own, and rather than prioritising the interpretations of noted critics and/or other significant cultural intermediaries, then, this essay overviews, codes and aggregates publicly available responses to them. That is to say, rather than berating *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede 2* for their alleged obscenity and/or for the hypothetical damage they might do to the less discerning or more vulnerable viewer, on the one hand, and rather than defending or indeed celebrating them on account of their experimental, transgressive or allegorical qualities, on the other, we demonstrate

how these film's audiences have actually judged them (see also Barker et al., 2007). In an era of unprecedented levels of user-generated content, opportunities exist to explore this relatively old story about (extreme) horror and moral panic, in relatively new ways. By codifying and tabulating 1,338 publicly available reviews of these two films, this essay seeks:

1. To demonstrate the proportionate extent to which moral and aesthetic grounds for judgment prevailed in the reception of *The Serbian Film* and *A Human Centipede 2*.
2. To compare and contrast lay and critical audiences in their moral and aesthetic judgments of *The Serbian Film* and *A Human Centipede 2*.
3. To connect the empirical findings from 1) and 2) to longer-going discussions about Torture Porn in particular, and (Extreme) Horror more generally.
4. To draw practical consequences from the above, specifically with respect to censorship requirements and expectations.

In what follows, we review previous studies relevant to the exploration of our empirical and methodological concerns before clarifying the procedures adopted within our data collection and codification stages. The analysis section then delivers on research objectives 1) and 2) while the discussion section attempts to deliver on 3) and 4). We close by underlining potential avenues for further research.

### **Previous Studies**

Sociological studies of the development and evolution of genre are to be found in Mathijs (2003) on 'cult cinema', in Sconce (1996) on 'trash cinema', and in Bode (2010) on 'teen'-targeted viewing. Such work shares an emphasis on how the nature and scope of genre is geographically and periodically inflected, demonstrating how audiences play an active role in the negotiation of genre (Jancovich et al, 2003). The very act of calling something horror, as Mark Jancovich demonstrates (2009, 2010), is a combined outcome of the content of the object *and* of the socio-historical context within which it becomes objectified. So in studies of film reception – horror or otherwise – there cannot be context-neutral judgments: responses to films are rather expressions of taste dynamically produced within individually and collectively negotiated prestige networks (Negus, 2002 & Bourdieu, 2004; Hills, 2004) and should be approached as such.

The dubious badge of controversy also emerges out of a broader context of prestige-motivated reception. Previous studies have demonstrated how the very notion of controversial-to-the-point-of-censorious content frequently – usually deliberately – wrenches this content from its wider cinematic and social context (Barker, 2004; Barker et al, 2010; Hills, 2005; Klinger, 1986; 1994; 2007; Mathijs, 2003; 2005). Audiences for censorious films, as such studies show, need to be constructed as impressionable, vulnerable and susceptible *so that* paternalistic protection, that is to say, censorship, can emerge as an appropriate – perhaps even necessary – remedy. These broader processes

were at play in the reception of *Torture Porn* (Jones, 2013) and are, we will demonstrate, a prominent feature in the reception of *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede 2*.

It will come as little surprise, at least to those conversant with the *Daily Mail*, that calls for the censorship of these two films have been particularly shrill there. Likewise, it will come as little surprise to those familiar with even the most rudimentary elements of cultural libertarianism that, content regardless, the individual's right to view may inevitably trump the social obligation to protect. Nonetheless, the position is nuanced, not least since the BBFC has recently adopted a more censorious and pragmatic approach to classification, incorporating provisions into the BBFC Guidelines that address issues relating to moral harm and damage (see Petley, 2013), which engages with the context of violence within film, and hence may limit access and individual rights on this basis. However, rather than ignoring or sidelining this sociological observation that individual instances of judgment are inseparable from broader cultural and historical processes and modes of evaluation, we need to find a way of proceeding on its basis. The challenge isn't to simply acknowledge that cinematic judgments are caught up with particular standpoints but to demonstrate the proportionate extent to which this is the case. This is what we have tried to do here.

The Barker et al (2001) analysis of the reception of David Cronenberg's adaptation of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* offers an exemplary precedent in this regard. The study's authors highlighted how scenes within that film *became* characterised as perverted and harmful by a handful of self-appointed defenders of public-morality, stirring up much by way of public controversy (Beard, 2006; Mathijs, 2008). That *Crash* could corrupt was the message which these motivated cultural intermediaries sought to "drive home" (Mathijs, 2003: 29) in their motivated interpretations, thereby providing a grammar of pejorative judgment for subsequent lay audience interpretation. The crucial methodological move here was to avoid placing the content of the film at the root of the controversy – its emergence instead being explained by a series of exoteric factors within the mechanics of reception. It remains an important standard-bearer within the field of film reception studies.

Scholars remain divided as to whether the lay reception of controversial film is informed by its critical reception, or not. On the one hand, Cherry (2009) highlights the case of a community of horror-fans discussing films in a manner almost entirely removed from their broader critical reception. Church (2009), on the other hand, contends that broader critical reception provides a shared platform, even if only a pejorative one against which a sub-culture can better construct its own identity. Here we dispense with the metaphysical question of causality in favour of pursuing empirically demonstrable contrast and comparison.

Our study replicates aspects of the *Crash* study, most notably in our construction of **Table B** (below), by relating the "cross-cutting dimensions" (2001: 163) of aesthetic and moral judgments through the construction of a 3x3 response matrix. Whereas the *Crash* study was the outcome of primary qualitative and quantitative research data deliberately produced for the author's purposes, however, ours is the outcome of the classification of publicly available data. This decision is in keeping with the methodology employed by

Martin’s study of the UK reception of *Ring* (2009) while our utilisation of web-based information is also not without precedent (e.g. King, 2007; Shepherd, 2009). The next section underlines how we undertook the empirical stage of the project.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

All the reviews published upon IMDB.com, Rottentomatoes.com and Amazon.com on or before 4 January 2012 figured within our analysis. Reviews posted after this date did not. In total, we collected 1,338 reviews, categorised as follows:

Lay-Reviews of <i>A Serbian Film</i>	565
Lay-Reviews of <i>The Human Centipede 2: Full Sequence</i>	419
<b>Total Lay-Reviews</b>	<b>984</b>
Critical-Reviews of <i>A Serbian Film</i>	176
Lay-Reviews of <i>The Human Centipede 2: Full Sequence</i>	178
<b>Total Critical-Reviews</b>	<b>354</b>
<b>TOTAL REVIEWS</b>	<b>1,338</b>

**Table A:** Reviewer Type Categorisation

The nature of the distinction between lay-reviews and critical-reviews is not our own, rather it is the one already made by IMDB.com and Rottentomatoes.com (though not by Amazon.com). ‘Lay reviews’ are posted to these sites by visitors. ‘Critical reviews’, on the other hand, are specified as such upon the sites. The distinction between lay and critical largely hinges on the question of whether the reviewer (or, more accurately, the source) is an acknowledged or reputable commentator. This method of division is not without its difficulties, of course, but we have nevertheless adopted it for our analytical purposes. All reviews gathered from Amazon.com were classified as ‘lay reviews’.

### Data Codification

Each of the 1,338 reviews was manually coded as a response to the following question: is this a good film? The question was meant in both an aesthetic sense and a moral sense. Each review was consequentially coded in both senses, that is, as a response to the following two questions:

- 1) Is this a good *film*? (The Aesthetic Question)
- 2) Is this a *good* film? (The Moral Question)

Three possible answers to both of these questions were allowed for: yes, no and no comment. The coding stage consisted in the classification of the quality [positive (yes), negative (no) or neutral/non-committal (no comment)] of the aesthetic *and* moral judgments made within each review and the subsequent attribution of one of 11 possible categories (9 analytical categories and two anomalous<sup>3</sup> categories). The aesthetic and moral forms of judgments were far from mechanically complimentary, as will be demonstrated in the analysis section. Reviewers might well enjoy a film whilst also finding its subject matter, and by extension their own enjoyment of it, morally reprehensible. Reviews might also describe the film as poorly-shot and embarrassingly plotted while simultaneously appreciating its socially critical or allegorical aspects. Our coding methodology sought not only to recognise the potential deviation between these two forms of judgment but to make it the very focus of our empirical analysis. For this we developed a 3 x 3 coding matrix, as detailed in **Table B**:

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> Aesthetically Positive, Morally Positive	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> Aesthetically Positive, Morally Neutral/Non-Committal	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> Aesthetically Positive, Morally Negative
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> Aesthetically Neutral/Non-Committal, Morally Positive	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”<sup>4</sup></b> Aesthetically Neutral/Non-Committal, Morally Neutral/Non-Committal	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> Aesthetically Neutral/Non-Committal, Morally Negative
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> Aesthetically Negative, Morally Positive	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> Aesthetically Negative, Morally Neutral/Non-Committal	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> Aesthetically Negative, Morally Negative

**Table B:** Coding Matrix

Coding ambiguities were quite infrequent, but two recurrent cases warrant special mention. Firstly, many reviews drew attention to the boundary-pushing, transgressive or even extreme nature of the films yet neglected to form explicitly positive, neutral or negative judgments on their basis. For the purpose of ensuring consistency, reviews highlighting the challenging nature of the film without overtly passing aesthetic or moral judgment have been coded as having made a positive aesthetic judgment and a neutral/non-committal moral judgment (Code #3: ‘Appreciators’). Secondly, while many of the reviews were aesthetically and morally ambiguous, our concern was with coding the *general* character of the review as positive, negative or neutral/non-committal. Our approach sought to code cases of ambiguity in terms of their positive or negative tendency and, therefore, only where this wasn’t possible was the neutral/non-committal code applied.

For illustrative purposes, let us briefly return to the excerpts from the two reviews with which the essay opened, both of which fall under the ‘critical-reviews’ heading. The first, from Scott Weinberg (FEARnet), of *A Serbian Film*, goes as follows:

I think that the film is tragic, sickening, disturbing, twisted, absurd, infuriated, and actually quite intelligent. I admire and detest it at the same time. And I will never watch it again. Ever.

Weinberg is clearly torn on the question as to whether *A Serbian Film* is a good film, or not. On the side of aesthetic judgment, he speaks of admiration and intelligence. On the side of moral judgment, however, he tells us that the film is sickening and twisted: the sort of thing that, lamentably, cannot be un-watched. The film is simultaneously admired and admonished, then. From a coding perspective the expressed statement of admiration means that, even though the film was disturbing, it was nevertheless categorised as good, *aesthetically* speaking. The admonishment, for its part, doesn't criticise the film for its moral failings, rather, it criticises it for having left a lasting disturbing impression. This is not moral criticism, but a morally non-committal judgment. As such, Weinberg's review had #3 "Appreciators" (Aesthetically Positive, Morally Neutral/Non-Committal) assigned to it.

Things are a lot more straightforward with Mark Kermode's (BBC) review of *A Human Centipede 2*:

One funny joke was at the end. It says 'this film has been brought to you by Six Entertainment', and I thought this is clearly a new usage of the word 'Entertainment' I hadn't previously encountered.

For Kermode, *A Human Centipede 2* is an atrociously bad film and we need not be drawn on the morality/immorality non-debate, Code #9: "Critic" (Aesthetically Negative, Morally Neutral/Non-Committal). This two-dimensional method of coding deliberation outlined above – protracted in the case of the Weinberg review, constricted in the case of Kermode's – was repeated across all 1,338 collected cases. The result of this iterative manual procedure is discussed in the next section.

## **Analysis and Findings**

In total, 366 (27%) of the collected reviews received a Code #1 designation.<sup>5</sup> Our initial population of 1,338 possible reviews was consequentially reduced to 972 appropriate reviews. It is on the basis of these 972 reviews, rather than on the basis of the population of reviews as a whole, that the following tables, and their corresponding discussion, are respectively constructed and undertaken. That is to say, rather than discussing the effect of data deemed irrelevant to the purposes of analytical-categorisation, our analysis only focuses upon non-Code#1 reviews. The remainder of this section addresses the project's first two stated research objectives:

1. To demonstrate the proportionate extent to which moral and aesthetic grounds for judgment prevailed in the reception of *The Serbian Film* and *A Human Centipede 2*.

- To compare and contrast lay and critical audiences in their moral and aesthetic judgments of *The Serbian Film* and *A Human Centipede 2*.

It does this by presenting and subsequently commenting upon our empirical work.

### 1. Moral and Aesthetic Responses, in General

71 of the analytically relevant reviews received Code #2 designation (Fans), meaning that 7% of all the non-Code #1 reviews judged the films positively upon moral *and* aesthetic grounds. On the opposite extreme, Code #10 reviews (Opponents), represented 18% of the relevant review population. Taken together, these two categories, lying on opposite extremes of our coding-system (the most positive and the most negative), account for only a quarter of all relevant reviews. This also means that the majority (i.e. 75%) of the available reviews of two allegedly extreme films have tended away from making extreme judgments. 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, as detailed in **Table 2**:

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 7% (71)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 27% (260)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 7% (67)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 2% (18)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 10% (98)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 2% (19)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 2% (16)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 25% (240)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 18% (175)

**Table 2:** Total Critics and Fans Classification, excluding Code Ones [N =972 incl. 8 Code #11]

Indeed, it was much more likely for film audiences to *avoid* making moral judgments of these films, than it was for moral dimensions to figure within their reviews. 27% of the population were deemed to be Code #3, (Appreciators), meaning that 27% of all reviews judged the films positively – *as films* – without seeing the need to make any broader moral point. On the other hand, a further 25% of reviewers (Code #9: Critics) avoided casting moral judgment and nevertheless judged the films negatively, *as films*. When we add the three neutral/non-moral judgment categories together (Appreciators, Critics and Neutrals), then, we find that 62% (or 598) of all the relevant reviews gathered judged these allegedly morally charged films along demonstrably non-moral lines.

Empirical differences between how each film was received by the aggregate audience considered here also warrants commentary. The juxtaposition of **Table 8** and **Table 14**, within which the data is arranged along film-specific lines, allows for some very interesting comparisons in this regard. On the one hand, *A Serbian Film* can be seen to have provoked more by way of extreme reactions (the Combination of Code #2 and Code #10) in that 30% of reviewers were categorised along these lines, as compared to 20% in the case of *Human Centipede 2: Full Sequence*.

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 8% (42)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 28% (145)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 3% (17)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 3% (17)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 17% (90)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 3% (17)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> >1% (5)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 15% (77)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 22% (113)

**Table 8:** *A Serbian Film*: Total Critics and Fans Classification, excluding Code Ones [N =523 incl. 0 Code # 11]

That *A Serbian Film* provokes more by way of extreme reactions, however, is to be contrasted with the fact that, on the other hand, *Human Centipede 2: Full Sequence* provokes more by way of negative reviews. In the case of *A Serbian Film*, the combination of Codes #8-10 (Satirists, Critics and Opponents) reaches 37%, as opposed to 52% in the case of *Human Centipede 2: Full Sequence*.

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 6% (29)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 26% (115)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 11% (50)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 0% (1)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 2% (8)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 1% (2)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 2% (11)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 36% (163)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 14% (62)

**Table 14:** *Human Centipede 2: Full Sequence* Total Critics and Fans Classification, excluding Code Ones [N = 449 incl. 8 Code # 11]

In other words, *A Serbian Film* provoked more by way of extreme reviews whereas *Human Centipede 2: Full Sequence* provoked more by way of negative reviews. As with everything that has been said within this section, however, such general remarks need to be explored along audience-specific lines.

## **2. Moral and Aesthetic Responses, compared across Audiences**

**Tables 4 and 6** allow for direct comparisons between the two audience types. Following the category aggregations pursued above (the combination of Codes #2 and 10), we can see that lay audiences were more prone towards extreme reactions than critical audiences (28% vs. 19%). Surprisingly, perhaps, 11% of the critical reviews analysed qualified as ‘Fans’ whereas only 6% of lay audience members fell within this category. Less surprisingly, perhaps, lay audience members were more likely to oppose the films along moral and aesthetic grounds than were the critics (21% vs. 8%)

Moving beyond the question of extreme reactions, again, we can see, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, that there are *not* substantial differences to be observed between the two audience-types when it comes to the non-reliance upon moral judgments (the

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 11% (25)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 23% (59)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 5% (12)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 3% (6)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 12% (28)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 1% (3)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 4% (9)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 30% (70)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 8% (19)

**Table 4:** Total Critics Classification, excluding Code Ones [N = 234 incl. 3 Code #11]

Combination of Code #3, 6 and 9). In the case of the critics, 65% avoided couching their reviews in moral terms whereas that figure climbs only as far as 69% in the case of lay audiences. This gap is remarkable only by virtue of the fact that it *isn't* so glaring.

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 6% (46)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 27% (201)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 7% (55)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 2% (12)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 9% (70)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 2% (16)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> >1% (7)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 23% (170)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 21% (156)

**Table 6:** Total User Comments Classification, excluding Code Ones [N = 738 incl. 5 Code # 11]

Likewise, insofar as positive aesthetic judgments are concerned (the combination of Codes #2-4), the proportion of 39% of critics doesn't so obviously contrast with 40% of lay audience members nor, insofar as negative aesthetic judgments are concerned (the combination of Codes #8-10), does the proportion of 42% of critics hugely differ from 44% of lay audience members. Indeed, the differences between the two audience types, on these as well as so many other grounds, aren't so great as might have been expected. It is only on the question of extremes, it seems, that significant distinctions are to be observed.<sup>6</sup>

## Discussion

We fade in from black. In no particular order, we observe a fat and lonely man masturbating with the aid of sandpaper, a goateed Eastern European using a machete to induce rigour mortis in a recently deceased sex partner, repeated hammer-blows to the skull and face of a skinhead, a murder instigated by way of eye socket phallic penetration, amateur dentistry and surgery without-anaesthetic-but-with-mallet-and-stapler, a doubly confused young boy watching hardcore pornography within which his father plays the lead role, eleven mouths poised to accept eleven separate laxative-induced anal discharges, various forms of incestuous sexual intercourse, necrophilia of the decapitated, forced sexual penetration throughout which the perpetrator's penis has barbed wire wrapped around it, an infant's head bursting under the pressure of an accelerator pedal which its mother (of all people) jams to the floor (albeit unintentionally) and then, perhaps most unforgettably of all, the

fatal rape of a new born baby still attached to the maternal umbilical cord. Mixtures of sperm and blood, and of blood and faecal matter, splatter across the camera lens.

Finally, the action climaxes and, before the credits roll, we fade back to black and are provided with a small moment of emptiness within which we might contemplate the meaning, or otherwise, of the various horrifying spectacles we have just witnessed.

This essay has contemplated these scenes within a broader context of reception. By aggregating, overviewing and categorising the reception of *A Serbian Film* and *Human Centipede 2*, within which they occur, we have sought to contribute towards longer-going discussions about the reception of Torture Porn in particular, and of (Extreme) Horror more generally.

Our aim here wasn't to oppose a passively literalist view of audience members with an actively intelligent alternative in a dogmatic or speculative manner. Rather, the goal was to construct an aggregate picture of the extent to which these two films *were* judged along moral lines by those who elected to judge them. Our empirical findings demonstrate that aesthetic concerns figured much more prominently within the reception of these films than did concerns over morality. The suggestion that the release of these two films is the sign, cause or harbinger of a broader moral decline therefore lacks empirical support to the extent that the majority of people who watched them were more than capable of doing so without becoming corrupted. Boredom, indeed, was a much more frequently reported response.

Furthermore, while lay audiences were slightly more prone to judge these films upon moral grounds than their critical counterparts, this tendency wasn't so markedly different as to constitute compelling evidence for a paternalistic policy for everyone bar the connoisseurs. The audiences of these films, in other words, know that they are only films. What goes for *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede 2* might also go for other films said to be a part of the (Extreme) horror and/or Torture Porn genres – this is a question towards which further empirical work could be directed.

These two films present particularly relevant cases to the extent that they were each met with significant censorship and controversy ever since, indeed even before (Barker, 2004), they were released. A campaign to have *A Serbian Film* (2010) banned, which finds a clear precedent in the reception of *Crash*, failed. Nevertheless, that the following advice can be given by a morally non-committal critic, only goes to underline the responsibility which would-be viewers have to their selves regarding the consumption of films like these: "The film shouldn't be banned but you can't blame the BBFC for cutting the worst out. The best thing you can do is ban yourself from seeing it" (Malcolm, 2009). This is less a matter of negative prohibition and more a matter of positive advice. Policy lessons can be learned from such a flippant remark.

There are, of course, sub- and counter-cultural dynamics at work here in that mainstream condemnation can regular serve to create a dedicated cohort not despite but because of said condemnation (Austin, 2002; Bernard, 2014; Hills, 2005; Martin, 2009). This is something Kim Newman (2010) alludes towards when he describes *A Serbian Film* as a

must-see for those who like or collect controversial films, simultaneously underlining that it will shock audiences less accustomed to the genre. We might well be dealing with a sub-culture here, then, but this doesn't take away from the fact that our evidence is taken from actual, rather than hypothetical, audiences. We will leave it others to worry about the finer philosophical points of an audience being protected from films they haven't watched. Here, we have been concerned with the effect these films have had upon those that have watched them, sub-cultural or otherwise.

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.

This analysis is obviously rooted within a specific temporal context. Reception alters over time: an initially ambivalent or negative critical reaction can later become more appreciative (Mathijs, 2005, Krämer, 2011) whereas 'cult' audiences take time to emerge (see Hills, 2005). We have neglected the pursuit of a longitudinal component to our analysis, both because we find the initial response to these films sufficiently interesting in its own right, but also because it is too early to undertake such a study. Longitudinal analysis is, however, already possible with respect to other films within the (Extreme) Horror/ Torture Porn genre. Such studies would allow better insight into the general question of whether protectionist censorship is felt to be warranted for some films, rather than others, and of how, if at all, this perception has altered over time.

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## **Appendix A - Tables**

### **Combined**

1 – 27% (366)

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 5% (71)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 19% (260)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 5% (67)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 1% (18)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 7% (98)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 1% (19)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 1% (16)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 18% (240)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 13% (175)

**Table 1:** Total Critics and Fans Classification, including Code Ones [N = 1,338 incl. 8 Code # 11]

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 7% (71)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 27% (260)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 7% (67)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 2% (18)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 10% (98)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 2% (19)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 2% (16)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 25% (240)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 18% (175)

**Table 2:** Total Critics and Fans Classification, excluding Code Ones [N =972 incl. 8 Code # 11]

1 – 34% (120)

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 7% (25)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 17% (59)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 3% (12)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 2% (6)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 8% (28)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> >1% (3)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 3% (9)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 20% (70)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 5% (19)

**Table 3:** Total Critics Classification, including Code Ones [N = 354 incl. 3 Code # 11]

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 11% (25)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 23% (59)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 5% (12)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 3% (6)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 12% (28)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 1% (3)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 4% (9)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 30% (70)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 8% (19)

**Table 4:** *Total Critics Classification, excluding Code Ones* [N = 234 incl. 3 Code # 11]

1 – 25% (246)

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 5% (46)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 20% (201)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 6% (55)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 1% (12)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 7% (70)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 2% (16)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> >1% (7)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 17% (170)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 16% (156)

**Table 5:** *Total User Comments Classification, including Code Ones* [N = 984 incl. 5 Code # 11]

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 6% (46)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 27% (201)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 7% (55)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 2% (12)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 9% (70)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 2% (16)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> >1% (7)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 23% (170)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 21% (156)

**Table 6:** *Total User Comments Classification, excluding Code Ones* [N = 738 incl. 5 Code # 11]

**A Serbian Film**

1 – 29% (218)

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 6% (42)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 20% (145)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 2% (17)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 2% (17)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 12% (90)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 2% (17)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> >1% (5)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 10% (77)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 15% (113)

**Table 7:** *Total Critics and Fans Classification, including Code Ones* [N = 741 incl. 0 Code # 11]

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 8% (42)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 28% (145)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 3% (17)
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<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 3% (17)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 17% (90)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 3% (17)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> >1% (5)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 15% (77)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 22% (113)

**Table 8:** *Total Critics and Fans Classification, excluding Code Ones* [N =523 incl. 0 Code # 11]

1 – 47% (82)

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 5% (9)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 10% (18)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 2% (3)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 2% (5)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 13% (23)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 2% (3)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> >1% (1)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 10% (18)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 8% (14)

**Table 9:** *Total Critics Classification, including Code Ones* [N =176 incl. 0 Code # 11]

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 10% (9)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 19% (18)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 3% (3)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 5% (5)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 24% (23)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 3% (3)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 1% (1)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 19% (18)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 15% (14)

**Table 10:** *Total Critics Classification, excluding Code Ones* [N =94 incl. 0 Code # 11]

1 –24% (136)

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 6% (33)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 22% (127)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 2% (14)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 2% (12)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 12% (67)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 2% (14)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> >1% (4)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 10% (59)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 17% (99)

**Table 11:** *Total User Comments Classification, including Code Ones* [N =565 incl. 0 Code # 11]

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 8% (33)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 30% (127)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 3% (14)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 3% (12)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 16% (67)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 3% (14)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> >1% (4)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 14% (59)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 23% (99)

**Table 12:** Total User Comments Classification, excluding Code Ones [N =429 incl. 0 Code # 11]

**Human Centipede 2: Full Sequence**

1 – 25% (148)

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 5% (29)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 19% (115)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 8% (50)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 0% (1)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 1% (8)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 0% (2)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 2% (11)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 27% (163)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 10% (62)

**Table 13:** Total Critics and Fans Classification, including Code Ones [N = 597 incl. 8 Code # 11]

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 6% (29)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 26% (115)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 11% (50)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 0% (1)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 2% (8)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 1% (2)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 2% (11)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 36% (163)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 14% (62)

**Table 14:** Total Critics and Fans Classification, excluding Code Ones [N = 449 incl. 8 Code # 11]

1 – 21% (38)

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 9% (16)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 23% (41)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 5% (9)
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<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 1% (1)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 3% (5)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 0% (0)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 4% (8)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 29% (52)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 3% (5)

**Table 15:** Total Critics Classification, including Code Ones [N = 178 incl. 3 Code # 11]

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 11% (16)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 29% (41)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 6% (9)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 1% (1)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 4% (5)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 0% (0)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 6% (8)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 37% (52)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 4% (5)

**Table 16:** Total Critics Classification, excluding Code Ones [N = 140 incl. 3 Code # 11]

1 – 26% (110)

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 3% (13)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 18% (74)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 10% (41)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 0% (0)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> 1% (3)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> 0% (2)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> 1% (3)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 26% (111)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 14% (57)

**Table 17:** Overall User Comments Classification, including Code Ones [N = 419 incl. 5 Code # 11]

<b>Code 2 – “Fans”</b> 4% (13)	<b>Code 3 – “Appreciators”</b> 24% (74)	<b>Code 4 – “Perverts”</b> 13% (41)
<b>Code 5 – “Deviants”</b> 0% (0)	<b>Code 6 – “Neutrals”</b> <1% (3)	<b>Code 7 – “Censorists”</b> <1% (2)
<b>Code 8 – “Satirists”</b> <1% (3)	<b>Code 9 – “Critics”</b> 36% (111)	<b>Code 10 – “Opponents”</b> 18% (57)

**Table 18:** Overall User Reviews Classification, Excluding Code Ones [N = 309 incl. 5 Code # 11]

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> The cuts beyond the stipulated requirements were made for plot continuity purposes. For more detail on the cuts required to *A Serbian Film*, see the BBFC decision:

(<http://www.bbfc.co.uk/releases/srpski-film-serbian-film>), the BBFC case study

(<http://www.bbfc.co.uk/case-studies/serbian-film-srpski-film>) and the SBBFC case study

([http://www.sbbfc.co.uk/CaseStudies/A\\_Serbian\\_Film\\_Srpski\\_Film](http://www.sbbfc.co.uk/CaseStudies/A_Serbian_Film_Srpski_Film)). For further analysis and commentary see: [http://www.melonfarmers.co.uk/hits\\_a\\_serbian\\_film.htm](http://www.melonfarmers.co.uk/hits_a_serbian_film.htm).

<sup>2</sup> David Cooke was interviewed viewed by BBFC Examiner James Blatch as part of a podcast on how the BBFC classifies films with violent content. The podcast is available at:

<http://www.bbfc.co.uk/case-studies/podcasts/bbfc-podcast-episode-2-violence>

<sup>3</sup> Unsuitable reviews were categorised as Code #1 and heteronymous reviews were categorised as Code #11. Duplicated reviews, incoherent reviews, or reviews deemed irrelevant to the purposes of coding along aesthetic and moral lines were classified as Code #1. Very short reviews (of two sentences or less) were also coded as #1, unless they were very clearly making both an aesthetic and a moral judgment, in which case they were coded along the lines already outlined, that is, as non-Code#1. Unlike Code #1 reviews, Code #11 reviews fell outside the coding matrix for a variety of esoteric reasons internal to the review itself and were unfortunately rare!

<sup>4</sup> The 'neutral' label requires clarification, not least of all in an area so demonstrably mired in controversy. By 'neutral' we do not mean to suggest that the reviewer is without a moral and aesthetic judgment of the film, only that the review has not presented these judgments in a clear and unambiguous manner. Only in cases where the aesthetic and moral judgments of the review weren't obviously positive or negative, or where no clear aesthetic and moral judgment was made at all, was a neutral/non-committal code applied. Very frequently these 'meh!' type responses seem to have been made deliberately, almost by way of a disaffected pose.

<sup>5</sup> See **Table 1**, Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> Comparisons between judgment base and audiences type can be made at the individual film level through a juxtaposition of the data presented within **Tables 10, 12, 16** and **18**, Appendix.