

A film bacchanal: Playfulness and audience sovereignty in San Sebastian Horror and Fantasy Film Festival

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Abstract:

The focus of this essay is a medium-sized festival that has had an essential role in determining the character of cult film fandom in Spain: San Sebastian Horror and Fantasy Film Festival (SSHFFF). Since its opening in 1989, SSHFFF has become generally known by the fans of the genre for the participatory and intentionally annoying behaviour of the audience during the theatrical screenings. Since survival has been the main concern of many Spanish festivals after their problematic proliferation in the 2000s (Mesonero Burgos) this essay examines the aspects that may have contributed to the event remaining a city council managed event regardless of its rather endogamic profile. In order to evaluate the importance of the audience performance in catalysing the festival's permanence, the essay focuses on how the audience enacts a playful and highly restricted protocol to negotiate with the organisers. In particular I am going to use the concept of *play* as a key cultural category to understand audience interaction within culturally oppositional communities. While playfulness has been identified as being a common practise among cult audiences (Jerslev; McCulloch), the essay considers to what extent play can also be a useful concept to grasp audience behaviour in event-led cinema.

Keywords: San Sebastian Horror and Fantasy Film Festival, cult audiences, play, ritual, fandom, film community.

Introduction

In the last twenty years, a number of cult film events and horror film festivals have blossomed across Spain not only attracting genre film fans, but also a wider public looking for a different filmic experience. The Phenomena Experience (Madrid-Barcelona); FANCine

Malaga (Málaga); FANT Festival de Cine Fantástico de Bilbao (Bilbao) or Molins del Rei Horror Film Festival (Barcelona) are few of the events that have made it through the financial crisis while still remaining under the shadow of Sitges Film Festival (Catalonia), possibly the most veteran event specialized in horror and fantasy films and certainly the one which attracts most media attention. Survival, in fact, has been the main concern of many festivals after the problematic proliferation of film festivals throughout Spain in the noughties (Mesonero Burgos 8).¹

However, the focus of this essay is another medium-sized festival that has had an essential role in determining the character of cult film fandom in Spain: San Sebastian Horror and Fantasy Film Festival (SSHFFF), commonly known as the “Horror Week” among regulars. In fact, despite gaining little nation-wide attention, since its opening in 1989, the Horror Week has become widely known by fans of the genre, especially for the participatory and intentionally annoying behavior of the audience during the theatrical screenings. The festival’s avoiding media coverage across time is mostly due to organizers trying to keep the festival small-scale by offering a narrow range of features in the oldest venue in town: a traditional theatre of only 576 seats where most of the cult action happens. While the event’s small proportions have reinforced its “only-for-hardcore-fans” image, this has also resulted in a small local community of fans appropriating the festival over the years, meaning little chance for audience renewal as well as the progressive ageing of the public, most of them local males well into their forties. In part, this image has been deliberately sought after by organizers who have written their mission statement in opposition to the high-profile Sitges Film Festival, seen by fans as commercial, attracting celebrities and therefore as less fan oriented and less authentic.

Central to the Horror Week’s distinctive festival image is that unlike most film festivals in Spain, this event doesn’t speak to different imagined publics, but to an expert audience of regular horror and fantasy film viewers (also habitual consumers of magazines, fanzines and online material) that, in addition, come to the festival with previous experience and esoteric knowledge of the event: the specific ritual performance that takes place within the main theatre, its internal codes and rare protocols, binds the event to a tightly-knit community of hard-boiled followers.

Both festival directors, José Luis Rebordinos (1989-2010) and Josemi Beltrán (2011-2015) have focused entirely on cult audiences in terms of programming, yet throughout its twenty-five years of existence the Horror Week has been firmly supported by the San Sebastian city council. What is more, it is entirely publically funded by San Sebastian City Council, the Basque Country Government, and Spain’s Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport. In this sense, the Horror Week stands out as an example of cult films and cult audiences not only being included into the cultural hegemony of a particular cultural place such as San Sebastian, but of an uncouth subcultural event, seemingly at odds with conceptions of civic life, becoming part of the public/local cultural agenda. In fact, locals, whether they attend the gory screenings or not, participate actively in a range of activities and events that the city council organizes for the occasion. Exhibitions, contests, make-up

sessions, zombie walks and parades announce the arrival of the festival to the local community.

Although the festival has been now held for over 25 years, the participatory performance and playful behavior that the audience of the festival engages with, echoes with current emerging contexts of film reception where audiences' involvement goes beyond conventional movie-going practices. In fact, several experiences that invite the audience to sing, dance, shout, dress-up and celebrate the act of viewing, have taken off in the last five years in different towns in Spain. Festive experiences such as the Phenomena Experience (Barcelona), Sunset Cinema (Madrid), Bang Bang Zinema (Gipuzkoa), sing-along and quote-along sessions, or itinerant initiatives such as TRASH Entre Amigos, are attracting larger and larger audiences to classic cult films of the 70s, 80s and 90s, and assuming an important role in the cultural program in big cities such as Madrid and Barcelona. By studying the behavior and participatory dynamics that rule the screenings in the Horror Week, this essay aims to situate *play* as a central notion in understanding film reception contexts in the present. In order to decipher what play adds to the collective reception of cult films, this article brings together audience research, fan studies' observations on *cult*, and anthropological and sociological accounts of ritual and play.

The study takes place during the 2012, 2013 and 2014 editions of the festival and results from an ethnographic engagement with the festival audiences, organizers, volunteers, journalists and guests. As a product of ongoing research, this research represents a work in progress based on my own experiences at the festival as well as on several visits to San Sebastian outside the festival period in order to do archive research. My findings are also based on ethnographical observations of the event, analysis of printed materials and interviews with the festival directors, programmers and festival organizers. To interview the audience members, I used online questionnaires with 108 respondents (September-November 2014) and I conducted face-to-face focus groups with forty people in total that complemented the questionnaires with qualitative responses (November 2014). The people interviewed during the focus groups represent 8% of the audience who attended the screenings at the Main Theatre in 2014 while questionnaire respondents represent 19% of the audience. Since my research is strongly driven by my interest in the audience's sense of community I added a round of focus groups to the questionnaires I had used initially, in order to examine interactions between audience members. While the choice to use focus groups instead of personal interviews was strongly driven by expectations of the patterns of interaction that I would observe between different members of the audience. To that end, while some focus groups were deliberately organized to contain only younger and less experienced members, other groups combined both the inexperienced and veterans.

Through the examination of this data and the analysis of the unique audience performance, I am first going to examine sub-cultural discourses in the performance, and second, I will argue that *play* allows the audience some level of sovereignty. I expect that the examination of the playful attitude of the audience will provide insight into the larger

study of both cult film cultures, and other film spectacle experiences that are taking up the baton and writing the future of collective cinema viewing.

Method: The play-element

Beyond the sphere of gaming and game development, play has mostly been a foreign concept to media studies. Only recently, has theoretical reflection on play become a relevant tool in the study of emerging contexts of film reception and identities within media contexts. Game-play approaches to culture have shed light on the importance of play in several domains of everyday life from media to politics and social contexts such as urban interventionism and social movements (Minnema; Raessens; Shepard). As far as film reception contexts are concerned, recent work by Sarah Atkinson and Helen Kennedy explores the ludic aspects in massive event-led film experiences (Atkinson and Kennedy). The main thrust of Atkinson's and Kennedy's work is the way audiences engage playfully with the film text and 'navigate' the fictional narratives set up by the event. I believe their study prepares the ground for further inclusion of play theory within the field of audience research, film studies and ultimately, film festival studies. While film festivals have been defined by their ceremonial setup and for being events based upon rigid rules and regulations (de Valck; Elsaesser; Dayan; Bazin), *play* as a condition vital for active audience participation in film festivals has been notably overlooked. Hence, my aim is to draw attention to play, as an anthropological certainty central to the experience of genre festival-goers.

What do I mean by *play* in the film festival context and how is play related to contemporary film going-practices/rituals? Play has always been part of the cinematic experience, and as the hermeneutic tradition has demonstrated, a key concept in understanding the process of media reception and spectatorship. According to Gadamer, the most prominent author of the latest hermeneutical school, *play* has an active role in the spectator's aesthetic experience, since the work itself is seen as play between the artist and the viewer who reveals the meaning of the work by being dragged into it. In other words, the audiovisual work is seen as a challenge that the player accepts and actively interprets. From an anthropological perspective, Gadamer's notion of the playful audience can be traced back to the seminal work of Johan Huizinga who suggests that any form of cultural consumption and production involves a play element. While, in the frame of media theories Huizinga's work serves as inspiration for Darley's spectatorship model. Andrew Darley claims that play remains an important concept in understanding the audience experience in practices related to visual cultures in the digital era. According to Darley, '... pleasures of reception in visual digital culture are direct, sensual and quasi-ritualistic, considerably removed from the interpretative dimensions of meaning and significance' (171). These works, even if frequently overlooked in audience research, give evidence for the idea that play is a strong anthropological tool for describing and understanding how audiences engage with different forms of film reception.

In this essay, my main concern is how play works against and for etiquette and social norms, something that becomes clear in the social context of the Horror Week. My reading of Roger Caillois' sociology of play is that play offers contexts for pleasure and invention while teaching the importance of complying with rules and submitting our instincts to social order. Since play creates "controlled models of reality" it happens within condensed spatial and temporal limits, and often combines freedom with convention, mimesis, repetition or principles such as competition or creativity. But more than that, play is a recurring, habitual performance through which we see and therefore approach familiar things and situations under a new light. When everyday life tends to be repetitive and end up being meaningless to us, play helps us to engage with it *differently*. From this perspective play is a notion worth paying attention to when studying the social construction of events; as they periodically return to people's lives, events introduce newness within routine and allow festive and unruly behaviors; they are cultural landmarks and they bring stability to the community.

San Sebastian Horror and Fantasy Film festival as a Cult Event

Although the Horror Week fits within horror and fantasy-themed film festivals, its program actually spans films concerning a variety of issues and genres that aren't always related to fantasy or horror. As happens in many other genre film festivals, fantasy, horror and science fiction, are rather loose categories that incorporate a broad scope of meanings, styles and subgenres. In the case of SSHFFF, horror and fantasy have been present throughout the years in many shapes and fashions, spanning from crime and Italian *giallo* to slasher and found-footage; from neo-monsters and viral infections to haunted houses and Arthurian fantasies. While programmers have tried to keep the festival line up as varied as possible, Asian horror, animé, and horror comedy are among the festival's favorites. As the director of the festival, Josemi Beltrán, explains in a personal interview "the extent of the presence of vampires, werewolves, blood or superheroes, will be determined by each year's harvest of films". Given the fact that programming a film festival is subjected to commercial interests and to distributors' requirements, the selection process is often determined by whatever is available after the festival high season is over, and by the personal criteria of the small team of programmers who also try to keep the program close to the audience's taste for the unusual. Also, in the editions from 2012 to 2014, the festival has remained loyal to its legends, holding retrospectives dedicated to *Cannon Films* (2012), *Universal and VEA* (2013), and to the festival's trajectory that celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2014.

Taken together, the body of films that the festival screens could easily fall under the category of Cult, that Jeffrey Sconce explains through what he calls 'Paracinema':

As a most elastic textual category, paracinema would include entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as "badfilm", splatterpunk, "mondo" films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries

to soft-core pornography. Paracinema is thus less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus. (372)

However, as Sconce mentions in the last line of the quote above, the Horror Week is better defined through its audience's protocols of reinterpretation of films than for the group of films it shows. Unsurprisingly then, cult audiences have for the last few years caught scholars' attention for their engagement with live events such as festivals and conventions (Hills), as well as for being typically attached to participatory theatrical screenings (McCulloch; Austin; Jerslev; Van Extergem). Dirck van Extergem's review on the Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film in particular, is an interesting description, as it provides testimony about an event that features not only a similar programming vocation to SSHFFF, but also a cult audience that partakes in a series of behaviors and reception modes similar to those under analysis here.

Anne Jerslev writes about how cult events can help us to understand cult films. In her essay *Semiotics by Instinct: 'Cult film' as a signifying practice between film and the audience*, she makes the case for two different contexts of reception of two classic cult movies, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and *The Big Sleep* (1946), which have since the seventies been projected in collective/cathartic screenings. Adding to Andrew Tudor's account of genre as a reception concept, Jerslev argues that cult films need to be conceptualized historically in terms of their reception, meaning the conditions (contexts of film circulation, spaces, practices) that enable the act of viewing to shape the understanding and categorization of a film as a *cult* film (92). By doing this she demonstrates that cult audiences work as temporary communities that are motivated by sharing their film textual knowledge in a social context.

Using Jerslev's account of a cult event as a point of departure, I want to examine the Horror Week audience as a unique interpretative community that has created a playful and highly restricted protocol to mediate with the films and the guests of the festival. Since Jerslev understands that cult cultures exist within mainstream culture and therefore might not necessarily hold a subcultural status, I challenge her position, in the case of SSHFFF, by arguing that the particular socio-historical context that enabled its foundation gave its viewing context subcultural value and therefore its culturally subversive reputation. In order to argue this I am going to take the Horror Week audience's rituals as a main focus.

Although horror-themed and cult events have been studied on several occasions from the point of view of the audience (McCulloch; Hills; Austin) the ritual aspects of their interaction with films have been overlooked. Considering the specifics of the Horror Week audience's viewing protocol, I argue that the ritual not only creates a phrasebook of inside jokes for playfully deconstructing films private to this community, but also legitimizes and regulates an internal hierarchy that enhances discourses of disaffection, aspiration and power among the Horror Week fans. I will argue that the coexistence of such discourses within the community is made possible through a constant interplay between a scrupulous

following of prescribed rules and formalities on the one hand, and a playful re-interpretation of the traditional film-viewing protocols on the other.

Bringing the local film program to the young people of San Sebastian

Located in San Sebastian, one of the liveliest and most culturally active towns in the Basque Country and with a particularly thriving film festival culture, San Sebastian Horror and Fantasy Film Festival came about as a city council project in 1990 with the ambition of attracting young people to the local film program. With this main concern the project was passed on to José Luis Rebordinos, a young cinephile who in the eighties had gained some local recognition for running a prominent film society in Errentería, a left-wing, working-class town with one of the highest rates of violent political incidents in the post-Franco Basque Country. Set up in a spacious screening room, the film society would show art house movies every Friday, spanning a variety of genres and favorite *auteurs* such as Bergman and Pasolini. In a personal interview Rebordinos defines the film society as follows:

The film society was initially aimed at watching films that people couldn't easily access at the time and for little money. We were left-wing lads; some of us activists and radicals, and the film society became a way to do politics. People would suggest films, and every session would end up as an assembly, with a spontaneous political discussion (Rebordinos).

In order to meet the city council's requirements, he brought to the project his own knowledge of his contemporaries' film tastes and practices, and envisaged an event that would show international horror, fantasy and sci-fi related films, genre classics and recent production. In its golden era, the festival introduced high-profile guests such as Guillermo del Toro and Peter Jackson, and introduced cult directors in Spain such as Takashi Miike, Takashi Shimizu and Hideo Nakata. For all this and for his family-like relationship with the audience, Rebordinos became a focal point for the festival's identity. For twenty-one years he advocated the festival and was the director of the council's cultural unit (today, *Donostia Kultura*) until 2011 when he took over the management of the highest-profile media event in Spain: San Sebastian International Film Festival.

Additionally, the festival starts off in the wake of the Spanish political transition to democracy. Although these were times of political upheaval and violence in the Basque Country, the festival took advantage of a generalized sense of liberation and emancipation that at that time was growing stronger among young people. A regular evening in the festival would typically include concerts by anti-establishment bands; spontaneous interventions of the audience showing amateur material; and fanzine competitions along with heavy drinking and habitual drug consumption. When asked about their early experiences in the festival, veterans repeatedly recalled the coarse, uncontrolled and reactionary atmosphere that reined in the theatre:

The first time I came here, 23 years ago, my parents immediately asked me: “The Basque Country? Are you going to the bloody war?? Are you crazy?” I could tell you extraordinary stories about what used to happen in the screening room after five in the morning. Crazy things. At first, I thought I was going to end up maimed like the characters in the films. We used to be a family of lunatics. Everything has changed now (Javier, 46, Toledo).

Borja and Rubén built on that: ‘Things have changed a lot. I guess we’re getting old’ (Borja, 43, Madrid). ‘Let’s say it’s not as genuine as it used to be’ (Rubén, 42, Barcelona).

Here, the memory of the festival is evoked through the memory of the Basque Country in the early nineties, which older fans narrate as a savage territory immersed in a wave of nationalist violence and controlled by the radical separatists (*izquierda abertzale*). As the sequence above shows, remembering the proximity to the conflict and the crudeness of their first experiences triggers a sense of nostalgia among the older participants who coincide that those were “better times”. Also, all three participants take the opportunity to identify themselves as first-hand witnesses to the festival’s origins. According to Matt Hills, the proximity to an original moment seems to be a recurrent element that horror and cult fans use to rank themselves higher in the festival’s subcultural hierarchy:

Rarity, distance in time, and proximity to an imagined original moment are all, similarly, determinants of how convention/festival attendance can act as a source of subcultural capital for horror fans; being able to say ‘I was there’ for the first Shock Around the Clock festival, held at London’s Scala cinema in King’s Cross, 1987, would hold more subcultural capital than ‘being there’ for the 2002 London FrightFest at Prince Charles cinema off Leicester Square.” (Hills 91)

The political currents of this foundation period are essential in understanding the political significance of the emergence of cult movie fandom in Spain. Sconce argues that the paracinematic interest in “trash” aesthetics and excess ‘serves as a reminder that all forms of poetics and aesthetic criticism are ultimately linked to issues of taste; and taste, in turn, is a social construct with profoundly political implications’ (392). Equally, the thriving cultural atmosphere that prospered in the Horror Week can also be read as a political reaction against anything representative of the oppressive Spanish political past such as parents, the Catholic Church and social mores. This set of historical circumstances gave to the fans a disposition to challenge authority and to decide on their own terms the rules of participation in the festival.

The audience

Who are these people who religiously attend the festival year after year? First of all, to an outsider, or a non-specialized spectator that is unfamiliar with the horror and fantasy milieu,

the large number of men that attend the festival could come as a surprise. However, the overwhelming presence of men in horror-themed events has also been noticed by other researchers on cult film events such as the above-mentioned study of the Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film (2004). When the festival started off, less than 5 per cent of the audience comprised of women, who in many cases were simply the understanding companions (wives and girlfriends) of the devotees. Now the festival has expanded to an increasingly mixed audience of men and women. In 2013, over 20 per cent of the respondents to my questionnaires were female and over 12 per cent of focus group participants were also women. I should add that it is my belief that men and women responded with equal enthusiasm to my request to participate in my research.

As far as the geographical origin of the audience is concerned, most members of the audience, a good 71 per cent, come from the neighboring towns of San Sebastian and from different areas of the Basque Country, while the remaining number come from different towns in Spain. Among those who travel a long distance to attend the event, the largest groups (17 per cent) come from Madrid and Barcelona. It is not surprising that those coming from regions other than the Basque Country plan their visit carefully around the different activities that the festival offers and attend all the screenings that take place in the Main Theatre. While 63 per cent of the people interviewed make time to visit the exhibitions (centered on props, special effects, comic writers and illustrators), watching the competing films in the Main Theatre remains the main attraction for hard-core followers that year after year reconfirm their loyalty by buying a weeklong special pass. Every year, the festival issues a limited number of passes that give access to all the screenings and that are always difficult to get. There are two ways you can possess a whole-week pass. For residents in the Basque Country, owning the precious tickets means queuing up for 48 hours in front of the theatre's entrance as whole-week passes are sold on a first come, first served basis and seats are assigned in order of purchase. "The queue" has become a ritual in itself as well as an enjoyable experience that followers look forward to. Being part of the queue, not only means getting the well-deserved tickets, but becoming part of the festival's legend and ultimately, a visible personality in the community. Meanwhile for those who come from far-off regions, a number of tickets are sold by telephone over a period of three hours some days prior to the festival. The passes are highly sought after leading some newer members of the audience to complain that older members keep attending and holding on to their seats in the theatre (which can only be achieved by standing in the queue and waiting your turn democratically), as this participant observes:

I've been coming with a whole-week pass for the last few years after years paying for individual sessions. But it is not easy, you know? Some people have been holding their seats forever and don't want to let them go (Alberto, 32, San Sebastián).

Even with younger newcomers gradually arriving at the festival (in 2013, 19 per cent of questionnaire respondents were between 21 and 29 years old), there is not much evidence that the older generation is passing the baton to the next generation. In reality veteran fans still form the majority of the queue when the weekly passes go on sale every October.

Regardless of age, 77 per cent of the participants confessed that the atmosphere in the Main Theatre is the main reason that they attend the festival. So what is it like to be part of this perverse and unique performance?

The Horror Week's viewing protocol as a ritual

In the same way that other festival communities arrange a series of actions and performances to get together and to elaborate their fandom, the Horror Week audience gradually adopted a private protocol. This protocol is highly identified with the Main Theatre, where the audience engages in a boisterous act of disapproval and criticism towards films and guests that are introduced during the screenings. Almost any film that is part of the line-up as well as anyone who ventures on to the stage will be the target of crude witticism and the catalyst for a whole dictionary of in-jokes that have developed over the years. To date, according to both festival directors, the organisation's policy has been not to interfere with the audience's habits but to do as much as possible to boost this atmosphere through strategies such as keeping a bar open within the theatre or giving out objects so the audience can throw them onto the stage.

As far as the fan community is concerned it is here where the members of the audience make a play for status within the group since every intervention must pass the audience's judgment. Such protocol is reaffirmed by some participants who declare that 'yelling has crossed my mind but I have restrained myself since I'd rather leave that to those who have been coming here for a longer time' (Sheila, San Sebastian) or 'people can detect when someone is trying too hard and therefore deserves a long silence' (Mikel, Lasarte-Oria, Gipuzkoa). These statements demonstrate that inside knowledge of who is who in the festival hierarchy is crucial in order to act and respond to others' actions accordingly. The viewing protocol holds in this sense a pedagogic purpose for both older fans and newcomers since the audience performs its own structure by patenting the yelling, occupying the same seat year after year, or through other practices linked to embodiment, such as cosplay. These marks of expertise and commitment draw a line between the older, genuine fan that is ranked higher in the festival hierarchy, and the younger and therefore less invested fan who is regarded as not being experienced enough. Several participants expressed this idea in the following way:

It's true that there are new people coming to the festival, younger people who come sporadically and, maybe, don't buy the whole-week pass. They don't stay for the whole week and they don't participate as much as we do... probably is not so easy for them (Borja, 43, Madrid).

I found the hard-core audience quite intimidating. When I first queued up to get a whole-week pass, I was like... who shall I talk to? What should I do? To me those who got the whole-week pass were like a superior race (laugh) (Susana, 28).

Oral narration is also an important element in finding a stance within the community. Interestingly, by telling and retelling “festival legends” veteran fans produce an oral memory of the festival that younger fans not only relate to, but also use as second hand experience to legitimate their fandom in that particular community. For example, younger participants illustrated this to me during the focus groups by recounting memorable anecdotes that had happened during the screenings years before they started attending, and that they had come to learn through attending the festival. Age and aging also play an essential role in the imagination of the fan hierarchy of the Horror Week. Hence to the festival’s hierarchical structure, participatory interventions occur within a set of rules that shapes an implicit course of action. For example, every screening would begin with a song-like cheering at the festival’s credits and a joke about the festival director’s camp style of dress; people are disappointed if things don’t happen accordingly.

What goes on in the main theatre seems to possess ritualistic elements, and by stating this, I am adding myself to the list of scholars who have assumed that film festivals can be studied as rituals: Film festivals have been regarded as *rites of passage* for films that make it through the festival network by accumulating cultural value (de Valck); they’ve been compared to religious orders that set up resilient hierarchies in the film world (Bazin); as collective performances modeled on pre-established scripts (Dayan), and so on. If we subscribe to an anthropological definition of rituals then there are reasons to argue that the audience of the Horror Week, shapes its participation as ritual: they perform a sequence of explicit formulas which they shout out; by doing this, they self-celebrate their fan affiliations; they are suspicious of newcomers, and last but not least they define their membership within the spatial and temporal dimensions of the festival. Since this particular encounter has explicit, identifiable rules, we could follow sociologist Erving Goffman’s interpretation of social rituals to construe our audience’s singular practice as an arbitrary set of rules that signifies the audience’s encounter once a year. However, the event-based structure of the festival and its particular time-space compression makes this type of ritual clearly discernible from other audience stories. Since the audience follows a set of symbolic acts (rites) that need to be carried out and sequenced rigorously, the theatrical screenings of the Horror Week relate aesthetically more to a religious ceremony than to a conventional socializing protocol.

What makes this case so interesting is that this particular type of critique is a genuine initiative of the audience that after twenty-five years has become the central motive of the ceremony. It also regulates hierarchical membership, sets up the rules for socializing within the festival and most importantly, legitimates a special and somewhat “sacred status” of the audience that grants them sufficient authority to influence organizers.

This reversal of the traditional relationship between the audience and organizers in film festivals has proved to be a fruitful tool in negotiating the program. For example, their explicit reaction towards a particular filmmaker, film or subgenre, requires the organizers to rearrange their agenda so it's made it to measure for the audience's tastes.

The play-element in the Horror Week

In his case example of Ed Wood's films reception, Sconce argues that within fan cultures the film experience is enriched by the extra textual knowledge, which increases the power of the fan to "see through" the production process normally hidden in the text (389). Likewise, anecdotal information such as "what happened ten years ago" can be added on to the ritual script, becoming knowledge that enhances the experience and contributes to make sense of the otherwise bizarre situations that occur in the theatre.

A good example of this is the celebrated accident on the festival's stage involving the Spanish cult filmmaker Pedro Temboury and "Jocántaro", the half spider-crab half octopus monster in his "badfilm" *Kárate a muerte en Torremolinos* (*Karate to the Death in Torremolinos*, 2003). As the story goes, the actor dressed in his "Jocántaro" costume suffered a dramatic fall and ended up in the emergency room only to be back on stage two hours later. Ever since, the name of this eminent monster is shouted out every single time any monstrous creature appears on screen during any projection. This event demonstrates that the unexpected associated to live events adds value to the static structure of the ritual, allowing some degree of novelty and controversy that requires the readjustment of pre-established scripts.

Moreover, incidents remind the audience of the event's contingent temporality, which guarantees the unpredictable happening, as Janet Harbord puts it when analyzing Locarno Film Festival as a live event:

The appeal of the event is not evident simply in the ritual practice of viewing a showcase of films, in the case of Locarno, open-air screenings. It is also the appeal that the event may be interrupted, that its liveness may spill over into the unexpected, a performance witnessed but not reproducible. (44)

Given that spontaneity and the attempts to break the rules are often applauded during the screenings, I assume that arbitrariness and unforeseen behaviors are crucially connected to the audience's ritual. Being playful with the rules inevitably goes hand in hand with the ritual as it opens a door for change, renovation and survival. Playfulness has already been identified as a common attitude towards the film text among cult audiences. For example, Jerslev compares the audience performance of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* with a "play-act" and regards the audience's knowledge and deconstruction of the film text as "playful-mastery" (90). Richard McCulloch also observes the playful attitude that audiences assume in certain reception contexts. In his study of the impact that audiences have upon of the cult film *The Room* (Tommy Wiseau, 2003), McCulloch observes how through their active

interaction with the film text, audiences transform what was intended to be a romantic drama into a comedy experience (189). Likewise, in SSHFFF, role-playing and inside jokes, serve to catalyze creative communication in the theatre, as the audience not only reacts to what is happening on the screen but also to the comments of fellow audience members. The result is a spontaneous conversation that many times turns into a competition to see who is the biggest wit.

Roger Caillois points out that play happens between two extremes that constantly interrelate in life: *paidia* and *ludus*. On the one hand play manifests itself through spontaneous behavior that leads to free improvisation (*paidia*); On the other, we become social through play: when playing we create rules that channel our volatile and cheerful impulses towards common goals. In other words as we play, we imagine possible paths of action, and by doing so we increase our productive capacity as a society (*ludus*) (27–33). Likewise, Horror Week fans enact a similar tension, as their rigid performance must be matched by the creation of new rules and therefore by engaging with newness and creativity. This is somehow facilitated by the spatial and temporal nature of the film festival which follows a similar dynamic to that of play: while the enthusiasm that the fans display over the happening of the event provides room for improvisation and unconventional thinking, the iteration of the event sets up a series of liaisons among fans and organizers, and creates a habit that ultimately institutionalizes fan works and rituals. If we follow this argument we can establish further parallels between play and the Horror Week audiences' uncouth profile. Horror Week audiences are playful in many ways: they engage in cosplay, they display an ironic distance towards films and filmmakers, they create fanzines that mock cult film icons, and they set-up a space for play where competition between old and new fans are key for change.

But I argue that, in contrast to the rigor and apparent immobility of the ritual, play offers to the audience opportunities to engage in creative enterprises within the festival. The festival nourishes itself from constant collaborations with members of the audience such as occasional comic book and fanzine writers, illustrators, bloggers, online magazine editors or entrepreneurs who contribute in different ways to the festival: they submit films, curate exhibitions, display their art, write fanzine specials, design the event's printed materials, or contribute to the festival's publications. Among the people I interviewed, 17% had participated in some way or organized some kind of event. The latest example is a fan-collective called *Gugan* that owns a small company specialized in transmedia projects. After offering their services to the festival in 2011, they took over the festival's parallel activities, which include zombie walks, The Master of Doom Quiz, videogame workshops, and make-up sessions.

San Sebastian Horror and Fantasy Film Festival as a sub-cultural event

The Horror Week ritual has for a long time developed a reputation for its rowdiness as well as for its uncivil and politically incorrect ways among the uninformed, uninitiated public, who have at times asked for their money back. Not only the radical selection of films, surely

difficult to watch for a mainstream audience, but also the audience's behavior always seems to border on excess. The shouting at the main theatre often incorporates elements of religious provocation; there is a recurrence of profane war cries and sexually perverse humor; pagan-like attitudes such as the use of animal noises to distinguish the members of the audience; jeering at the local authorities when mentioned as sponsors of the event and even cosplay with childhood icons (like Winnie the Pooh) exemplifying the ironic embodiment of naïve popular culture; all of this is routine activity at this uncouth ceremony.

It is important to note that although the heckling is often part of an ironic response to films and does contain a certain level of affectation, the audience's expressions of hostility usually represent genuine complaints. Through their yelling the audience expresses its disappointment, gives the filmmakers a bad time and hopefully, sends a message to organizers. One of many humiliating episodes occurred at the 2013 edition, when cult film director and friend of the festival Gabe Bartalos left the theatre in the middle of his own film premiere demoralized by the shower of comments of dissatisfaction and simple jeering coming from the audience. By the end of the festival, the film had come last in the competition for "the audience's choice award" that year. Interestingly, lack of quality is often read by the audience as a deliberate choice by the organizers, who are suspected of programming bad films in order to upset the audience on purpose. Paco, who has been attending the festival for over eight years, explains a belief, held mostly unanimously: 'They [the organizers] do it to fire people up. The films get worse every year just to wind us up' (Paco, Madrid). Josemi Beltrán, the present director of the festival confirms the audience suspicion: 'We have no intention to educate our audience, if something, we assume our role as organizers is to feed the monster' (Beltrán). Except for some rare moments of silence, the audience spends most of the time commenting on genre clichés, bad acting and slip-ups they have picked up on, or simply bullying Beltrán for his unfortunate film (and clothing) choices.

In the same way Sconce characterizes the paracinematic community as embodying an "educated" perspective on cinema (375), in the Horror Week, the heckling becomes a substantial part of the audience's self-construction as experts. By being fastidious and witty, the members of the community ritualistically demonstrate their authority as well-informed spectators and dispute their position within the audience hierarchy. But more than an expression of rivalry, heckling is the way the Horror Week community collaboratively constructs a film as a bad film.

Also, the ritual is the way the audience communicates their disengagement from the 'more "normal" popular audiences' as John Fiske ("The Cultural Economy of Fandom": 446) has referred to the socially legitimated audiences. The audience possesses a sub-cultural sensibility oppositional to legitimate film culture, which they display by attending cult events, writing in blogs, magazines, fanzines, or engaging with other fans. However the ritual also serves as a way of differentiating themselves from other cult communities in Spain and of personalizing their fandom.

Sitges Film Festival's presence is always felt at this smaller festival. However, while for many members of the audience it remains a not-to-be-missed, cult event of the season, it is also the object of constant mockery among insiders. The fact that Sitges attracts such a large and diverse public is looked on with suspicion by the majority of the audience at the Horror Week. They take pleasure in attacking its big name and its "pretentious" film program. In fact, one of the most celebrated screams "¡Vete a Sitges!" ("Bugger off to Sitges!"), is heard in the theatre every time the audience considers that a film is too artistic and therefore, it would find a better home in Sitges. By incorporating Sitges into the insiders' vocabulary of the ritual, the audience reaffirms its own identity in opposition to Sitges fans who lack the transgressive attitude of the fans in the Horror Week.

Conclusion

It is worth pointing out that the variety of aesthetic and ideological disaffections that the audience expresses through their participatory ritual can only be put into perspective by looking at the origins of the festival. One must consider the vibrant film and music scene that flourished as a result of the political dissatisfaction that prevailed in the Basque Country in the early nineties. In the Basque Country political subversion has been one of the main motives behind emerging cultural phenomena from Basque rock to the comedies and violent horror films of Alex de la Iglesia and Juanma Bajo Ulloa. In fact, María Pilar Rodríguez argues that the violence and subversive discourses in the Basque film productions of that time, came from a series of "conflicting worlds" that reached a high point in the nineties (Rodríguez).

My contention is that the symbolic behaviors that the audience of the horror week puts into action retain a subcultural value that is renewed through the ritual every time the festival takes place. The ritual helps to connect the present of the festival to its own past, and therefore serves as a reminder of its very first ideological spark: in other words, it keeps believers believing. I do not mean by this that the Horror Week is oppositional to popular culture and popular media fiction. On the contrary, the emotional attachment of the audience to popular culture personalities, practices such as the canonization of popular Spanish celebrities from television and film (*Alaska y Mario*; *El Chiquito*), or displaying commitment to fanzines, suggests that popular media fictions are appreciated at the cult event. Notwithstanding, the ongoing performance that since the nineties takes place in San Sebastian once a year, serves as an occasional but formidable filmic conclave where opposition to aesthetic and political conformity is displayed. The perdurability of such sentiment and the values it represents rest on the unique occasion that the film festival bestows, underpinned by the event returning year after year.

So, to what extent does play really provide a ground for a subcultural agenda? As the horror week performance demonstrates, play is a useful cultural category for understanding audience interaction as well as audience/organizer dynamics within culturally oppositional communities. It is not unusual for play to become a way of exhibiting cultural difference and disengaging from the "mainstream" culture. In fact, play has been taken as a means of

interacting and negotiating with authority, and has been associated with social change and insurgence. In his renowned thesis on pleasure and play in active television viewers, Fiske notes that by involving themselves in different kinds of pleasurable forms of identification with television texts, audiences playfully appropriate mainstream discourses as a way of transgression (*Television Culture*: 183–195). In other words, they are capable of choosing in what way they want to identify with the text and of rejecting dominant mass media meanings while taking pleasure from popular television narratives. I would further argue that while rituals sustain social structure and therefore, legitimate a source of authority and dominant discourse, it is through play that we take action and shake the very structure of things by pushing conventional boundaries.

However, following Darley's lead and his reservations about *fiskean* allusions to play as a vehicle for "resistant" forms of media consumption (177–188), my view is that the Horror Week's playful performance is not so much an expression of resistance to dominant encoded meanings of the official culture, as it is a way of negotiating a privileged cultural position within the festival hierarchy as well as within the Spanish sphere of cult film fans. If we turn to anthropological notions of play, we can pinpoint this quality in ceremonial competition, a recurrent activity that according to Huizinga is often found in "higher play", as he calls complex cultural forms of interaction:

The function of play in the higher forms which concern us here can largely be derived from the two basic aspects under which we meet it: as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something. These two functions unite in such a way that the game "represents" a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something. (13)

I find this quote particularly valuable since "the contest for the best representation of something" captures the motive of any subcultural identity that competes in the cultural arena to gain cultural authority through style, ideology, aesthetics, etc.

In conclusion, instead of assuming that the Horror Week's audience uses play to challenge the institutional film cultures that in different ways circulate in the city of San Sebastian, I rather sustain that play becomes a legitimate way for the fans to arrange themselves as an enduring, hierarchical social system and to a certain extent provides them with a level of control over organizers. In this context, the ritual is not simply an expression of reverence and devotion towards films, but a means to keep the festival faithful to its counter culture origins and to be acknowledged within the cult film viewing community.

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Note:

¹ In his essay *A Festival Epidemic in Spain*, Sergi Mesonero Burgos refers to the abundance of film festivals and casts doubts over the need for them.