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'... And the Food Was Terrible!': Food in the Horror Film



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Introduction: '... And the Food Was Terrible!': Food in the Horror Film



Mark Bernard

Introductions and Appetizers

It is my pleasure to welcome everyone to the fall 2013 edition of *The Projector*. As with our previous issue, this edition of *The Projector* spotlights scholarship on food and film. While our previous issue featured articles on representations of food in films ranging from *Blackmail* (Hitchcock, 1929) to *Ratatouille* (Bird and Pinkava, 2007), this edition is more focused, looking specifically at representations of food and eating in horror films.

At first, food films and horror films seem like an odd match. However, connections between these two bodies of films become clearer when one notices how monsters in the horror film often terrorize their victims by threatening to consume them, in other words, to turn human beings into food and drink. Cannibalistic ghouls – ranging from inhuman, flesh-eating zombies to all-too-human fiends like Leatherface and Hannibal Lector – want to dine on their victims' flesh. Dracula and his vampire kin are out to drink their victims' blood. Monstrous consumption in horror film is sometimes less obvious. For example, Barbara Creed has written extensively

about how horror films often feature monstrous women whose all-consuming, insatiable appetites not only make them horrifying, but also make them a threat to civilization at large.

Indeed, questions about what it means to be “civilized” are often at issue in food films and horror films, which are preoccupied with both the maintenance and violation of taboos. In food films, taboos encompass both the banal – proper table manners, appropriate meal times, the right choice of dining locations and partners, etc. – and the bizarre – the consumption of disgusting, “improper” food product such as feces and other human beings. Similarly, horror films trade heavily in breaking taboos. Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton observe that critics and horror fans bestow the label of “cult” upon horror films that “focus on breaking taboos” as “a central element” (195). A reoccurring element in these boundary-violating cult horror films is cannibalism, the ultimate food taboo. For instance, the infamous list of “video nasties,” films that were banned in the UK in the early 1980s, is replete with titles in which cannibalism predominates: *Deep River Savages* (Lenzi, 1972), *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1979), and *Cannibal Ferox* (Lenzi, 1981). One of these titles, *Anthropophagus* (D’Amato, 1980), became one of the most notorious of the “nasties” due to a scene in which a brutally insane and depraved cannibal (George Eastman) rips a fetus from the stomach of a pregnant woman (Serena Grandi) and ravenously consumes the tiny carcass (Mathijs and Sexton 199). So powerful and repulsive was the film’s violation of taboo that some moral campaigners believed the scene was real and accused *Anthropophagus* of being a snuff movie (Slater 124).

The Main Course

Mathijs and Sexton argue that “the more radical a horror film’s depictions of bodily harm . . . the more likely it is to attract a cultist audience and be labeled cult” (195), but as the above examples indicate, the radical savagery to which the human body is subjected in these films often

relates directly to the notion of eating and consumption. Such is the case with recent films *Human Centipede (First Sequence)* (Six, 2009) and *Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* (Six, 2011). Six's films caused a popular culture sensation with their over-the-top and intentionally gratuitous scenes of violence, torture, and mutilation. Both films feature demented individuals attempting to create "human centipedes," an organism made up of a chain of human beings sewn together anus-to-mouth. Amidst all the cutting, slicing, and stitching of human flesh, what perhaps causes audiences to become truly queasy has to do with consumption; the man-made human centipede shares a digestive system, so what is consumed by the first person in the centipede is digested and shat into the mouth of the next human unit.

Our first peer-reviewed essay, written by Delores B. Phillips, examines this revolting element of the *Human Centipede* films. Renaissance toxicologist Paracelsus is credited with the axiom: "In the shit, the gold." While the attribution of this quotation may be up for debate, what is not debatable is that Phillips's reading of coprophagia – that is, the consumption of feces – in the *Human Centipede* films dives into the gore and shit of the films and resurfaces with an illuminating reading, connecting the films to larger cultural trends. Her essay "Eat Shit and Die: Coprophagia and Fimetic Force in Tom Six's *Human Centipede (First Sequence)* and *Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* explores how the human centipedes' shit-eating in these films is metaphoric for how information travels from circuit-to-circuit and node-to-node via tweets and memes in our digitally networked culture. Thus, the films "outline the contours of a consumer-based excremental posthumanism." Phillips's argument grows even more interesting when considering the new-media-fueled reception contexts of the *Human Centipede* films, which are distributed by IFC Midnight, the Independent Film Channel's genre distribution arm, and

encounter a majority of their audiences via Video-on-Demand (VOD) release, which is simultaneous with their limited theatrical release.

Consumption, ranging from corporeal consumption like cannibalism to media consumption and our culture's seemingly insatiable appetite for violence and carnage, is explored in our second peer-reviewed essay, which examines an earlier taboo-breaking film, the aforementioned "video nasty" *Cannibal Holocaust*. Over the past several years, Ruggero Deodato's gruesome, faux-mondo-shockumentary has gone from being relegated to the margins of cinematic culture to occupying a central place in many academic examinations of how horror films can question core cultural beliefs and values. Many effective cult horror movies about cannibalism "demonstrate how uses and practices of the mode of consuming the human body can be widened to include self-consumption, media consumption, and capitalist consumption" (Mathijs and Sexton 200), and *Cannibal Holocaust* epitomizes this approach. In the film, the audience finds not only flesh-hungry native people in the jungle waiting to consume white Westerners, but also denizens of the "civilized world" hungry for sensationalist footage produced by a unit of ruthless American documentary crew who will do anything – including rape, torture, and murder – to obtain tantalizing footage. Ironically, their quest to produce films for American consumption leads to the crew being consumed by cannibals as their cameras capture the entire grisly scene. Jennifer Brown's essay "Taboo and Truth in *Cannibal Holocaust*" acknowledges the radical potential of Deodato's film by exploring how "Deodato uses cannibalism amidst a plethora of shocking taboos to question the idea of Western greed." By extension, Brown finds that the film also "question[s] notions of public truth, audience demands, media credibility and the objectification of the subject." Not bad for a film that was once banned for being exploitative trash.

Our third and final peer-reviewed essay of this issue, Peter Cullen's "You Are Who You Eat: Cannibalism as a Symbol of Family Breakdown in the Horror Film," offers an overview of how cannibalism figures into a handful of better-known, more canonical horror films: *Blood Feast* (Lewis, 1963), *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Craven, 1977). Cullen focuses on the different variations of the "family meal" that appear in these films and how these filmmakers make family meals uncanny by inserting cannibalism into the proceedings. According to Cullen, tracing how cannibalism is thematically employed in these films allows one to see how these films document the disintegration of the image of the traditional family unit, a trajectory that had already begun in the 1950s and early 1960s, but was accelerated by the disillusionment of the Vietnam War and Watergate. Focusing on food gives us a fresh perspective on the meaning-making processes of these well-known films.

The three peer-reviewed essays collected here show the value of examining representations of food not only in horror films, but also in films that are not generally considered "food films." This approach reflects the spirit of *Appetites and Anxieties: Food, Film, and the Politics of Representation*, written by Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson, and myself and published by Wayne State University Press in December 2013. We venture outside of the "food film" genre to look at foodways representations ranging from Classical Hollywood fare by John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock to Third Cinema, from "food films" like *Bagdad Cafe* (Adlon, 1987) to cult classics like *Repo Man* (Cox, 1984), and from horror films like the aforementioned *Cannibal Holocaust* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* to food documentaries like *King Corn* (Woolf, 2007) and *Food Inc.* (Kenner, 2009). Please see the ad for *Appetites and Anxieties* elsewhere in this edition of *The Projector* for information on ordering a copy.

Dessert

What is a meal without a tasty dessert? This edition of *The Projector* finishes with a treat: a group of five essays on American cinema written by undergraduate film students at Bowling Green State University. The topics covered are wide-ranging; there are essays on Charlie Chaplin, Universal monster movies, the Roger Corman-produced drive-in favorite *Rock 'n' Roll High School* (Arkush, 1979), Christopher Nolan, and Todd Solondz. We include this work here for a few reasons. For students in film production, many college campuses hold regular film festivals to showcase student films and videos. However, there are seldom any corresponding showcases for the equally important work of film studies scholars. We hope to provide such a venue here at *The Projector* to emphasize the continuing importance of the academic exploration of film, something that needs defending in the face of recent draconian cuts to the humanities departments of colleges and universities. Critical analysis must be kept alive, and the student work here shows that there are undergraduate film studies students up to the task.

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**Eat Shit and Die:
Coprophagia and Fimetic Force in Tom Six's *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* and
*The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)***



Delores B. Phillips

Shit is power: According to David Inglis, "faecal matters are always inherently political in character" (207). Feces has rhetorical force: it constitutes a powerful linguistic weapon, a tapping into what Inglis calls "the toiletry habitus" to abuse others, as the meanings that people attach to the management of their excreta shift over time yet never fail in their basic features of segregating the powerful from the powerless. Who gets to shit and who must endure being shat on (or called shit) are basic, universally recognized tropes in the arbitration of power. Indeed, telling someone to "eat shit and die" levels at an adversary one of the most potent insults in English.

It is the horror of bodily and excretory hypermanagement and the punitive power of humiliation that shapes Tom Six's *The Human Centipede* series' use of coprophagy as the key tool of torment in the two films. *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* and *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* join a body of films and novels in which people eat excrement, to

include Pier Pasolini's *Saló: 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and Marco Ferreri's *La Grande Bouffe* (*The Great Feast*) (1973).¹ Unlike these films, *The Human Centipede* franchise does not strike a posture against capitalism and excess (indeed, as I discuss below, Six's films are complicit in the forces that coprophagia critiques in other venues). Although *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* (2009) uses the figure of Dr. Heiter (Dieter Laser) to represent fascism and its interest in human experimentation, and while *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* (2011) may constitute a weak cautionary against copycat killing, the films themselves largely lack sustained, meaningful social commentary, preferring to wallow in their own spectacular filthiness as Tom Six undertakes an experiment very similar to Dr. Heiter's: the creation of a glorious monstrosity unique in horror cinema. *The Human Centipede* examines the operations of the horror genre, redistributing their force by introducing a new axis of power, one that violates the body not by hacking it into lifeless pieces, but by joining it with others and forcing it to eat waste, and then by offering the end product to the mass consumption of an eager audience already gorged on televised excrement and coprophilic memes yet still hungry for something new.

This essay will examine the logic of coprophagy in Tom Six's *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* and *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* as it operates along two separate but interdependent vectors in both films. Coprophagy constitutes a means of negotiating power, a feature that it shares with other texts in which characters eat excrement. This concentration upon excremental dietetics is not confined to the creation of the centipede and its torments of the bodies incorporated as its segments; it also includes Martin's (Lawrence R. Harvey) and Dr. Heiter's mealtimes. Food and mealtimes in films serve as metonyms for the forces at play in the plot as they also accelerate their momentum, no matter the substance on the plate; the function of food is no different in Six's films, whether presented at table or forced down the throats of

victims. Meanwhile, the movie avails itself of the trope of connoisseurship to establish its relationship with its audience, with the eating of extruded excrement as the basis for that connoisseurship. In pushing the boundaries of horror to include the stitching of victims together, mouth-to-anus, *Tom Six* establishes the same distinctions of taste that segregate the squeamish from the stalwart. This in turn plays into the larger structures of coprophagic cultural consumption in ways that outline the contours of a consumer-based excremental posthumanism.

The films reconceive posthumanism in the context of excrementality by thinking about the human body in both technological and animalistic terms—the centipede is an artificially assembled creature whose individual human segments are robbed of speech and upright motion and then forced to ingest and feed each other excrement. The rubric of posthumanism consistently relies upon the porosity of the human body, whether infiltrated by technology (Donna Haraway), entering into relationships with the animal (Deleuze and Guattari among others), or entering into relationships with spaces and things in ways that do not insist upon the superiority of the human being or the modes of thinking that establish its privilege (Carey Wolfe). In her essay “Toward an Excremental Posthumanism: Primatology, Women, and Waste,” Marie Lathers identifies excrement in both linguistic and literal forms as the principal element of exchange between women primatologists and their nonhuman objects of study, and examines how this exchange frames a form of excremental posthumanism. As women primatologists engage with nonhuman primates who walk the “odd space” between the boundaries of “nature and science,” “the private (the individual) and the public (nation-state),” “the inside and outside of the body,” “women and men,” and “nonhuman and human animals” (420), mountain gorilla excrement is “voiced through the bodies of white women” (425) to advocate for the rights of nonhuman primates in postcolonial Africa. Lathers notes the

prominence, not just of obscenities in the films about women primatologists, but of coprophagia as medicinal and social practice among both people and gorillas and the befouling of human bodies as punishment for poaching (426-9). These instances subject the boundary between human and animal to erasure. While these mechanisms—the beshitted body and the transcendence, surpassing, and negation of the individual human—are at play in Six's *The Human Centipede* films, their presence is far from salutary, as I argue below. Instead, the excremental posthumanism that Six constructs in his films is connected to excessive consumption in capital culture, the technological feats that intend to connect humans to one another, and the constant, celebratory, excessive ingestion and effusion of our own shit in multiple cultural contexts.

It is axiomatic to think of excrement as a tool of humiliation. A dropped colostomy bag in *He Was a Quiet Man* (Frank A. Cappello, 2007) drives a paraplegic woman off a stage on which she was enjoying karaoke, disrupting the fragile, momentary happiness in which she almost can accept her plight. At the beginning of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (Peter Greenaway, 1989), a man's body is smeared with dog feces as a punishment: to endure a beating is almost heroic; to endure beshittedness is always ignominious. During a reunion episode of the Season Two cast of *Bad Girls' Club*, Jennavecia humiliates Neveen on the air by bringing up the specter of her past appearances on *The Playhouse*, a Portland, Oregon radio show. In her role as the straight for a team of shock jocks, Neveen takes up a dare to eat cat feces—and consumes a piece on the air. At the reunion (characterized as all reality TV reunions are by bickering and resuscitated grudges) Neveen at first denies the allegation; then she attempts to defend it. Reality television is particularly noisome and prolific in its proffering of excrement. In her analysis of televised coprophagia, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster observes, “In *Hoarders*, we are repeatedly

subjected to images of cat feces, rat feces, human feces, skeletons of dead cats, and even the tears on the faces of broken family members, underscored by downbeat and frightening music leitmotifs borrowed from horror films.” This series traffics in the humiliation and “healing” of people whose excessive consumption, lax toilet and hygienic habits, and effusive emissions immerse them in waves of shit.

The Help's (Tate Taylor, 2011) deployment of the excremental adulterant constitutes a reclamation of power in the homes of upper-class Southern white women.² Power here is aligned along the vector of the toilet: the black help cannot relieve themselves in the houses that they clean, a violation of basic human rights by denying workers a place where they can eliminate in privacy and comfort.³ To solve this problem and to eliminate subversive, surreptitious bathroom-usage, Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard) begins an initiative to create outhouses outside the home that the help can use—but which are still an insulting, embarrassing ejection of human bodies from the home and also render hypervisible the practices that closed doors aim to conceal. After being accused of theft (an accusation that can guarantee that she will never work again), Minnie Jackson (Octavia Spencer) delivers Hilly a message in a chocolate pie, telling her oppressor to “Eat her shit” by feeding it to her, thus ensuring Hilly’s silence with the unspoken threat of telling everyone that she has eaten a black woman’s excrement. The pie represents the fears of adulterated food that attend to any service industry. However, its power is not limited to the acting-out of this particular paranoia—dirt from the yard or from inside the house could have served this purpose. Containing shit intended to be eaten, the pie acts out the fecal rhetoric of abuse analyzed by David Inglis, literalizing it, elegantly channeling an insult into an act of culinary sabotage. More critically, the excrement in the pie contaminates the white feminine body in the exact manner that she hoped to prevent—and then exponentially magnifies the threat.

Finally, it inverts the power dynamic that determines who can shit where, who gets to shit, and who gets shat upon, and this is the pie's truest intent.

Breakfast, Dinner, and the Assembly of the Merdivore

Coprophagia maintains the same punitive power in *The Human Centipede* films as it does in *The Help*, but is stripped of its irony. Instead, coprophagia's violence becomes the film's predicate. In the place of evisceration, other manipulations of the body thematize a perverse cohesion instead of rending and dissection. Horror conventions have rendered cliché the gutting and flaying of bodies; Six's films attempt to offer something new by re-centering their violence on the human gut, keeping it intact instead of emptying it of its viscera, augmenting the alimentary canal with additional segments, and then filling it with excrement. Violence then moves outward toward the opposite ends of alimentation as mouth and anus are connected end-to-end-to-end-to-end: once they are sutured together and forced to kneel, Heiter and Martin can then force their victims to eat and to shit, violating them orally and anally. The Frankensteinian efforts of the mad doctor do not shift the shape of a singular entity or even create an entity capable of duplicating itself by infecting or assimilating others. It is instead an organic whole comprised of discreet segments, multiple people conscripted to participate as links in a new being.

In the centipede itself, *The Human Centipede* films invoke the explosive power of George Bataille's JESUVE, the *tableau vivant* he creates of a beautiful young woman kissing the bright-red ischial callosity of a buried female gibbon as it jets excrement in panicked death-throes; she is watched, all the while, by “stupefied” eyes that are simultaneously aroused and revulsed, her viewers groaning and orgasming. *The Human Centipede* films then collapse the JESUVE's components into an act of alimentation.⁴ Entranced by the idea of human sacrifice, eroticism,

and excrementality, Bataille assembles the JESUVE to represent a unification of the human and humanity with the animal and animality and with vulgarity and obscenity. Bataille's equivocal concept of the erect man reconnects him with the anus from which he distances himself when standing upright and that he cannot disavow when looking at the excessive excretion of nonhuman captive primates and erotic scenes featuring beauty and shit. The JESUVE therefore creates an image of Man both elevated and debased and of woman defiled and desired. The JESUVE, the horrifying, "little copulation of the stinking hole with the sun" (Bataille 86) does not include ingestion. Its polluting power is of one of proximity, of witnessing and desire. *The Human Centipede*, however, attaches. In both films, the proximity of a pretty girl's mouth to a rude, stinking, shitting bottom remains, but kisses become gavage, the "raucous sighs" and "impossible cries" become screams, and the "brilliant tears of vertigo" become the weeping of frustration, fear, and evacuated hope (Bataille 86). Heiter's careful manipulations of the body are thus the civilized echo of the savage scene around the pit in Bataille's JESUVE, while Martin's assembly of his own creation—along with our own febrile, shameful, revolted, exuberant viewings of both films—perhaps more closely adhere to the JESUVE's original sense of horror, its obscenity and its excess.⁵

The plots of both films are fairly simple: a mad scientist has an idea; people are captured, stitched together, and forced to perform in ways that demonstrate their subservience to absolute power; they rebel after achieving limited coherence as a single entity, the ironic outcome of the surgeon's objectives; their rebellion is only ambivalently successful as they thwart their captors' aims, but die in the process. In *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)*, Lindsay (Ashley C. Williams) and Jenny (Ashlynn Yennie), two young American women vacationing in Germany, stumble upon the lair of Dr. Heiter, a disaffected surgeon whose stellar career in separating

conjoined twins has left him jaded and yearning for a new medical accomplishment. Six months prior to the beginning of the film, he "design[s] a never-seen operation, not separating anymore, but creating." Having captured the women along with a Japanese tourist, Katsuro (Akihiro Kitamura), Heiter then details the creation of a "Siamese triplet connected via the gastric system" as they lie strapped to gurneys in his basement surgery, screaming and weeping. The centipede's defining biological process is the conservation of nutriment, as "ingestion by A, pass[es] through B, to the excretion of C. A human centipede, first sequence." After a successful surgery, Heiter dominates his new pet, treating it as he did his "Lieber 3-Hund" (Beloved Three-Dog), the canine precursor to his human centipede, feeding it from a dog dish, forcing it to fetch, and marching it around the yard. The film becomes messier and bloodier as Dr. Heiter's plans to keep the centipede as a quasi-immortal pet fall apart because the authorities tighten their scrutiny of his house and his victims refuse to remain docile. As their cooperation and coordination increases (and the centipede becomes a whole organism capable of synchronized movement) Heiter's ability to corral the centipede erodes—just in time for the arrival of prying police whose inquiries into vanished victims leads them to Heiter's door. However, the film offers its victims no relief: it ends with dead investigators floating in Heiter's pool, Heiter's blood and brains splattered against a wall, Katsuro lying face-first in a pool of his own blood after slashing his own throat, and Lindsay alive but alone, weeping, attached to two corpses as her posterior segment, Jenny, has died of infection. Gore is smeared throughout the house, the bedroom sliding-glass door is (again) shattered in an escape attempt, and the swimming pool is filled with blood.

The film overturns a number of horror conventions as Tom Six attempts, similarly to Heiter, a new creation. The perversity of the film's operation lies in the manner in which

excrement morphs from waste to food, to waste and then again to food. Linearity becomes circularity and then becomes helical. *First Sequence* displaces sexuality almost completely, focusing upon the violation and manipulation of the body. However, even this convention—the slicing and slashing of the body, the extraction of teeth, the sadistic dominance of others—also contravenes horror conventions by largely withholding them from view. The cleanliness and sterility of Heiter's house and his basement operating theater counter the horror and filthiness of the operation he is about to undertake and its concentration upon force-feeding human excrement to other people as an exercise of power entrenched in the nourishment of the body using waste. The centipede's unifying feature, the connector that attaches each segment to the next, is coprophagic, and Heiter punishes Lindsay for an early escape attempt by making her the middle. Not only is the operation the most painful for this segment as both anus and mouth are attached, but she must also endure both the forced-feeding of excrement as well as force-feeding it to another person. Subjecting her to both processes amplifies her suffering. Part of Heiter's monstrousness is the tenderness with which he tends his creation and a clear sense that he intends this creature to live forever by replacing segments if they sicken and die. In spite of the disfigurement of faces, mouths, and anuses in the film, *First Sequence* is surprisingly spare in its depictions of gore, hiding its violence behind cutscenes, anaesthesia, and post-op care. The violent mutilation of the body is largely hidden for much of the film, intimated by blood-stained bandages and stapled flesh. Nudity is treated with equal care. In *First Sequence*, body parts are protected from view by the placement of bandages and limbs. Jenny, the final segment, is even allowed to keep her panties.



Figure 1: The human centipede assembled in *First Sequence*.

In this fashion, *First Sequence* stands in the company of *La Grande Bouffe* and *The Help*. In *La Grande Bouffe*, the excrement to be eaten has been beautified, its baseness elevated by the pâtés with which it has been mixed, even as its very baseness reveals the fate of even the most rarified foods. The composition of the dish, created by master chef Ugo (Ugo Tognazzi), serves as an allegory for the metaphysical exhaustion and ennui that has driven him and his companions to commit suicide by gluttony. In *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)*, gustatory terror is elevated to the form of art: the mouth, its teeth knocked out, stitched to an ass. The dietary transactions that convert shit to food and then shit again take place beneath bandages.

The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence) is the opposite of its precursor. Martin, the film's protagonist, is a psychological mess, underemployed and horribly abused. Anally raped as a child by his father and neglected as an adult by his mother, he must endure unproductive therapy sessions with Dr. Sebring and work a boring job as a parking garage attendant. Over and

over, he watches *First Sequence* on DVD and copies the attachment procedure from Heiter's overhead projections, in part and as whole drawings, endlessly studying and committing them to memory: a diligent medical student of a fictional lesson. However, Martin's plans include the amplification of Heiter's experiment. Where *First Sequence* stitches together three people, *Full Sequence* stitches together twelve. Rather than carefully selecting and culling segments based on their compatibility, he simply bashes in the heads of any victims who blunder into his garage and offend his (and by extension the viewer's) sensibilities with their uncontrolled fucking, their drunken debauchery, and their mistreatment of their partners and of Martin. Rather than imprisoning them in his own home, Martin rents a warehouse where he stashes victims for later attachment. Similarly to the centipede in the first film, Martin enjoys momentary success by forcing his creation to move, consume, and excrete, but the centipede rebels, again after achieving some unity as a single organism (although this centipede splits into two separate, mobile halves at the film's climax). After shooting all of the segments after they defy his efforts of containment and control and physically injure him, Martin seems to awaken from a reverie, alone in his booth in the garage, the entire film a possible dream sequence.

Following through on his pledge to show more, Tom Six displays the process of assembling the centipede with much more detail and an exponential increase in gore in the second film.⁶ Heiter's ever-present riding crop is replaced by Martin's crowbar. The tender wound care that Heiter demonstrates in the care and maintenance of his pet is reduced in *Full Sequence* to clumsy brushing of the hair of the female segments (a refraction of his mother's hair-brushing earlier in the film). Carefully wrapped bandages yield to layers of silver duct tape. Martin is Dr. Heiter's epigone and, while his methods are much cruder and more immediate, and while his enjoyment of his centipede is much more short-lived, his work is only marginally more

successful and he ends the film disturbed, but alive.

The centipede's noisy, defiant head is not a Japanese man hurling invectives in a language unintelligible to everyone else in the film. It is the Jenny-sector, played by Ashlynn Yennie playing herself. The film's black-and-white dinginess contrasts sharply against its precursor's full-color cleanliness. There are no pristine surfaces, surgical draping, or medical instruments. Instead, Martin must operate in a dirty, empty warehouse, using a hammer, a pair of pliers, rolls of duct tape, kitchen implements, and a staple gun to stitch together his creation. Martin's bug-eyed, pudgy unhealthiness contrasts against Heiter's fitness. While both men wear lab coats, Martin wears his only over a pair of white briefs, his corpulence smeared with gore. Martin's obsessive copycat criminality contrasts against Heiter's controlled study of his subject matter, his desire to make something new. Even as the film's metafilmic structure connects *First* and *Full Sequences*, the second film is the converse of the first.

In keeping with the cinematic function that many meals serve in films as a setting that cathects relations between characters or as an accelerant that spurs the film's actions, the placement of meals as settings for the negotiation of power include Heiter's dinner table and Martin's breakfasts with his mother. At dinner, Heiter feeds his centipede's head, Katsuro, who then bites the doctor's ankle. This display of rebellion does not go unpunished: in response, Heiter kicks Katsuro in the face, and threatens to pull Katsuro's teeth out one-by-one if he bites again. Striking Katsuro has sullied Heiter's hands with blood. He finds the stain of it repellent and so wipes his fingers on his napkin as he tries to return to his own dinner, a thick, rare steak, perfectly cooked and elegantly plated to mirror his own carefully-executed bloodthirst. The unpleasantness of the encounter ruins the doctor's appetite and so he sets down his fork in disgust. This moment of revulsion contrasts sharply against Heiter's later taste for his victims'

blood: he licks the blood that they have dripped on the stairs leading out of the basement as they make a final attempt to escape.

Dietetics is closely associated with power in both films and the politics of power in both *First* and *Full Sequence* do not limit themselves to their merdivorous creations. In *Full Sequence*, for example, Martin feeds baby mice and crickets to a pet centipede in a terrarium, inflicting suffering upon lesser creatures as a way of dealing with his own victimization. Other forms of oral violence proliferate in the film: Martin pulls out Yennie's tongue when her incessant screaming gets on his nerves. It is mealtime with his mother that proves most evocative. His dysfunctional relationship with Mrs. Lomax (Vivien Bridson) plays out over their breakfast, distorting and amplifying the role that the dinner table plays in *First Sequence*. Eating a breakfast of beans-on-toast, bacon, and eggs (a mess on a plate that contrasts against Heiter's tidy meal of a steak garnished with a sprig of parsley) Mrs. Lomax declares, "I've decided to kill us both." Shortly after this declaration, the upstairs neighbor starts playing loud music with heavy bass. When Martin's mother thumps the ceiling to make him stop, the neighbor tromps downstairs and beats Martin. After the upstairs neighbor flips the table, Mrs. Lomax cries "Kill us both!" and receives verbal abuse in response before the neighbor leaves the apartment. In this scene, the family table does not bring together mother and son. Instead, the one-sided conversation they have over breakfast (Martin does not speak in the film) underscores his mother's suicidal tendencies and homicidal intentions toward her offspring. When joined by a neighbor, the breakfast scene demonstrates Martin's powerlessness. There is no communion over the meal. However, it is at the breakfast table where Martin exacts his revenge. After bludgeoning his mother to death with a crowbar, he seats her nearly decapitated corpse across from him at the breakfast table where he eats with her as they normally do. When Martin staves in his mother's

head and props her body in the chair across from him, it is her hollowed-out face and gaping mouth that arouses such horror. He completes the breakfast ritual by tapping on the ceiling to lure the upstairs neighbor down into the apartment where Martin shoots him in the leg, hits him in the head, and integrates him into his centipede. This meal offers no reconciliation (as promised by the feeding of his centipede, both human and arthropod); it does, however, constitute the first significant step toward Martin's reclamation of power. This scene is the apotheosis of the breakfast table's dysfunctional force, the fulfillment of its energies, a scene of release.

In *First Sequence*, the meal table represents a space in which the unsteady power dynamic that governs the struggle between Heiter and his centipede plays out, and their struggle here is a foreshadowing of later escape attempts. In *Full Sequence*, however, the family scene becomes an ambivalently recuperative space for Martin. It exposes the oppressive powers that make his life a misery and it is here where he exercises his vengeance against their actants: his hateful, hated mother and their bullying upstairs neighbor. The first film uses the meal table only as a metaphor for the agonism that leads to Heiter's dissatisfaction with his creation (and then abandoning it, as the only other meal in the film is that eaten by Katsuro). In the second film, the meal table plays a far more central role in the psychodrama, structuring Martin's need for his project. If Heiter is moved principally by vanity and curiosity, then Martin's curiosity is moved by retributive need. Martin's rage erupts at the breakfast table—it is only once this initial release has been achieved that he can begin the assembly of his centipede.

First Sequence's key coprophagic scene occurs when Katsuro has to relieve himself—for which he begs the forgiveness of his posterior segments. The humiliation of defecating while being watched is heightened by the lips unwillingly attached to his backside. He is forced to shit

and Lindsay is forced to swallow it. Meanwhile, Heiter sees this as the biology of his creature in action and so he hops about, gleefully exhorting Katsuro to "Feed her! Feed her!" He howls, "Hard! Swallow it, bitch! Swallow up!" adding a dimension of oral rape as the centipede takes on its first overtly sexual overtones. Until this moment, Katsuro has been defiant, refusing to fetch when Heiter stuffs a copy of *Die Welt* in his mouth, biting the doctor's leg at dinner and turning the centipede's back upon Heiter when commanded to bite his boot, obstinately refusing to play the role that Heiter's prototype, his "Lieber 3-Hund" should have played had it lived. After unwillingly forcing Lindsay to feed upon his excrement—days after the centipede's assembly—Katsuro is broken (but only momentarily: he makes another escape attempt not long after).

This is the fulfillment of Heiter's plan, as what A eats passes into B. However, the centipede resists him, its intractable bowels refusing to obey. B never passes anything to C and C never eliminates. At a checkup, it is revealed that Lindsay is constipated. She is unable to feed the centipede's tail segment. Dr. Heiter responds to this dysfunction by declaring that she will be administered a laxative, ("neostigmine, good stuff"). Meanwhile, Jenny's stinking, suppurating facial wounds move Heiter to observe, "Jenny-Sector, you're very sick. I think you're dying. We have to replace you." The centipede's biology is barely under Heiter's control because the actual bodies that he sutures together defy the imagined perfection of his creature.

The organization of the centipede refracts and then distorts the power dynamic between Heiter and his creation. Heiter's choice to stitch a Japanese man at the front of the centipede is chiefly pragmatic: Katsuro's body type better accommodates the dimensions of the women who will follow him and, similarly to Martin, Heiter has to work with whomever he can successfully ambush. However, the positioning of a male figure at the front of the centipede feeding shit to a

woman sewed to his anus gains added significance as Heiter hops about, gleefully exhorting Lindsay to “Swallow it, bitch!” In keeping with the conventions of horror, it is the men who perform the preponderance of the monstrosities, and women who endure the preponderance of the suffering. However, by putting an ethnic man at the front of the centipede, Six has added the specter of race-based oppression to the centipede’s shock without tapping into the most familiar horror tropes (the black guy always dies first) and while also disrupting the film’s fascist axis (although Six nods toward Japanese horror by selecting a Japanese actor). If the film’s inflections include Nazi atrocities, Katsuro’s nationality should have put him on the side of Dr. Heiter; his force-feeding of excrement to Lindsay certainly does, and his apologies to her refract postwar chagrin. However, to read the politics of World War II into the film’s alignments of power overstates the role that these tropes play in the centipede’s organization, as would reading Katsuro’s body as the inhuman, shitting female gibbon in Bataille’s JESUVE. Katsuro is the centipede’s noisy, unintelligible head. He is an open mouth that can feed and scream. He can howl in pain and horror and dismay without being able to speak directly to anyone. Even his ending soliloquy is wasted on those who cannot read the subtitles explaining his understanding of his predicament. His nationality silences him even as it allows him to give voice to his agony and his anger. This means that the inclusion of a Japanese man at the front of the centipede actually works to democratize suffering along the lines of gender, race, and nation. The film therefore upsets the horror convention that reserves the full wrath of the genre for the bodies of white women even as it also holds these conventions in place: it is Lindsay who is fed and it is Lindsay’s body that is impotent to feed; it is Lindsay’s eyes that we see in the film’s final shots, and her muffled weeping is the film’s final sounds. However, it is Katsuro who must feed and feel shame for it; he is most capable of defiance and can even lead it, but he too is frustrated; and

he must kneel before absolute power just as his female posterior segments must kneel behind him.

First Sequence is largely disinterested in the sexual; *Full Sequence*, on the other hand, is interested in the psychosexual. Heiter's attentiveness in assembling his creature does not make the bodies of his female victims—petite, girlish, pretty yet not ravishing—into the sexual fetish that is then defiled by the force-feeding of excrement. The process in the first film is instead biological. For Martin, however, assembling the centipede is both an enlargement of and expansion upon the experiment that he wishes to reproduce. His creative impulses are actually mimicry and exaggeration. He fails to work through his own anally-induced trauma: the dreams of his father's violations underwrite his savagery, but he ends the movie with a dead, broken centipede at his feet and a live centipede writhing in his gut. The film concludes with a lack of clarity whether its happenings have even occurred, as Martin's troubled looks and unsettled demeanor suggest that he has learned a valuable lesson about copying his idol's handiwork. Martin ends the film appearing to have been chastened. In these ways, both films differ greatly from de Sade's texts and Pasolini's *Saló*, which bind the eating of excrement to the satisfaction and amplification of sexual desire.

Although Martin can force them to eat and although they defecate in panicked spasms during Yennie's gavage, the segments of *Full Sequence's* human centipede refuse to unify to comprise a singular entity defined by gastric continuity. The centipede's bowels resist him. He attempts to unsuccessfully feed his pet, dumping a can of beans (which feature prominently upon his breakfast plate) into a dog dish. Not only does Yennie glare at him incredulously, she flings the bowl away. In response, Martin resorts to more direct methods, forcing her to eat when compliance fails by funneling food directly into her stomach. During this process, a few of the

centipede's segments involuntarily defecate and they feed each other, their excretions explosive and watery, the implied result of panic. When it is clear that some segments are not passing food quickly enough, Martin manually palpates their abdomens and attempts to stimulate their participation by using crude noises. Frustrated by his inability to produce complete results, Martin lasks each segment with an injection, triumphantly jabbing each victim to force compliance, inflicting the encopresis that he repeatedly suffers in the film.⁷ Martin is rewarded by gastric upheavals that force the segments to feed each other violently, each segment defecating in its turn. Refracting the red coat in *Schindler's List*, the sole spot of color in the film is the brown excrement spilling from each anus and splattering the camera as the victims forcefully feed one another.



Figure 2: The centipede realized in *The Human Centipede II: Full Sequence*

This feeding exhibits none of the tidiness of Heiter's centipede: it is orgiastic and sloppy as the nutriment that each segment provides to the next spills uncontrollably from the spaces between

lips and anus. Here at last the centipede fulfills its purpose: the gastric path is complete as shit becomes food and then shit again, to be excreted in a final burst by the tail segment. Martin can achieve what Heiter cannot—his centipede is a functional organism. To the viewer, it is clear that there is no passing of excrement through the centipede. It is an illusion conjured by the sequential defecation of each individual. However, for Martin, the serial feeding of each segment attests to his successful conjoining of a twelve-person yet singular entity, a four-fold expansion of Heiter's gastric and gustatory trinity.

What Martin discounts, however, is the smell. His centipede's gastric processes are more noisome than expected, and Martin finds himself repelled by his creation. He vomits, nauseated by the stink of the shit he has forced through and from the centipede (and this nausea refracts the emesis of the investigator who vomits at almost precisely this point in the first film). Here, he can do what his creation cannot—he is at liberty to vomit, where they are forced to swallow and accept. The parallelism pairing the vomit in *First Sequence* with the vomit in *Full Sequence* undoubtedly stems from the metanarrative that Tom Six uses to structure the film. The film within the film is perfect in execution precisely because it is a film, whereas Martin's sloppy imitations can never achieve such perfection. This is the distinction made in the film between the film and the real, a collapsing of the distance between the real and the imaginary as layered viewerships proliferate.⁸

The Cultural Logic of Coprophagia

Coprophagia forces interpersonal intimacy between the subjects in the centipede and the doctor who has connected them. Shitting and the eating of shit becomes a sign of unwanted, but successful intercourse with others. Boundaries marked out by excrement break down: the unification of bodies, attaching them from ass to mouth to ass to mouth represents a gross

violation of the excremental order and a cunning reversal of the customary trajectory marked out by Dominique Laporte in which shit is imbued with value. Excrement becomes nourishment and then excrement and then nourishment and then excrement again. However, the end segment in *First Sequence* is not only malnourished but sickens first, as her suppurating wounds are prodded by the doctor who seems to lack foresight beyond his assembly of the human centipede, the initial acts of feeding, and the walking of his creation around the yard.

Not only are bodies disassembled and then reassembled in frankenstienian fashion, but they are assembled with a special attention paid to the alimentary trajectory. The films suggest that the cleansing of shit is never effective—and films that indulge in coprophagia count upon this to power their use of the trope. Representations of excrement redistribute its fimetic force: excrement is cleansed of its taste and odor even as its spectacular filthiness grants an additional dimension of horror to the film. Neither does it have a flavor.⁹ Consequently, suffering lacks poignancy. Additionally, both films trope uncontainability: the shit that the first segment cannot control and that floods the mouth of the second is rendered odorless and flavorless even as the flood of it makes infinitely more monstrous the stitching of a young woman's face to an Asian man's anus.

Because they connect with the medical horrors of Nazi German doctors' human experiments, the sequences of *The Human Centipede* share with Pasolini's *Saló* an interest in fascism and the exercise of absolute power; however, this engagement exists at the level of interest and no further. It is not a commentary upon consumption and the bourgeoisie, a theme that *Saló* shares with *La Grande Bouffe* and that is a feature of coprophagic engagements with human excrement in television (Foster). Indeed, the key distinction between *The Human Centipede* series, *Saló*, and *La Grande Bouffe* is the cynicism with which Six markets his film.

The promotional materials for *The Human Centipede* state that it is "100% medically accurate," a "shockeroo gimmick" with a lengthy history in horror cinema, and one that attempts to distinguish the film from the pack but is ultimately derided as "old-fashioned marketing tomfoolery" (Martin, cited in Gornstein). Neither of these films pretends to be art beyond their skillful execution; they are explicitly "shitty" consumerist productions. The films' multiple bannings become an added meta-textual resource for the popularization of the film. Instead of keeping viewers safe from harm, they add to the film's appeal.¹⁰

In spite of their aspirations toward factual fidelity, *The Human Centipede* represents a series of influences mobilized in the furtherance of a thought experiment, a joke, one in which Six and his friends based an entire film franchise on the horrific notion of a perfect punishment for the worst transgressions.¹¹ Instead of lamenting it, Six revels in the power of the "critical quarantine" that isolates films such as *Saló* and *La Grande Bouffe* from mainstream consciousness, and then uses that power to force his films into the very mainstream that rejects them with such violence.¹² Rather than attempt to breach it or supercede it (as films such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* [2004] have attempted with some success), Six uses the films' shock value to amplify their appeal. Although *The Human Centipede*'s primary appeal is its iniquity, its high-quality vulgarity, and the carefully configured artistry of its offensiveness, it is its accurate invocation of medical technique—ultimately a small percentage of the film's total content—that allows Six access to the mainstream avenues of film distribution in the UK. A curious sleight-of-hand enabled the film's shock value to masquerade as attentiveness to medical detail. However, viewers do not gravitate toward the film for its medical accuracy and its depiction of surgical technique; we watch because people are being forced to eat shit and we recognize the film's coprophagia as a bubbling to the surface of internet subculture's more

shocking staple images and clips.¹³ Meanwhile, the official alibi allows Six to capitalize upon his film.

In spite of (or, more likely, because of) its banned status, the film enjoyed a vibrant subterranean life in Britain and Australia, riding the same currents of distribution as “Bathtub Girl,” Goatse.cx, and “2 Girls 1 Cup”¹⁴ to acquire the same widespread reception in both nations, as these films and memes constitute as much a component of *The Human Centipede*'s cultural genetics as its Japanese horror forebears and Pasolini and Ferreri's films. As it contains images of extruding, consuming, and regurgitating human excrement set against the backdrop of lesbian sex, “2 Girls 1 Cup” has been the subject of innumerable reaction videos in which the unsuspecting have been duped into seeing it or are lured by the dare of watching something so vile, and then filmed as they laugh, retch, moan, and scream.¹⁵ *The Human Centipede* films replicate the structure of “2 Girls 1 Cup” and its reaction videos: we watch, dared to do so by someone who has seen; we are revulsed as we are also amused by our revulsion, our revulsion an inversion of Kundera's kitsch;¹⁶ we dare others to watch, that we may be amused by our collective revulsion. In this way, similarly to de Sade's work, *The Human Centipede* demands a curiously epicurean palate to withstand its aesthetic assault. Similarly to the shit confection that Ugo creates in *La Grande Bouffe*, *The Human Centipede* is “Une poeme de merde”: as Andréa (Andréa Ferreol) says, “it's good, Ugo, but it won't go down.” Shit-eating is a culinary vice that requires a discerning taste. Consuming this film and its internet antecedents takes gustatory stamina to enjoy. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster's article describes the operation of gluttony and excrescence in American television culture, describing its coprophagic and cannibalistic qualities. Her inquiry can easily extend to accommodate Six's films and its coprophagic precedents.

The Human Centipede's cult and commercial success suggest that it readmits excrementality—and that it is the epilogue of Laporte's *History of Shit*, which tracks the return of excrement to the fields of cultural production. Excrement becomes capital, shit alchemically transformed into the coin of the realm. The films shift the register of excremental politics: much of its study (Warwick Anderson, Jed Esty, David Inglis, Achille Mbembe, George Bataille) concentrates upon the purgation, elimination, and celebration of shit. Indeed, excrement has a particularly potent political resonance in postcolonial fiction, where shitting in beds and leaving heaping mounds of filth in toilets is a particularly insulting intrusion into the homes of dispossessed middle class citizens and intellectuals whose lives are disrupted by political flux.¹⁷ Its ingestion adds a new dimension of cruelty and spite to images of effusive excretion and excessive consumption. As they avail themselves of an ironic posture toward recycling waste, images of coprophagy also align themselves with themes of decadence, humiliation, and hyper- or mismanagement of the body.

The films therefore participate in a configuration of excremental posthumanism, one that connects people via excess consumption and effusive cultural production. Marie Lathers' model of excremental posthumanism shifts postcolonial excrementalism away from the management of bodies via the excremental order to the management, socialization, and naturalization (the making familiar) of nonhuman primates (421-22). In spite of its critics' enumeration of its many artistic failures, Six's films perhaps adhere to the model of the posthuman excremental, not because of socialization and naturalization (even though the films are deeply interested in collapsing and then reconstructing the separations between human, inhuman, nonhuman, and animal) but because of *The Human Centipede* franchise's interest in augmentation, in deconstructing the human body's individuality by inserting it into coprophagic relations with

others in ways that dehumanize it and yet make it suprahuman. If Pasolini's renderings of coprophagy depict the shit food that manufacturers shovel down the gullets of consumers,¹⁸ then Six's version of coprophagy critiques the disavowal of our collective interest in shitty culture. Its parodies reinforce this thinking, exemplified by *South Park's* "HUMANCENTiPAD," aired in 2011 and a year after the release of *First Sequence*.¹⁹



Figure 3: South Park's HUMANCENTiPAD

This episode points toward the posthumanist excremental order established by the film. As we are governed by increasingly opaque End User Agreements (that few of us read attentively) and as our laptops, tablets, desktops, and cell phones become increasingly integrated with each other, and we with them, and they and we with other people and their devices, the human centipede's logic emerges in the ordering of everyday life: we live in a world of informative data vomit that we consume and spew in endless text messages, phone conversations, emails, web pages, blog

posts, forum posts, tweets, status updates, and memes.²⁰ Similarly to Heiter and Martin's centipedes, these new constructions of self rely upon sustenance that is marginally nutritive. Although Six's consultation with a physician verifies his film's claim that a human being can exist for years upon a diet of excrement if supported by infusions of vitamins,²¹ there is little sense that the eating of one's own shit or the shit of other human beings has serious dietary potential beyond its shock value, its immediate, stunning effect upon the viewer. The image of the new, posthumanist human being is one who is chained to others, not by the democratizing power of Web 2.0, but by endless ingestion, regurgitation, and defecation of information.

In this way, the HUMANCENTiPAD offers a deconstruction of the conflicting social settings of the subject in an age of information oversaturation. Instead of a solitary figure bent over a keyboard or a mobile device, face illumined by a single screen into which she stares, rapt, substituting virtual interactions for real-life connections with others, and instead of the endless connectivity with others offered by social media and the instantaneousness of immersion in the internet, the HUMANCENTiPAD and Six's precursor films offer an intermediary: the individual sutured to others, ingesting excrement and extruding it. The solitary netizen is revealed as a fiction—she reads and is read by others. She is bound to them by the streams of information into which she dives, searching for stimulation and novelty, impatiently demanding updates by obsessively and repeatedly pressing F5.

This is because the viewer is as much a segment in the centipede as its victims. If the segments of Six's centipedes simultaneously become the panicked, dying, shitting female gibbon buried underground with only her anus exposed to the sky as well as a perversion of the beautiful woman who kisses them, then they also invoke the JESUVE's third component, which is the group of onlookers whose sighs, groans, and orgasms complete the tableau. Heiter and Martin,

the choreographers of the scenario, are both orgiastic onlooker and eager participant; however, it is the audience's sighs, cries, and tears that are the film's realization of its objectives.²² Our own vertiginous enjoyment of the film's horrors highlight the absurd, disturbing excess that Gwendolyn Audrey Foster laments as she observes "the cyclical loop" of "capitalism eating itself." She argues that television culture in the US disgorges its excess to feast upon it again in the forms of exploitative gluttony. She describes television as "coprophagic and cannibalistic in this way; TV is largely feces, our own regurgitated feces, which we ultimately pay to eat." She notes that "shows such as Hoarders exploit and engage in coprophagia for better ratings, ultimately supporting gluttonous capitalism." Tom Six's films make this the literal foundation of their appeal, especially as they sink deep roots in other moments of coprophagy in film and internet culture. We watch, but not impassively, as watching the films constitutes a feat of strength; our disgust is dizzying and Six's shoveling of the shit down our collective gullets is as cynical as our appetite for it. His is not the ironic posture struck by Pasolini and Ferreri. It is not one of dismay. By making literal the film's allocophagy, he also makes literal the manner in which we will consume what others extrude, amusing ourselves by feasting on filth.

End Notes

¹ Others include the shit pie eaten in *The Help* and treated in brief detail below, and *Pink Flamingos* by John Waters. In spite of the shock value of contemporary coprophagia in film and literature, the eating of shit as a form of social commentary is nothing new. Textual references to coprophagia can be found in Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and he in turn cites classical Greek comedies.

² Adulterated food in which the adulterant is of the body has its own politics of power and is part of an ancient tradition. Seneca the Younger's *Thyestes* features a father who unknowingly eats the hacked apart bodies of his own sons; this play is a refraction of the Greek myth in which the gods are fed human flesh by a curious mortal host in an effort to divine their omniscience.

³ Laura Norén's article "Only Dogs are Free to Pee" examines the plight of taxicab drivers in

New York. They cannot relieve themselves freely and are forced to pee surreptitiously. Their furtive micturation includes the use of drinking vessels to contain their urine. The problem of where to pee marks out for Laura Norén a site where human rights must be arbitrated to establish a standard of dignity for the bodies of workers in New York.

⁴ Bataille writes:

A relative silence settles: all the stupefied glances are fixed on the filth, beautifully book-colored solar prominence, sticking out of the earth and ridiculously shuddering with convulsions of agony. Then the Englishwoman with her charming rear end stretches her long nude body on the pit: the mucous-flesh of this bald false skull, a little soiled with shit at the radiate flower of its summit, is even more upsetting to see when touched by pretty white fingers...contracted by strangulation, and even by death, the beautiful boil of red flesh is set ablaze with stinking brown flames...In reality, when this puerile little vomiting took place, it was not a mere carcass that the mouth of the Englishwoman crushed her most burning, her sweetest kisses, but on the nauseating JESUVE: the bizarre noise of kisses, prolonged on flesh, clattered across the disgusting noise of bowels. (86)

⁵ Bataille writes of the female gibbon:

Once she is trussed up like a chicken--with her legs folded back against her body--the three men tie her upside down to a stake planted in the middle of the pit. Attached in this way, her bestial howling mouth swallows dirt while, on the other end, her huge screaming pink anal protrusion stares at the sky like a flower (the end of the stake runs between her belly and her bound paws): only the part whose obscenity stupefies emerges above the top level of the pit. (85)

⁶ About the responses to the second film, Six states, "Similar to part one, people either absolutely loved it or they hated it. Part one was more psychological and people would tell me, 'We want more shit and gore.' So I really shoved it to them and went all the way!" (cited in Wampler)

⁷ Martin soils his bed early in the film and, while viewing the section of First Sequence in which Katsuro feeds Lindsay, he soils himself while gleefully hopping around his booth.

⁸ This distinction is best explained in Baudrillard's analysis of science fiction. He writes: "There is no real, there is no imaginary except at a certain distance. What happens when this distance, including that between the real and the imaginary, tends to abolish itself to be absorbed on behalf of the model?" (121) Full Sequence answers this question in a number of ways, many of which are beyond the scope of my analysis here. However, Six's manipulation of the metatextuality in the film connects to, not only to its placement in The Human Centipede series, but also its placement in the posthumanist chain that I outline below.

⁹ Barthes writes: "Language has this property of denying, ignoring, dissociating reality: [W]hen written, shit does not have an odor" (Barthes 147).

¹⁰ Both films were banned in the UK, although both bans were reversed after cuts. When the first film was banned in Britain, Six appealed to its medical accuracy as part of the effort to get the ban lifted, which it ultimately was. The second film remains banned in Australia. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Human_Centipede_%28First_Sequence%29>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Human_Centipede_2_%28Full_Sequence%29>)

¹¹ Six describes the scene:

It all started with a very sick joke I always made to friends. We were watching television and there was a child molester or something like that and I said, "They should stick his mouth to the ass of a very fat truck driver. That would be a good punishment for him." Everybody said, "That's horrible." And that was the basic idea for this film, just a joke. (Disgust Discussed: A Q&A With The Director Of This Year's Foulest Horror Flick)

¹² Roberts writes,

[C]ritics tend to speak of *Saló* in hyperbolic terms, as when John Powers called it a "cinematic ground zero, the cruelest, most obscene, and most intellectually toxic work ever made by a major director." If indeed with *Saló* Pasolini did reach a limit, instead of stimulating analysis, the hyperbolic judgments of outraged humanists have kept the film hedged in by taboos both juridical and aesthetic, suspended in a critical quarantine[.] (30)

¹³ Of the coprophagy in *Saló*, Roberts writes:

Audience-member and actor alike convulse in disgust, even though the film can only show an image without taste or smell, and the actors themselves were eating Swiss chocolate. Speaking of this as a "strange sensation, resting on sheer imagination," Kant likens such loathsome content to the artist force-feeding the audience a disgusting object that the gustatory senses inherently reject: "the object is represented as if it were imposing the enjoyment which we are nevertheless forcibly resisting." When this happens, "the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation itself from the nature of the object itself, and it then becomes impossible for the former to be taken as beautiful." Revolting objects force the interested nature of taste to the surface, thereby breaking the spell of aesthetic autonomy. (40-1)

¹⁴ "Bathtub Girl" is a still from a Japanese pornographic film, one that seems to come straight out of Bataille's writing and collapses the buried gibbon with the beautiful woman that Bataille pairs in his vision. A young woman lies in a bathtub, her face spattered by a fount of foul liquid excrement squirting out of her anus and arcing above her body. Goatse.cx, the first successful domain hack, is a series of photos of a man's prolapsed anus, spread to impossibly wide dimensions. "2 Girls 1 Cup" is a by-now eponymous trailer for *Hungry Bitches*, a Brazilian scat-porn film produced in 2007. In the clip, a pair of women engages in several stages of taboo sexuality: they segue from kissing to eating excrement to kissing again as they share the excrement, and then to vomiting the excrement into one another's mouths.

¹⁵ As of this writing, a simple Youtube search of "2girls1cup reaction" yielded 33,600 hits. The "2 Girls 1 Cup" reaction videos are also spoofed in "Back to the Woods," an episode of Family Guy in which Brian tricks Stewie into watching it. (http://familyguy.wikia.com/wiki/2_girls,_1_cup).

¹⁶ Kundera defines kitsch as "the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being," "a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist...the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence" (248). He continues:

The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories: the ungrateful daughter, the neglected father, children running on the grass, the motherland betrayed, first love.

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass!

The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch. (251)

¹⁷This occurs in Chimamandi Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, in which a family headed by a Biafran intellectual is displaced by the military and returns to their home to find feces in their bed. In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, an intruding militia commandeers the home, treats the protagonist and her colonially indoctrinated grandfather with condescension and contempt, forces the family to feed and house them, and then leaves a stinking mess in the toilet before they depart. *The Memory of Love* by Aminatta Forna also contains an instance of excrement in the bed of a displaced radical intellectual. This is not to say that those who must endure being covered in or in close proximity to their own shit or the shit of others are rendered completely powerless. Bodily filth constitutes a weapon of resistance in the film *Hunger*, which dramatizes how IRA POWs use their own filthy bodies as a battleground to loudly declare their refusal to be considered criminals. In addition to refusing to wash themselves or to cut their hair and beards, they save food to create dams to funnel urine into the hallways outside their cells. More critically, they bedaub their cells with their own shit, creating beautiful murals of thickly-layered whorls that must be hosed off the walls. *Slumdog Millionaire*'s protagonist Jamal is locked in a latrine as his Bollywood idol Amitabh Bachchan lands a plane on a nearby airstrip to greet adoring fans. Desiring an autograph, Jamal jumps down the latrine hole to land in the sticky pit below, swims to its surface and runs through the crowd, every inch of him covered in shit. His reek clears a path for him. He leaves smears of excrement on the clothes of the crowd as he pushes his way to the front. The ignominy of the beshitted body here becomes an asset. He gets his autograph--his most prized possession.

¹⁸Roberts writes:

When asked what the scatological themes “represent in the film, metaphorically speaking,” Pasolini responded, “Mainly this: that the producers, the manufacturers, force the consumer to eat excrement. All these industrial foods are worthless refuse.” Pasolini here casts coprophagy as an allegorical comment not only on the culture industry but also on the industrialization of agriculture, with the shit serving as a symbol of the terrible food to which people were becoming habituated. (40)

¹⁹When he neglects to read the Terms and Conditions to which he agreed after downloading an iTunes update, Kyle is kidnapped and forced to participate in an experiment in which he is the middle segment of the HumancentiPad: a human centipede with an iPhone stitched to its

forehead and an iPad stitched to its posterior segment. (<http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s15e01-humancentipad>)

²⁰ We answer the question Baudrillard asks of what writer could imagine the East German factories-simulacra which we are all involved, in as we engage in endless unproductive productivity and “our activity is consumed in a game of orders, of competition, of writing, of bookkeeping, between one factory and another, inside a vast network” (126). This “fictional” space is not a metaphor for what we do; Six’s movies and our activity with and around them participate in and exaggerate its logic.

²¹ As he constructed his centipede, Six consulted with a physician who verified that humans can live on shit if infection is prevented and if supported by intravenous nutrition. (Disgust Discussed). This observation is supported by Ralph Lewin, who points out that excrement has a high concentration of protein. He notes the record of an artist in Brussels who subsists upon it for 23 days as well as a biblical passage in Isaiah in which men on a wall eat excrement (598).

²² Bataille writes, “But these unheard-of events had set off orgasms, each more suffocating and spasmodic than its predecessor, in the circle of unfortunate observers; all throats were choked by raucous sighs, by impossible cries, and, from all sides, eyes were moist with the brilliant tears of vertigo” (Bataille 86).

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Taboo and Truth in *Cannibal Holocaust*



Jennifer Brown

In examining popular culture of the last 100 years, it is evident that cannibalism manages to worm its way into all kinds of places, expected and unexpected, with numerous references to cannibalism in music, television, literature and film. From the grubby horror of slasher movies such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper 1974), to Rammstein's rocking out to "Mein Teil" the subject of which is Armin Meiwes, a German man who successfully advertised online for a young man willing to be eaten and killed. Meiwes was convicted of manslaughter, but at a retrial in 2006 he was sentenced to life for murder. Rammstein, in typical dramatics, perform the song with no small element of macabre glee, and the lyrics detail the seasoning and flambéing of human meat, porcelain dishes, candlelight, and wine before concluding tongue-in-cheek that "you are what you eat."

Within this glut of cannibalism culture we find the Italian cannibal films, a sub-genre of exploitation film made mostly by Italian film makers through the 1970s and 80s. The most notorious of these cannibal films are *Cannibal Ferox*, directed by Umberto Lenzi in 1981, and *Cannibal Holocaust*, directed by Ruggero Deodato, released in 1980. Others include *Deep River Savages* (Umberto Lenzi 1972), *Mountain of the Cannibal God* (Sergio Martino 1978), and *Eaten Alive!* (Umberto Lenzi 1980). This sub-genre is essentially a collection of graphically violent and

bloody movies that usually depict cannibalism by primitive natives in Asian or South American rainforests. While cannibalism is the uniting feature of these films, the general emphasis focuses on various forms of shocking, realistic, and graphic violence and gratuitous nudity. The peak of the genre's popularity was from 1977 to 1981, a period that has come to be known as the 'cannibal boom'.

Cannibalism in our culture is not simply indicative of our obsession with it, but also highlights the sheer pleasure we take in it, hearing about it, contemplating it, fantasising about it. Of course, popular culture often focuses upon blood and gore at the expense of serious reflection on the meaning of this material. In this essay, I argue that the use of one of the world's oldest taboos has significant meaning and resonance. I focus primarily on Deodato's controversial masterpiece *Cannibal Holocaust*, a mockumentary horror that uses cannibalism as its crowning shock tactic. It is my argument that rather than merely trying to shock, Deodato uses cannibalism amidst a plethora of shocking taboos to question the idea of Western greed. Furthermore, he uses the taboo in a stylistic way that bridges horror, mondo, and mockumentary. This allows Deodato to question notions of public truth, audience demands, media credibility and the objectification of the subject.

Before examining the film, it is worth exploring why we are so fascinated by cannibalism. Cannibalism is first and foremost about eating so I will outline some important food theories that will help ground the theory behind cannibalism's function in culture. In horror and Gothic texts food takes on dark symbolism and raises questions concerning orality, boundaries and fears. Poison, forced eating, forced starvation, vampires, werewolves, zombies, cannibals, vomit, bile, decayed food, disgusting non-foods, starved bodies, obese bodies fill horror films and repulse and fascinate viewers in equal measure. Food in culture functions powerfully and encourages a range of theories which attempt to understand its symbolism. In analysing horror films it is useful to consider the role food and orality play. As food is a liminal substance, as something outside the body that we desire, it evokes ambivalent emotions as it threatens "contamination and impurity" (Lupton 3).

Furthermore, Leon Kass has argued that understanding human eating throws light on the relation between the rational and the non-rational in humankind, and between the strictly natural and the cultural or ethical (12). Due to its highly symbolic nature, transgressing food boundaries can mean absolute ostracism, such as exclusion from social groups, family celebrations, or religious ceremonies. In popular culture, these social norms are played with and food taboos can be used to evoke horror and repulsion. Crucially, the division between normal and abnormal, the Self and the Other, is often defined by what is eaten and what is forbidden to eat. As a highly symbolic system of codes, food constructs a significant part of our cultural identity and, as an extension, our opinions and prejudices of others.

What is the function of these systems of codes and where does cannibalism fit into them? Mary Douglas analysed the dietary rules of Leviticus and concludes taboos are not about health regulations or tests of faith, but rather involve a system of maintaining symbolic boundaries: “For I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience” (4). In this way eating becomes a means of differentiating between people and cultures, between civilised and savage, well mannered and rude, local and foreign, devote and pagan, and ultimately between the Self and the Other. Cannibalism, within this system of codes is deemed taboo, monstrous, an utter rejection of widely accepted norms. Therefore, it incites repulsion. Cannibalism further unsettles by creating ambiguity in terms of how we see the human body. Usually deemed the pinnacle of the food chain, above and beyond the butchery of meat, the human body is, through cannibalism, paradoxically reduced to the level of mere food and elevated to the status of taboo gastronomy. As the ultimate transgression of cultural mores, cannibalism also reminds us of the potentially limitless nature of human appetite.

Fear of the Other is often expressed through images of being literally and metaphorically consumed by that Other. For these reasons, cannibalism has long been the epitome of the transgression of boundaries and has a long history in popular culture as a way to incite and display

fear. The configuration of colonial subjects, working classes, women, homosexuals, Christians and non-Christians, as cannibalistic is suggestive of the fear and repulsion these groups evoked at various times. Indeed, in his contentious 1979 work, *The Man Eating Myth*, William Arens argues that cannibalism, as a widely practised cultural phenomenon in the non-Western communities of the world, probably never existed and is, in fact, a racist myth perpetrated to excuse colonialism.

As the cannibal has such a symbolic significance, it has been used in popular culture to not only incite fear but to make comments on that which we fear. I have argued elsewhere that the cannibal figure has moved location throughout the last 100 years of culture. At first, he was an African savage in need of civilising in the colonial tales of 19th century Britain; in 1960's and '70's American horror the cannibal appeared as a rural degenerate, inbred and economically left behind; in the late twentieth century we see a plethora of serial killer cannibals in urban centres, the ultimate capitalist consumers in the capitalist consumer centres of the world (Brown 2012). Thus, it is evident that in Gothic and horror texts, texts which often explore the limits of the human body and are concerned with the fascinating fear of transgressing boundaries, that orality and cannibalism take on darkly symbolic meanings far beyond simple gore.

Within this history of the cannibal in culture we find some of the goriest of all cannibal texts, *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Cannibal Ferox*. As I have suggested, however, there is much more going on here than mere gore. It is worth taking a brief look at the other films in this sub-genre before turning our attention to *Cannibal Holocaust*. It is fair to say that the Italian cannibal films provide, perhaps, the most complete vision of man as meat. An extreme body of work, they offer a “relentlessly repellent vision of the human body and human culture” (Jones 45-46). However, I am interested here in asking if they have anything deeper to offer. At first, it may seem the answer is no, with *Deep River Savages*, Italy's first graphic cannibal movie, described as a “gruesome racist fantasy” (Slater 44). It features the real animal violence and hard-core gore that would come to dominate later films of the genre. Like many of the films in this genre, the actual slaughter of animals is shocking, indeed offensive to many viewers. Lenzi tried again in 1980 with *Eaten Alive*,

set in New Guinea and featuring purification cults, poisoned darts, and, of course, cannibal hordes. Again, Lenzi's film has met harsh criticism as mere shock exploitation. Film critic Mike Bracken accuses Lenzi of the "heinous" crime of stealing footage from other cannibal films and editing them into *Eaten Alive*. This kind of cannibalisation of the genre is quite typical with the Italian cannibal movies. Cliff Ponder claims the film descends into an "atmosphere of banality by alternating between munching cannibals and ranting nutcases" (114). The special effects are amateurish and I am inclined to agree with Ponder that any real fear comes not from the cheap gore but the sense of the characters' lack of control over their fate (116). Like the other cannibal boom films, the practices attributed to the New Guinea tribes are inaccurate and any attempt at questioning racism or exploitation is lost in an ultimately racist and exploitative film. Overall though, Lenzi's earlier films are trial runs for his more successful and slightly more complex *Cannibal Ferox*.

In *Cannibal Ferox*, also known as *Make Them Die Slowly* in America, we begin to see the importance of these cannibal movies and, importantly, an awareness of the significance of the cannibal figure in othering throughout popular culture. *Cannibal Ferox* is the story of an American research student, Gloria, who travels, with her brother and friend, to Colombia in order to gather evidence for her thesis, in which she intends, William Arens-like, to debunk the myth of cannibalism. There they meet an American drug dealer, Mike, who exploits a native tribe in order to gather emeralds. The embodiment of the immoral, avaricious West, Mike enslaves, castrates and kills natives while drinking whiskey and snorting cocaine. Mike blames the tortured and mutilated bodies on the natives, labelling them cannibalistic, murderous brutes. Eventually the tribe begin to exact revenge and they become the cannibalistic savages of Mike's set-up. They gobble the entrails of Mike's companion with their hands, the blood showing up garishly against the white dusty setting. Lenzi certainly indulges in the standard violence of the cannibal genre. There are scenes of castration, eye-gouging, scalping, brain eating, and a woman is hung by meat hooks through her breasts. As Mike's castrated penis is eaten by the natives, Gloria's earlier statement that 'Cannibalism doesn't exist, it never existed' is echoed over Mike's screams of anguish. Gloria is the

sole survivor and is returned to New York where she accepts adulation for her thesis 'Cannibalism: End of the Myth.' Her thesis is seen as intellectually radical although this is laughable as Lenzi is surely aware of Arens's work on the same subject, representing Gloria as a female version of Arens.

Slater has criticised *Cannibal Ferox* as being an excuse for "outrageous gore" with "pedestrian direction," "inane characterisation," and a "truly abysmal script," (159). He describes it as "an adult comic book adventure made in an era where the graphic ripping of flesh was popular, but . . . completely without subtext" (108). I tend to agree with Slater. I do think the film attempts to ask interesting questions about who the real savages are and to tackle issues of cultural defilement and racial issues. The natives become cannibals after being so labelled by the Westerners. They are driven to savagery by the savage greed of the West. However, the film attempts and fails to send a message regarding the racist and exploitative premise of Western attitudes to tribal cultures.

Coming from the controversy of Arens's work, it never fully understands his arguments. The crucial point of *The Man Eating Myth*, the reasons for cannibalism and the widespread belief in it existing in the jungles, is lost in *Cannibal Ferox*. Rather than examine the reasons for the extensive belief in cannibalism tales, the film becomes one of those very tales, it becomes interested only in the gore and horror of eating flesh without fully investigating motives, facts or circumstances. Lenzi's thirst for shocking the audience, with bloody body parts and screaming naked women, overrides any deeper meaning. Indeed, Slater accuses Lenzi of using throwaway excuses for outrageous gore and an attempt to disguise the film's own "exploitative, racist premise" (159). Cannibalism has become here an excuse to become part of a popular genre and is used for its sheer gore factor.

However, this gore factor is central to a discussion of these films, as part of their notoriety stems from it. In *Eaten Alive!* Slater examines the phenomenon of these Italian cannibal and zombie movies, marking the horror film *Blood Feast* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1963) as one of the first zombie/cannibal movies to be released since the 1910s and 1920s. He argues that the films met such cult success because of a relaxation of censorship. A recent article in *The Guardian* newspaper reported on the BBFC's (British Board of Film Classification) plans to tighten their policy on sexual

or sadistic violence. After the release of so-called torture porns such as *The Human Centipede II* (Six, 2011), there were concerns that some material may be potentially harmful to “vulnerable viewers,” that is, young men with little life experience, as it may normalize rape and give a distorted view of women. The BBFC has said it would consider cutting or even rejecting works aimed at adults containing violence (*The Guardian*).

The question of what is, can be, or should be shown to the public is not only one pondered by film censors, but also editors, webmasters, journalists, documentary makers, and photographers, and is central to understanding the debate on truth put forward by *Cannibal Holocaust*. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag looks at war photography and argues that the policy concerning what content should be publicly available is very much in flux and has no clear guidelines. She asks if viewers are inured or incited to violence by the depiction of cruelty. The moral dilemma over whether to publish footage of “real” death has risen again recently with conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. The U.S. military has a fluctuating relationship with the media and how much information, or what kind of information, they want released to the public. In the Vietnam War, there was a glut of horrific images and first hand reports from the front line. This material colored public opinion and affected the support of the war. However, in the Gulf War, journalists were not given access to combat zones and were fed “cleaned up” and exaggerated reports of success (Topping).

Conversely, mondo videos promote themselves as the only genre that depicts real death. Mondo film is exploitation documentary, usually based on taboo topics intended to shock the audience. The forefathers of mondo are Franco Prosperi and Gaultiero Jacopetti with *Mondo Cane* (1962). As the intention of mondo is to shock the audience, the temptation to edit footage to make the film more shocking arises. Many film critics argue mondo is the precursor to reality television, both claiming to offer an exploratory, often exploitative insight into real life, and both open to accusations of fabrication. In “Spectacles of Atrocity: Mondo Video in the War on Terror”, Jason Middleton looks at mondo videos, or shockumentaries, and websites that claim to show “real” shots

of disasters; in particular he considers photographs from Abu Ghraib and footage of September 11: “Mondo videos ostensibly grant viewers greater access to the unrepressed ‘real’ event, the sense of connection to the ‘real’ event actually becomes more elusive” (Middleton). Mikita Brottman describes mondo films compiled of footage from police cameras of car wrecks, riots, suicides, wars. The footage is occasionally held together, she writes, by “loose documentary style commentary, but is more often left to speak for itself, or is backed up by an appropriate (or sometimes deliberately inappropriate) musical soundtrack” (Brottman 2004 167). Brottman argues that mondo is the ‘other’ of mainstream horror, and despite horror’s use of technology to evince the violence of death, mondo reveals the “actual” violence in a way that horror never can, “more explicitly, more offensively, and more defiantly” (ibid 168). She also suggests that it is usually considered offensive as it “makes the violent death of the human body into a leisure pursuit” (ibid 186).

Of course, underlying all of these discussions is the question of audience demand. Paparazzi journalists often defend themselves against critics by claiming that customer demands drive the type of material they seek. Within this, stories of cannibalism certainly seem to attract readers, for example the New York cop, Gilberto Valle, convicted for plans to kidnap and eat women; the ‘Miami zombie’, Rudy Eugene in Miami who ate his victim’s face in a frenzied street attack; Luka Rocco Magnotta, the Canadian porn star accused of eating his lover; Armin Meiwes, the German man who advertised successfully online for a willing victim to be eaten. I am sure that most readers are familiar with most of these stories. It is that assumed familiarity I am interested in here. The media frenzy around each story, the grisly photographs, the attempts to categorise the criminals as insane or monstrous echo the stories of infamous cannibal serial killers Ed Gein and Jeffrey Dahmer in the 1950s and 1980s respectively. It is in examining the easy belief in, and avid consumption of, these stories that we come to an understanding of *Cannibal Holocaust* and its significance as a damning commentary on Western media.

Ruggero Deodato said that he was inspired to make the film after experiencing the media’s coverage of the Red Brigades’ activities in Italy in the 1970s and the news media’s constant search

for a scoop and the subsequent ‘rape’ of the spectators’ senses (qtd. in Jauregui). Political terrorism was a prominent feature of Italian life in the 1970s. Between 1969 and 1980 there were more than ten thousand recorded terrorist incidents in the country with over two hundred people dying from these acts (Burrows 406). The most prominent terrorist band was the Red Brigades – a Marxist movement which grew out of the failed student revolts of the 1960s. Up until the 1980s, the Red Brigade pursued armed protest against the capitalist state and sought to create a true socialist state in Italy. They felt betrayed by the Italian Communist Party because of a compromise formed with the Christian Democrats. They carried out a series of terrorist attacks, robberies, shootings, and kidnappings. In 1978 they kidnapped Aldo Moro, the president of the ruling Christian Democratic party and five times prime minister of Italy. The Italian public were shocked and Pope Paul IV pleaded with the terrorists to show humanity (Smith). However, the Red Brigade decided Moro should be sentenced to death. After the Democrats refused to meet the terrorists’ demands, Moro wrote letters to them accusing them of easy indifference. He was shot dead after two months in captivity. The results were a new anti-terrorist crackdown and the Red Brigades went into decline after losing much of their support. The hype and media circus around these activities led Deodato to question the portrayal of truth and the relationship between the truth and audience demands.

Filmed in the Amazon, *Cannibal Holocaust* tells the story of four American documentary makers who travel to “The Green Inferno” to film native cannibal tribes. When they go missing an anthropologist, Professor Monroe (played by pornography star Robert Bolla!), is sent to rescue them or their missing footage. On finding the remains of the four and their reels, he returns to America to view the footage. The second half of the film consists of the documentary makers’ footage.

This film-within-a-film approach lends an aura of cinema-verité, a technique made familiar in the more recent horror film *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez 1999). It is also typical of both horror and Gothic literature and film, which often function around the trope of the “found document.” The role of the mockumentary and the position of *Cannibal Holocaust*

within this tradition are important issues to consider when examining the film and reaction to it. *Cannibal Holocaust* is intended to confuse the audience's perception of fiction and reality through the insertion of a film within a film. Mockumentaries use the codes and conventions of a documentary. They then subvert these conventions by presenting a fictional subject and critiquing it. A mockumentary imitates a documentary in order to destabilize the truth. It is generally seen as a subversive genre. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight identify different levels of mockumentary with level one using mild irony in a parody of a documentary and level three involving critique, hoax and deconstruction of the genre (qtd. in Campbell). While critiquing the 2006 film *Borat* (Charles 2006), Miranda Campbell raises an interesting point regarding the audience and mockumentary, in that the audience that understands the irony of the mockumentary feels a sense of superiority: it is "jokes instead of intelligence, economic power or level of 'development' that lends itself to feelings of superiority. Call it the cultural imperialism of the smugly tongue-in-cheek" (Campbell).

While there is certainly no comic element to *Cannibal Holocaust*, there is a play with audience fear and sense of self-assuredness. This, Cynthia Miller points out, is a strong and crucial feature of the mockumentaries; they "hold a mirror up to our flaws, poke fun at our assumptions, and refuse to let us look away from our most cherished notions about reality . . . they laugh at our discomfort in the process" (Miller). *Cannibal Holocaust* shows the cannibalistic rapacity of the West and the short sightedness and ethnocentric stance of the "developers" and journalists, laughs at our discomfort in assuming the American documentary makers are the good guys, and forces us to question the "truth" in Western media.

The realist horror, and indeed real killings of animals, in *Cannibal Holocaust* call to mind the journalistic frenzies around serial killers and violent crime. Both disperse graphic images for audience enjoyment. A film on cannibalism, *Cannibal Holocaust* utilizes the audience's assumptions about documentary and truth to undermine both, but also to critique and satirize our attitudes toward exploitative anthropological documentaries, thus confusing the audience's reception of the film, and ultimately perpetrating a hoax. The film constantly refers to itself as a

celluloid construct, yet features realistic and real violence. Jackson notes how in achieving this balance between realism and awareness of artifice, the film “establishes a dual discourse that both exploits and critiques its horrific content for maximum emotional and cognitive impact” (Jackson). Again, this is a central feature of the mockumentary as identified by Miller, and this discomfort forces the audience to reflect on “norms, values, ideologies, and ways of being.”

Deodato achieves the sense of a documentary through a range of technical trickery. The texture of the film and the shaky quality of the picture contribute to this. The most vivid colour on screen comes from the viscous red of blood and meat. Images of eating are savage, animal-like and violent. Riz Ortolani’s orchestral soundtrack is a crucial part of the impact of the film. Haunting and affective, it contrasts jarringly with the violence of the images on the screen, making them paradoxically beautiful in their goriness. What we are shown is a “rough cut of that footage consisting of grainy reels interrupted by numbers and scratches (for enhanced ‘verisimilitude’)” (Jauregui). By using techniques such as “shaky hand-held camera work, deliberately scratched and fogged frames, crash zooms and incorrectly-exposed sequences” (Fenton 77), Deodato achieves maximum visceral effect and exploits audience notions of realism. Of course, another reason that the footage seems real is that some of it is. The animals were actually killed and Deodato includes authentic news footage of human executions. As Gary Rhodes argues, this use of authentic death scenes mixed with those that are faked, place *Cannibal Holocaust* in the sub-genre of mondo films which “combine the real and the unreal into a collective narrative menagerie that proves difficult for audiences to know where the authentic ends and the fiction begins” (5). In their analysis of the mockumentary, Roscoe and Hight comment on the increasing difficulty for the audience to discern truth from fiction, positing “this is a tension which has arguably become more acute in recent years given an increasingly commercial broadcasting environment” (3) and progress in technology that allows for seamless editing. Again, this is crucial in our reading of *Cannibal Holocaust* as a reaction to media frenzy around the Red Brigade’s terrorism; the real and the fake are often side by side and it is almost impossible to tell them apart. Unquestioning belief in and acceptance of the media is no

longer acceptable, resulting in audience uncertainty and tension.

Deodato uses clever technology to subtly play with these tensions and uncertainties. When the crew kill a turtle with a machete (again, this is an actual killing of a live animal and resulted in much of the controversy surrounding the film), the various camera angles and well-timed soundtrack of clashing instruments at the moment of decapitation heighten the shock of the animal's real death. The animal's death throes and the reduction of his body to a gooey mess are soon compared to the staged deaths and mutilation of human bodies. When the jungle guide's leg is chopped off with a machete, the same range of camera angles and sound effects are used. Thus, the hoax is continued and, as Jackson argues, "actual and simulated mutilation of the body are presented through identical stylistic modes in order to equalize their perpetual effect" (Jackson). The film's iconic image of the impaled girl brilliantly captures these arguments. A native girl is impaled on a pole entering her vagina and exiting her mouth as a punishment for being defiled by one of the crew. The footage of the crew's discovery of this horrific site highlights a significant aspect of the discomfort caused by mockumentaries. The crew's reaction is not one of horror or shame for their part in the girl's suffering. That is, it is not one of horror and shame until they remember the camera is rolling. They then assume the "correct" response to such violence. This moment reveals the attitudes of the crew that would have otherwise been cut in the editing room and "points to the immediate nuances of realistic presentation" (Jackson).

Of course, underlying this is the audience's concern that all supposedly true reactions to others' suffering in journalism or documentaries is, or could be, staged. As Roscoe and Hight argue, documentaries and journalism are trusted by audiences and maintain privileged positions because we trust them to present "truthful and honest accounts of the social world" (13-14). We tend to assume footage is authentic to the point of ignoring skilful editing in favour of believing the story. Despite the fact that techniques usually associated with fiction, such as lighting, music and close ups that cue emotional responses and aid identification, are used in journalism and documentaries, the audience chooses to accept their accounts at face value (ibid 17). This, Deodato would have us

believe, is a dangerous practice.

Deodato is not only working within the tradition of mockumentary, he is also building on the body of texts that use cannibalism as their abrasive tool to question imperialism and consumerism. Obviously aware of this tradition, Deodato is referring to William Arens's *Man Eating Myth* and the long history of representing others as cannibals. By using the genre of mockumentary he highlights the ease with which the West believes itself superior to the barbarous cannibals, and then subverts this belief by questioning reality and truth. Boundaries between fact and fiction, civilized and savage, and cannibal and non-cannibal are blurred until the viewers no longer know where they stand. As the film unfolds, anything initially held to be true is overturned and identification is unsettled. The result of the initial unquestioning belief in an easy superiority is a deep and disconcerting uneasiness. Mary Douglas speaks of the need to differentiate in order to maintain a sense of control and order, "ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and purifying transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created" (Douglas 4). Likewise, Marina Warner argues that the fact that we continue to label others cannibal stems from the continuing need for "The centre...to draw outlines to give itself definition. The city has the need of the barbarians to know what it is. The self needs the other to establish a sense of integral identity. If my enemies are like me, how can I go on feeling enmity against them?" (74). These are questions asked by *Cannibal Holocaust*, questions that tend to be forgotten in the focus on the gore.

On the release of *Cannibal Holocaust* the Italian courts and censorship board were outraged and later confiscated the film, although the initial audience reaction was positive. Not merely focused on the taboo of flesh eating, the greater theme of the film is the supposed lack of difference between the civilized and the uncivilized. Slater praises the film for waving an angry fist at the "arbiters of morality and censorship" (108). The original controversy surrounding the film's release was generated by the belief that *Cannibal Holocaust* was an actual snuff film, which was later

disproved in a court case involving bringing the actors believed to have been killed into the courtroom, proving without doubt that the killings were fictitious. It has been said that Deodato will “never live down the legacy of this stunning film” (Fenton 7).

Critics certainly remain split on the merits and demerits of *Cannibal Holocaust*. Supporters of the film such as Harvey Fenton cite it as a visionary work, a serious and well-made social commentary on the modern world. Mark Savage calls it a “unique marriage of beauty and brutality” (106). Lloyd Kaufman describes *Cannibal Holocaust* as the “most prescient film ever made” and praises Deodato for taking horror back down to its most “primal level” (104). Detractors, however, counter with criticisms of the genuine animal slayings, excessive brutality and accuse the film of racism, accusations which find *Cannibal Holocaust* in the midst of controversy to this day; in 2006, *Entertainment Weekly* magazine named *Cannibal Holocaust* the 20th most controversial film of all-time. Critics of *Cannibal Holocaust* have deemed it a disgusting, scandalous, abhorrent, racist and misogynous film. Mikita Brottman claims that contact with such contagious films can lead to confusion or disregard for the distinction between reality and representation (Brottman 1998 150).

At the same time, the theme of cannibalism itself contributes to the vitriolic criticism, especially since cannibalism is about breaking such distinctions. In *Meat, A Natural Symbol* (1992), Nick Fiddes believes part of the nastiness lies in the depiction of humans eating raw flesh. He comments on the video cover of *Cannibal Holocaust*, which featured “savage-looking women tearing with their teeth at raw, supposedly human, flesh – cleverly combining transgression of the cannibalism taboo with the added shock of seeing (female) humans consuming raw meat” (90). From this we can infer that the raw state of the human flesh adds to the shock factor! Claude Levi-Strauss famously made the distinction between the raw and the cooked and the savage and civilised. Indeed, the very title places the film firmly in the realm of horror by juxtaposing “anthropophagy with mass genocide”. Furthermore, the title is ambiguous in that it is unclear whether it refers to the “climactic slaughters of the camera crew or the murderous exploitation of the jungle natives by the film’s representatives of ‘civilization’” (Jackson).

Deodato is, I believe, aware of the controversy his film stirs up. The idea of censorship is dealt with in the film when the chief television executive wants to burn the found material. He recognises the extent of the crew's atrocities and fears the consequences of revealing this scandalous visual document to the public. He not only wants to censor parts of it, but to obliterate it completely. Jackson posits the film veers between "critical distancing and unashamed prurience," while exploiting extreme imagery, the film simultaneously provides a commentary on "processes of production and dissemination" (Jackson). Again, this raises discomfort in the viewer as to what material we are permitted to view in the media every day. There is a sense that a few in power can control public opinion and reaction by feeding them cleaned up versions of reality or by obliterating distasteful or dangerous versions of that reality.

Carolina Jauregui believes the critics of *Cannibal Holocaust* are perhaps limited by their own unconscious projections regarding colonial guilt that the film reflects back at them:

The critics' reaction to the film has to do with the violent tension between the 'developed' West and an 'undeveloped' non-West . . . The non-Western societies the imperialist West had encountered were often tribal, deemed as 'primitive', 'savage', and certainly exotic. Structuralist anthropology implies that these 'primitive' societies are signs of a past, the past of all humanity. In this film's case, if the anthropophagy recalls our distant past, the violence recalls a not-so-distant past that post-colonial guilt is all-too ready to erase.

I believe Jauregui is accurate in her analysis of the film but not in the critics' reactions to it. The film does raise questions of post-colonial guilt. A critique of the methods of portraying this guilt does not, however, erase or deny it. The viewer is initially lured into identifying with the Westerners and believing their story. The film's presentation of the monster is consistently ambivalent. This is true of revisions and rereadings in the 1970s, when the likes of Chinua Achebe accused Joseph Conrad of being racist and there were attempts to understand the deeper implications of the imperial process. The film opens with aerial shots of the Amazon. The camera then spans the concrete jungle

of New York skyscrapers as a reporter comments on the missing crew in the “inhospitable jungle,” drawing obvious parallels between the “West and rest,” and raising the theme of the clash of cultures between First and Third world countries. From the opening, the film constantly and explicitly juxtaposes images of American modernity with Amazonian savagery. Jones points out the Darwinian principle at work in the film, where we move from images of animal eating animal, animal eating man, human eating animal, man eating man (natives), and finally to man eating man (Westerners). Jones argues that the “beauty” of the violence and the parallels between the jungles of New York and the Amazon mendaciously argue for a relativistic view of human barbarism (46).

Cannibal Holocaust can certainly be viewed as a social commentary on various aspects of modern civilization. A common interpretation of *Cannibal Holocaust* is that the film was made to critique modern society, comparing “civilized” Western society to that of the “cannibals.” It is the corruption and brutality of the West that causes the chain of horrific events in the jungle. Jackson makes reference to Robin Wood’s argument that the monster often confronts the bourgeois fear of repressed social and sexual impulses. However, he posits this film overturns that idea by having its “middle class representatives visiting many of the film’s horrors upon a global underclass” (Jackson). The crew is initially presented as a group of daring young individuals willing to do anything in order to film a documentary about the Green Inferno. The film shows Westerners as untrustworthy capitalists, portraying “reality” as they see fit and their careless behaviour leads to anthropophagous revenge. After burning a village to make good footage, the crew rape a native girl, knowing that she will be killed for being defiled. In modern society, the continuing obsession with the idea of difference, the socially accepted norm pitted against the outsider, results in a continuing need to categorise, label and construct binaries of opposition. Just as with the colonial paranoia of the Other, the easiest and most basic way of doing this is through differentiating eating habits, through stating the accepted norms of edible in opposition to the inedible, monstrous or repulsive. However, in *Cannibal Holocaust* these differences are blurred and this is partly why we find the film so disturbing.

Ultimately the film asks who the real savages are. Using the taboo of cannibalism as the obvious reference point of the ultimate monster, and calling on the viewer's knowledge of this, Deodato then upsets this easy binary of cannibal equals savage, non-cannibal equals civilised. The tribal laws are not held up as an example of some idyll of untouched beauty. Rather they are savage, patriarchal, cannibalistic and violent. However, the crew's sexual perversions, utter lack of care for others, self-serving rapacity is equally savage. Thus, in *Cannibal Holocaust*, the Other is both outside and within. The monstrous acts of the crew in their desire to get their footage at all costs suggests Western progress is achieved through exploitation, that consumption of other's resources is tantamount to rape and annihilation.

All of this gory footage is viewed by the broadcasters and Monroe, and, at the same time, the audience watches. At one point, after watching the unethical footage, the broadcasting executive tells the professor that, "the more we rape their [the audience's] senses, the happier they are." Deodato is suggesting that the audience wants to be shocked, frightened, and subjected to sensory assault, and this is what he is doing with his movie. The camera crew anticipate audience disgust with mockery. They are therefore in "direct contact with spectatorial reaction, implicating both performer and viewer in the very processes of environmental and bodily exploitation" (Jackson). The desire for sensationalism is seriously flawed in Deodato's view. The audience's own barbaric sense of taste is what spurs the crew to "create" sensational footage. The audience continues to swallow the film and its fiction, no longer knowing what is genuine and what is fake. This "rape of the senses" is part of what the film satirizes. Deodato avers Arens's claim that we all too easily believe what we are told/shown when it is shocking, especially in relation to cannibalism. Missionaries and anthropologists are branded together in the film as being made of "special stuff" and willing to invent "hellholes like this" if they did not exist. And in a way they do invent them. The hellhole only exists after their interference.

As the anthropologist Professor Monroe asks in the film's final sequence, "Who is the real cannibal?" We can see this as a half-hearted humanist gesture or an attempt to show an awareness of

the confused trickery of the film. Is the cannibal the viewer who has just ingested the film? Is it the documentary film makers of the “Green Inferno?” Is it the director himself who has just made us watch it? These very questions destabilise our notions of fact and fiction. The audience devours the idea of cannibalism and through the act of watching the horrors of *Cannibal Holocaust* unfold, the audience in turn become cannibals of the visual sort. In Jacques Lacan’s Mirror Stage, the child looks into the mirror and sees not itself but another, this other who alienates it from itself. In a similar way, the film screen makes the audience define itself either as animal slaughtering rapists who burn villages for fame (the Westerners), or as man-eating, vengeful, primitives (the Amazonians). Perhaps they identify themselves simply as spectators who become uncomfortably aware of a voyeuristic and visually cannibalistic condition. Freud explains that things that are shunned frighten us because they manifest, in a terrifying or unfamiliar form, those parts of ourselves we are afraid to acknowledge: our repressed appetites, libidinal instincts, a fascination with flesh and death (14). The film succeeds in depicting modern “civilized” society as inherently savage and as brutal as undeveloped tribal cultures.

While *Cannibal Holocaust* seeks to critique an industry that sells images of pain for consumer interest and the voracious appetite in the media for evermore shocking stories, it becomes itself part of the cycle of consumption. While the film questions the relationship between “ethics, aesthetics, and profit” (Jones 46), it is also guilty of some of the excesses it condemns. Rather than refute cannibalism as a racist myth the film uses real tribe names to create a story which depicts these tribes as warring, murderous and cannibalistic. By referring to this story as partly true, and making financial gain from it, *Cannibal Holocaust* achieves what its protagonists set out to do: make a film about cannibal savages and sell it to a gullible, insatiable Western audience.

In the film, Monroe states the footage is offensive, dishonest and above all inhuman, offering an inadvertently powerful critique of *Cannibal Holocaust*. Deodato himself counters, saying “we should have left no doubt in the minds of the spectators about the moral stance of this film. They make me laugh, some of the critiques against me, when they speak of the ‘gratuitous

pleasure' of certain scenes" (qtd. in Jones 47). Deodato's response echoes that of the producers in his film; the audience enjoy the rape of their senses offered by such grisly material. The aesthetic of the film dwells on images of violence in a kind of horror-porn. It seems to me that *Cannibal Holocaust* falls into some of its own traps in its critique and capitulation. It appears to have collapsed ideological structure. Crucially, however, I believe it is fully aware of this. Jackson too, argues the film is "fully cognizant of its visual and moral transgressions, flaunting its ethical indiscretions in order to confront both liberal and conservative sensibilities simultaneously" (Jackson).

By 1980 the cannibal films were slowly being pushed aside by zombie films inspired by George Romero's success with *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). The market reached saturation point when, with the video revolution of the 1980s, cheap horror movies were ideal for a young audience. Indeed, as Bracken points out, "after *Cannibal Ferox* what's left to say?". For now, it suffices to say that despite their criticism, the Italian cannibal films mark a crucial change in the figuring of the cannibal in popular culture. Made in times of postcolonial turmoil, questions about the West's colonial guilt, appetite for the world's resources, and tendency to exploit others began to be asked. With these questions being asked the cannibal began to move.

However, it seems the question of the role of extreme violence in our media continues to raise questions and divide critics and audiences alike. The speed and range of dissemination of information, images, footage and a host of viewers' comments is at such a high level, it seems censors, lawmakers and moral commentators struggle to keep up. In recent months, a prank call by an Australian radio station to a London hospital in an attempt to garner information about Kate Middleton's pregnancy resulted in the suicide of the nurse who took the call. Immediate detractors called for the pranksters to swing. Someone, an easy target, must be held accountable, blamed, punished accordingly, and we can all continue with our lives unaffected and guilt free. Instead, perhaps, the audience demands for details of celebrities' private lives, including accounts of morning sickness, needs to be examined. There is a culture of reality television, prank shows,

hidden cameras that puts the eye of the camera into every crevice of life. The more embarrassing or perverted the better. Cyber bullying relishes found footage of sexual slip ups, private confessions, and inner turmoil. We now have the ability and technology, should we desire, to watch everyone doing everything. Deodato's film asked over thirty years ago for the audience to be more responsible in its demands, and the media to be more responsible in its dissemination of "the truth." There are tangible consequences on the subject should we continue to poke the lens into every sphere. The business of media means there is a great financial lure to have the biggest scoop, the topless photo, the sex tape, the suicide caught on film. Again, Deodato warned of the ease with which we believe all that is presented to us in the media. Dining on others' pain, privacy, emotions and secrets surely makes us, the audience, the true cannibals.

Not only does *Cannibal Holocaust* raise doubts about the voyeurism of the audience and the ethics of the entertainers, it also reminds us of the ease with which we find "justifiable" reasons to trespass and steal from others' lands. Deodato's film came at a time of postcolonial questioning. In the political turmoil of the 1960s, '70s and '80s the Vietnam War lingered on, Pol Pot came to power in Cambodia, Nixon became the first U.S. President to resign, terrorism reigned in the Middle East, and civil war reigned in Africa. In the postcolonial era there was a question of the merits of decolonisation as dictators, famines, and wars seemed to suggest the previous colonies really were as savage as had been imagined in the cannibal fictions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Watching the film now, some 30 years after its release, leads one to wonder if anything has really changed. Contemporary imperial projects are excused on the grounds of bringing democracy, ousting dictators, ending massacres, while also lining the pockets of the liberators, installing chosen leaders, arming rebels, and killing innocent people. Furthermore, the media's role in perpetuating myths is crucial in public support for these contemporary imperial projects. Indeed, the old trope of cannibalism refuses to go away as it again is used as the easiest go-to-example of savagery and complete lack of law and order; recently the footage of a Syrian rebel cutting out and eating the heart of an enemy flooded the media. *Cannibal Holocaust* showed

the drastic consequences of interference from self-serving Westerners in tribal Amazonia and asked the viewer who the real savages were. Questions that remain pertinent today.

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You Are Who You Eat: Cannibalism As A Symbol Of Family Breakdown In The Horror Film



Peter Cullen

The family dinner is one of the most potent symbols of 1950s family life. The image of a nuclear family sitting down at the table to consume a meal, prepared by the mother and paid for by the father, reflects the ideal of family life: a moment of tranquility where everyone could gather and spend time, as the larger world continued to shift and change. Even as the veneer of the civil society began to fall away in the wake of the Vietnam War, the idealized image of the family dinner remained a fixture of advertising and popular culture. For filmmakers hoping to shock their audiences, the concept of the distorted or perverted family unit was one well-trod. From George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), to Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), the idea of the family meal played an important role in demonstrating the darkness lurking just beneath the surface of a seemingly idyllic society.

The evolution of these films charts the changes in the culture; horror films in particular reflect the fears held by the larger society, calling up the darkness (or the fear thereof) that lurks within the hearts of mankind. The four films examined here played an important role in both reflecting the fears of social collapse and paving the way for the further horrors to come, with the family meal symbolizing

for their filmmakers a potent symbol both universal and mundane. Audiences could understand what was occurring onscreen in reference to their own experiences, even if the lens of the camera often transmuted it into something considerably more terrifying. In these films, food (and specifically dinner) is the binding thread that holds the family together, an element that is featured in each of these films, and one that any audience can relate to.

I. Methodology

The films I will be examining are *Blood Feast* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1962), *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), and *The Hills Have Eyes*. These films came out of a period of great social upheaval, and represented a marked shift in how the cinema began to reflect the social disorder that began to spill out into the streets as the relative calm and conservatism of the 1950s gave way to potent political movements, violence both domestic and abroad, and the splintering of many of the ideals held concerning family (for instance, the divorce rate alone nearly tripled during the years covered here).

While the 1950s certainly had its share of violence and uncertainty (threats of nuclear annihilation, the Korean War, the Montgomery Bus Boycotts), the 1960s proved even more turbulent (the Cuban Missile Crisis, the escalation in Vietnam, the beginning of second-wave feminism, the full swing of the Civil Rights Movement, myriad riots and assassinations), and these filmmakers tapped into a particular zeitgeist in the moment. Horror films often reflect the fears of the populace at large (consider the atomic-infused giant monsters of the 1950's), and these films continued that trend. These films each feature at least one dysfunctional family, a dinner scene, and the act of cannibalism. Horror is an effective way to comment on current events without directly referencing them, and these filmmakers saw that families were at the center of the burgeoning conflicts.

For the purposes of the baseline family in this discussion, we will draw from the predominant pop culture vision of the nuclear family, the sort that grew out of television series like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It To Beaver*. While these were not the only versions of the family unit circa 1950 (*My*

Three Sons and *The Andy Griffith Show* both featured single fathers, and are no less iconic), they give us some understanding of the mindset that existed within the society at large. In its simplest form, the family features a patriarch who holds most of the decision-making power, and whose role it is to provide the basic resources of survival for his family. The matriarch's role is to transform these raw materials into something better suited to the family, and to act as the liaison to friends and neighbors. What children invariably exist are called upon to follow their parents commands and carry on the family line. This may seem overly simplistic, but it is a trope that the filmmakers make a target of, and provides a useful window into their mindsets.

It should be noted that these are not the only cannibal films of the period. Even the term “Cannibal Film” tends to refer to a horror sub-genre of faux-documentary Italian Mondo cinema largely active in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For our purposes, we will be focusing on the shifts within the American horror genre, and how it relates to the social upheaval that the filmmakers were direct witnesses to. The usefulness of food in this equation is summed up well by Carole Counihan: “food functions effectively as a system because everywhere human beings organize their foodways into an ordered system parallel to other cultural systems and infuse them with meaning” (20). What and how we eat helps us understand how a given society operates, and in these films it provides a keen look into the minds of the creators. By looking to these cannibal feasts, we can begin to understand what the directors were trying to communicate.

Examinations of meals can impart a large measure of anthropological information to those seeking to understand a culture. The ingredients, preparation, consumption, and even atmosphere can provide important clues: material artifacts can tell us a great deal of the relative technology and domestication efforts of a given area, social traditions can show us how the gathered related to food, family, the larger society, and even strangers, and the food and preparations thereof can explain much of the role of gender and age within the group. Mary Douglas explains, “the meaning of a meal is found in a system of repeated analogies. Each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals; each

meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image” (69). The dinner is the thing in which we'll find the meaning of the film.

For the films discussed here, we generally only have one onscreen meal from which to decipher possible meanings, though there are often clues as to the deeper significance of the event. The nature of the food, and the reasoning behind its consumption, can explain much about the characters within the film, as well as the wider culture that gave birth to the notions contained in these films. Using a framework akin to Douglas, we can understand the social mores at play in the films more easily, and understand the underlying messages better. As Douglas elaborates: “if food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries.” (69). While Douglas' framework provides a lens for examining the meal itself, it is important to consider another key aspect of how these horror films operate.

From Douglas, we can create a framework suited to our needs, examining the key components of the meal: the acquisition of the ingredients (in this case, with special attention to how the cannibals treat their victims), the labor engaged in crafting the meal (how much, or little, effort goes into cooking the meat), the roles played by the diners (both the cannibals themselves and their occasional guests), and the act of consumption itself (what rituals the groups engage in). There are certainly other elements that could be considered, but these four pieces explain effectively how the meals are portrayed on screen, and what aspects the filmmakers draw attention to. The degree to which the actions are ritualized is telling with regard to the twisted vision the filmmakers are bringing forth, and provides some clue to the meaning of the images on the screen.

Beyond the meal itself, attention must be paid to the nature of the family units within these films, and how the directors were commenting on the changes. The filmmakers are examining the problems just then bubbling to the surface, problems that had been lurking for some time longer. Robin Wood quotes Wes Craven, summing up the importance of family in these horror films: “The

family is the best microcosm to work with. If you go much beyond that you're getting away from a lot of the roots of our own primeval feelings...there was an enormous amount of secrecy in the general commerce of our getting along with each other. Certain things were not mentioned. A lot of things were not spoken of or talked about . . . as I got older, I began to see we as a nation were doing the same thing” (Wood 119). This feeling persists throughout the films, using the family as a focal point to examine the troubles facing society at large. The families are not always the protagonists, notably in the later films (Craven's work emphasizes the dark side of families), but they provide a crucial point in the examination of the dinners within these films.

The filmmakers are not taking a direct page from Douglas' book; rather, they work to subvert the expectations of the audience concerning how a family is *supposed* to act and *supposed* to eat dinner, working from the pop cultural presumptions of a nuclear family's dinner. The filmmakers make use of Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, formulated in his 1919 essay titled *The Uncanny*. Freud defines it as follows: “It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening — to what arouses dread and horror...the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense...Yet we may expect that a special core of feeling is present which justifies the use of a special conceptual term” (23). The uncanny thus refers to the idea of something being familiar, and yet foreign, and thus inspiring some degree of psychological horror. Within the context of the films examined here, each of the meals depicted is an uncanny event, a very intentional, warped recreation of the conventional family dinner.

Freud draws a direct connection between death and feelings of the uncanny, recognizing the power that old superstitions still hold, the same powers filmmakers call upon for their scary movies: “many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts . . . There is scarcely any other matter, however, upon which our thoughts and feelings have changed so little since the very earliest times, and in which discarded forms have been so completely preserved under a thin disguise, as our relation to death” (152). The breakdown and failure of the traditional family unit during the tumultuous years of the

1960s and 1970s might well be viewed as uncanny by observers within the families themselves. This was not lost on these filmmakers, who had grown up in the post-war years and witnessed the false normalcy of the society at large. Thus, a tool for examining how this conflict disrupts the traditional family system is brought forth.

It should be said that there are many that would argue that Freudian thought as a form of critical examination is entirely debunked, and has little use to the modern scholar. Robin Wood posits that it is a political issue, rooted in the politics of the 1980s, an artificial turn of events that has left Freud (unfairly) out of style within academia, especially in the context of horror scholarship (xiv-xv). Wood reckons that Freud's work still has a role to play in the examination of horror cinema. Stephen Jay Schneider goes a step further, finding the history of Freudian thought inexorably intertwined with the traditions of Gothic horror, part of the tradition that the films discussed here arose out of (7-9). It should be noted that the filmmakers discussed here were all well-educated, to the point that three out of the four worked as college professors (each in the humanities) before taking up filmmaking. Moreover, in the course of their educations, and in their jobs, they would have encountered Freud in a theoretical context.

Freud was at the height of his powers in the halls of academia at this point, particularly in the disciplines in which they worked; the only exception is George Romero, who did receive a university education, though pursued filmmaking in a more direct fashion. In the spirit of keeping things concise, I will focus largely to the role of the uncanny in these films. There is a great deal of psychoanalytical horror theory, but the main purpose here is a foodways examination of dinner sequences in a set of horror films, filtered through the concept of the uncanny, as a commentary on the changing American society circa 1962 to 1977. The meals presented here, in ingredients, preparation, and consumption, follow a warped sense of form: they are at once familiar and alien to the viewer, following a universal code that is twisted by the horror of the situation.

It should also be noted that gender, something of great importance in horror films, plays a

strange role within the ideal of the meal within the films discussed here. There is a pervasive cultural presumption of cooking and feeding the family as a woman's work. Marjorie L. DeVault explains, "the claim that feeding work is gendered refers to a continuing pattern in the allocation of work: the fact that women typically do most of the work, and usually do its most important parts . . . through this ongoing process, activities such as feeding . . . come to seem like 'natural' expressions of gender" (117-118). Women in society at large (particularly during the era in which these horror films were made) were seen as the preparers of food, casting the situations that occur in the films in an interesting light. The villains of these films are predominantly male, contributing further to the deviance of "civilized" behavior and providing further examples of the uncanny in effect.

I will examine the concept of gender roles in these films, particularly among the predominantly male antagonists, under the presumption of the basic gender roles as understood in this period: the patriarch as the provider, the matriarch as the preparer, and the child as consumers (though each film will subvert the paradigm in their own ways). With the objective of keeping this focused on the uncanny meals within these films, I will generally avoid a larger discussion of gender in horror films. This has been covered more extensively by Carol Clover (*Men, Women, And Chainsaws*) and Barbara Creed (*The Monstrous-Feminine*), among others.

My analysis will emphasize a particular meal scene in each film, though I will make note of the larger action of the film and the imagery utilized: the climatic kitchen-set attempted-sacrifice in *Blood Feast*, the events in the cellar involving the Cooper family in *Night of the Living Dead*, the unhinged dinner sequence in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and the cannibal clan's campfire supper in *The Hills Have Eyes*. These scenes hammer home the conflicts that were playing out far away from the movie screens of America, behind closed doors in homes all across the nation. The family dinner, the epitome of the traditionalist idealism of American culture, is herein mocked, parodied, and torn asunder, the social and generational conflicts starkly capturing the upheavals that the filmmakers found themselves witness to. The use of the uncanny in these scenes (and, indeed, throughout the films discussed here)

helped to mask the subversive message posited within these films, while at the same moment commenting on the collapse of the traditional American family unit.

In reflecting what they saw as the typical American family through a warped lens of violence, the filmmakers simply added another layer of the uncanny to generate unease in their audience. It should be recognized that these films communicated with different audiences in different ways. While the average movie-going public might avoid the films or, at least, not admit to seeing them, others might gleefully attend for Grand Guginol spectacle. Some still smaller minority might recognize the deeper significance of the work and the subtle messages within. Within Douglas' framework, we can examine other factors that went into the particular recipes of horror presented by these films. Combined with the concept of the uncanny and a basic conception of what a family is "supposed" to look like, we can conceive a framework for examining the films and their respective dinner scenes.

The key is the portrayal of the family units and the relationships within these groups, specifically what roles the members are called upon to play. In these cases, the roles they undertake are often uncanny reflections of what "should" be, and provide a useful insight into the meal. From there, attention should be paid to how the raw materials of the meal are treated, and how the preparation unfolds, which provides an understanding of how each family survives and sees their role in society. The dinner scene itself contains considerable information as well, as the diners take on roles within the proceedings that might reinforce or subvert their everyday roles. Finally, the significance of the food itself should be noted, whether it acts as a symbol, serves as simple sustenance, or if it falls somewhere in the middle.

II. "A weird and ancient rite horrendously brought to life!"

The harbinger of the horror revolution was 1962's *Blood Feast*, directed by Herschell Gordon Lewis. The film was a low budget chiller, independently produced and released to drive-in cinemas primarily in the South. Lewis himself was an ad man and former English professor who had fallen into film-making after directing a series of television advertisements, joining in the wave of early nudist

films, before turning his hand to horror. Lewis had the advantage in that the market for low-budget, independent horror had been as yet untapped, with the rise of independently-owned drive-in theaters offering a prime area for new genres of cinema.

Lacking much in terms of budget, Lewis relied on gore in generous, colorful quantities, and as if by accident sparked a revolution. Of his work, Lewis himself is purported to have referred to his film as “a Walt Whitman poem – it's no good, but it's the first of its type and therefore deserves a certain position” (qtd. In Newman 17). Lewis's film is a key stepping stone in what will unfold, and its elements indicate the ways in which the genre at large will be shaped. *Blood Feast* is a significant milepost in the genesis of the genre, and has merit for examination within the context of the uncanny family dinner.

The plot concerns a caterer named Fuad Ramses (Mal Arnold), a murderous worshiper of the Egyptian goddess Ishtar. He is contracted to cater a wedding by the mother of the bride, Mrs. Fremont (Lyn Bolton). He then resolves to assemble a “Pharaoh's Feast” in order to resurrect his goddess Ishtar, the final piece being the sacrifice of the bride, Suzette (Connie Mason). This involves brutally murdering and dismembering young women, and combining their body parts to create horrifying dishes, in keeping with the ancient traditions, as explained by a lecturer during the film. The film jumps from gory scenes of violence to awkward exposition, as the police bumble and meander before finally uncovering the truth. Arriving in the nick of time (or slightly thereafter), they chase Ramses into the back of a garbage truck, where he is crushed to death.

The film is well-noted for its lurid, gory death scenes, as the villainous Ramses preys on various nubile young women, but there is an aspect that often goes unremarked upon. The impetus for much of the action revolves around his preparation of a horrific feast, nominally for his goddess. The feast is, however, prepared at the behest of the mother, who is marrying off her daughter to a police detective. Food, albeit gory bits of human flesh, is the motive of Ramses's crime, in service to his own mother figure, the gold statue of the goddess Ishtar, and much of the action revolves around his preparation of

the gory feast.

Blood Feast devotes a considerable amount of its run-time to the crafting of the meal, more than the other films discussed. Ramses's efforts are, in this case, literally ritual, as they are necessary steps in his dark rites, and we gain some understanding of the meaning behind his work. Ramses's takes specific organs from his victims, carefully chosen and surgically removed, combining the roles of the astute housewife, who would contemplate the best cut of meat available, and the butcher, who must work to preserve the specific cuts. He works efficiently, and seems to regard his work as an honor for the young women who are horribly murdered, though we never get much of a sense of why he targets these women beyond simple opportunity.

Ramses, within the "dinner," subsumes the role of both the provider of the food and the preparer of it, becoming the father and the mother within the context of the meal. He takes on the role of the parent for the Fremont bride, and is allowed to do so because of the void left by the inattentive mother and absent father (Mr. Fremont is never seen nor mentioned). Lewis recognizes how fragile the basic family structure is, and how much trust is placed in others in the modern society. Mrs. Fremont never asks to see Ramses's catering license, nor for any business references, or even about the flavor of his specialized cuisine. The threat here is corruption being allowed to creep into the hearth, with Ramses becoming an uncanny mother. Lewis indicates that the mother not preparing her daughter's feast herself, as would be tradition, causes events to go awry.

The "feast" does seem to have a recognizable, if grotesque, structure, and we can draw relation between Ramses's ritualistic feast and the intended wedding dinner. The preparation of the feast is highly ritualized, as if following a recipe, creating a sense of recognition within the horror. We see Ramses's careful gathering of choice cuts of meat from unsuspecting women, including "tenderizing" one young woman with a vicious whip. On a basic level, this is no different than the work that goes into providing for a meal, creating a feeling of the uncanny. Lewis offers up to his audience an uncanny vision of a whole wedding feast, complete with exotic cuts of meat. It is no accident that Ramses's

kitchen resembles a medieval torture chamber crossed with an industrial kitchen, creating a conception of what should not be.

It is the penultimate scene that features the closest representation to an actual dinner, though no human flesh is actually consumed. Ramses attempts to complete his ritual at the party, to sacrifice the bride-to-be in her mother's kitchen, upon her mother's counter. Her mother, in refusing to carry out her traditional duties in preparing a wedding feast for her daughter, has allowed a corrupted brute into her home, where he intends to desecrate the holy altar of the kitchen counter. In this moment, Suzette is reduced to the role of food itself, but this in turn marks Ramses's downfall as the surrogate mother.

It is the timely entrance of Suzette's true mother that prevents the terrible act from reaching its conclusion, as she returns to her proper place as a guardian of the household. Her entrance is driven by the grumblings of the guests that they are hungry; she is, after all, still expected to feed her guests, but is not apt to do it herself. Lewis draws attention to the mother's dereliction of her duties when, rather than inquiring further into the revelation that Ramses nearly slew her daughter, she instead nonchalantly states "Oh dear, the guests will have to have hamburgers for dinner tonight." Her concern is not for the murderer who just ran out the back door, nor for her daughter's frazzled state, but for the meal to be delivered to her guests, once more taking her "proper" place in the household.

It is unlikely that Lewis set out to create a new wave of horror, yet his gory film would ignite a revolution. "When *Blood Feast* opened at that lone drive-in theater in Peoria," Randy Palmer writes, "cinema history was made. Nobody knew that yet . . . *Blood Feast* trickled rivulets of blood that would swell into a torrent a decade later, when other filmmakers began telling their own gory stories" (60). It proved that an audience would be willing to stomach scenes of intense gore, and thus laid the groundwork of the cannibal as a figure of danger to the modern, suburban family. Noted cult film commentator John Bloom (writing under a pen name as Joe Bob Briggs) explains "*Blood Feast* became the first real find in what I call pop-culture archeology . . . there were young devotees who regarded the exploitation film not as pure entertainment, but as a cultural artifact that was celebrated . . . as an

assault on the senses that outrages the middle class and as a part of a subculture that only initiates know about” (87).

While Lewis might have received little recognition for the deeper subtext of his film, he opened the door for others to follow, and for horror films to take on a nature all their own. This film introduced a generation of young filmmakers to what could be done on film, and laid the seeds for what was to come, though it would not remain as ingrained within the consciousnesses of the movie-going public. Lewis would effectively retire from filmmaking in the early 1970s to pursue a lucrative career in copy-writing, just as a new generation of young horror filmmakers were taking up his bloody banner. With this film, the cracks begin show in the facade of American home life, fissures that will be rent open in the years to follow, with horror filmmakers there to document the whole ordeal in gory, colorful detail. Once even the slightest bit of corruption is allowed in, it becomes impossible to be truly rid of, after all.

III. “They keep coming back with a bloodthirsty lust for human flesh!”

1968's *Night of the Living Dead*, directed by George Romero, would prove one of the most pivotal horror films of all time, utterly changing the landscape following it. Romero was even more inexperienced than Lewis when it came to filmmaking, as he had only directed commercials. However, he had a natural talent and style, and a strong stable of actors to draw from. It should be noted that, in contrast to the higher education backgrounds of the other directors discussed here, Romero had pursued a career in filmmaking throughout college, and had nearly a decade of experience in the field before *Night*. Romero drew inspiration from Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* and various B-movies of the day, and the script went through a number of drafts before arriving at its somber, minimalist final form.

The film was in many ways a commentary on the social breakdown occurring in the 1960's, with the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War both coming into full swing (the Civil Rights imagery being particularly stark in the film's finale). Romero takes care not to directly reference these events, but there are obvious links between those upheavals and the film itself, particularly in terms of the relationships portrayed within the film. Romero's film is notable for a number of reasons, not the

least of which is creating the modern conception of the zombie, a term which the film never actually uses, and it was the film that would bring a new golden age of horror into full swing. It laid the groundwork for horror films to be more than simply the sum of their parts and take on deeper meanings.

The film follows a group of disparate strangers taking refuge in an anonymous farmhouse, as the dead rise to become voracious cannibals, intent on consuming the survivors. The cast is populated by simple archetypes: the teenage couple (Keith Waine and Judith Ridley), the calm and collected leader Ben (Duane Jones, who happens to be African-American, though this is never directly referenced), the shell-shocked survivor Barbra (Judith O'Dea), and a seemingly average family unit: father Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman), mother Helen Cooper (Marilyn Eastman), and daughter Karen (Kyra Schon). This family figures most directly into the conception of the family dinner here, as Karen is suffering a fever that will soon make her a member of a different sort of family. Just as society breaks down around them, so too does their own cell.

Eventually, chaos breaks loose, with Ben and Harry struggling over the only gun while the ghouls break through the boarded over doors and windows. When Harry, shot in the scuffle, retreats into the basement after he fails to seize control of the situation, he is met by his now mobile daughter, who falls upon him in a consuming frenzy. Shortly thereafter, Helen arrives to discover her daughter feasting upon her husband's corpse, and is dispatched by a trowel. Ben finally forces his way downstairs, dispatching each of the family of ghouls in turn, but the damage is done, and the film ends on a bleak note when Ben is apparently mistaken for a ghoul and shot in the head by the roving militiamen of rural Pennsylvania.

The most obvious family unit here is the Coopers, who in another film might easily have served as the protagonists (*The Hills Have Eyes* focuses on a markedly similar, if extended, family). Their dynamic is fairly straightforward: Harry is the leader and decider, Helen is the comforter and diplomat, and the dying Karen's place is to be cared for by her parents. Harry is cautious and conservative (even

initially unwilling to open the door when Barbra and Ben arrive upstairs), protective of his family and aggressive, particularly toward Ben. Helen tries to act as a cooler head (though is generally ignored by Harry), and takes on the role of the comforter, calming down the hysterical Barbra, as well as generally trying to smooth out the disagreements that occur. There is conflict within this family unit, as when Helen stays upstairs after Harry is shot rather than tending to her husband's needs. She thus shows she has more power than the others might have recognized, but ultimately it doesn't make much difference.

The sequence in the basement illustrates the disintegration of the family unit, and is the most direct portrayal of a family dinner within the film. While it is not a family dinner in the mode of the other films discussed here, lacking any obvious preparation of the meal or any iota of ritualized behavior, this is still an important portrait of the family unit in decay (featuring the child eating her parents). The scene is shot largely in shadows, a counterpoint to the well-lit interiors of the farmhouse, with the murk of the basement indicating the threat that lurks there.

Harry, already wounded from the upstairs scuffle, stumbles downstairs, only to be finished off by his now-reanimated daughter. The child then proceeds to feast on his corpse, before being interrupted by the arrival of her mother. Tony Williams explains what follows: "Helen moves to the basement to find Karen devouring her late husband. Instead of rationally re-evaluating the changed situation, she allows mother-love to dominate her feelings and falls victim to her daughter" (30). Karen undoes any conceptions of a traditional power structure in murdering both of her parents; in this uncanny new world, she provides and prepares her own dinner, though there is little ritual in her efforts. Romero uses shadows to convey the breakdown of the family unit; the undead make no distinction between family, age, or previous association, existing solely to consume the living.

The parents are dead by their daughter's hand, and are in turn shot by Ben as they reanimate. The family unit thus becomes the living dead themselves, despite the total lack of culture and higher cognition. There is something to be said for the zombies: they tend to travel in herds, gather where others do, don't compete for food sources, and have done away with any distinctions of race, class,

gender, and so on. They have achieved a sort of horrible, perfectly egalitarian society, so far as society can be presumed to exist within their reanimated minds. They are not completely mindless, showing fear of fire and awareness of food in the farmhouse; Romero explores these concepts in his later films, including *Day of the Dead* and *Land of the Dead*, expanding considerably on what it means to be zombie. Here, they are single-minded in their purpose: to consume. Even with the loss of everything else that made them human, they hold on to the need for food, and thus render it more important than the rest of their existence. The undead welcome all into this makeshift family, and all will be treated equally.

This is a dinner scene stripped down to its component parts: the only stab at meal preparation is the murder by trowel of Helen, which mimics a child's attempt at slicing up the meat. The parents aren't even allowed to partake in the eating, as the trio are killed by Ben shortly after reanimation, and are thus denied a "proper" family dinner. This is the new order: not simply do the children haphazardly replace the role of the parents, but there is a total collapse of the familial structure. The structure of the meal is almost entirely absent here: even the savage cannibals of *Hills* still cook their food, while the ghouls of *Night* only care about consuming. There are no rules, no structure, only the basest spark of human instinct remaining in this meal. Romero demonstrates how completely society has broken down by showing us the dissolution of the family unit amid a twisted meal in a darkened basement.

There is another, less obvious family unit in play here: the dead themselves. The walking dead become the new shape of humanity, bringing with them a new code of eating and simplifying their natures to a single purpose: to eat. The ghouls possess mindless hunger, driven only by faint instinct to dine upon the living (for reasons not made entirely clear, they travel in groups, making them far more of a threat than they would otherwise be). Despite their mindlessness, there is a faint glimmer of a code within their actions: the horde works together to acquire food, and every one of them can enjoy the meal. Harry's car was overturned earlier, and he explains the ghouls move in groups; "there's not going to be five, or even ten! There's going to be twenty, thirty, maybe a hundred of those things, and as soon as they find out we're here, this place'll be crawling with them!" It is the very presence of the survivors

that draws the dead to the house, much like a dinner bell, creating a great communal cannibalistic feast. Of all the horror movie cannibals, they are the most uncanny: they are us in every respect, save for their state of death, and we will become them whether we'd like to or not.

The undead are thus rendered more horrifying, as doppelgangers to erstwhile heroes, engaging in entirely aberrant, yet still familiar activity. We recognize how the ghouls function (a simple mob mentality based around the acquisition of food), but the traditional bonds of family have been replaced by this new brotherhood of being undead. Arguments have been made that the humans in the house (and the redneck posse) are the real monsters herein. Tony Williams writes, “[the characters] find themselves suddenly removed from their familiar surroundings and customary patterns of behaviour and . . . find themselves reproducing the behaviour of their assailants on a verbal level by attempting to dominate (or consume) their conveniently designated opponents” (23). They simply seek to consume the living in the most efficient and simple manner possible. It is notable that roboticist Masahiro Mori includes the living dead (zombie) at the bottom of the uncanny valley in his 1970 article on the topic, his implication being that by the thing looking distinctly human *and* mobile, it unnerves humans to a considerable degree (33-35).

This theme will be repeated, particularly in *The Hills Have Eyes*, albeit in a somewhat different fashion. As Freud explains in his definition of the uncanny: “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (151). Certainly this fits the meals that the undead engage in, resembling an almost animalistic (yet communal) feast upon their living counterparts. All members of the ghoul “society” are equals at the table, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, or state of decay: they all stumble forward at the same uncanny gait, and all join in the feast upon the living, “enjoying” their fill before meandering on to the next group of living humans. The relentless eating of the living is, if not a traditional meal, an *uncanny* meal. The living dead do not engage in basic behaviors like preparation of the food in any direct fashion, and they don't seem to particularly prefer

one human over another.

Romero effectively plays the audience against itself, setting up the typical American family as a foundation of the film, before knocking them down to make way for a new shape of families. Harry and Ben reflect the forces opposed to this new order, with Harry in particular fighting any change in family dynamics that would see his control of the situation reduced, particularly when it means ceding power to Ben. In failing to adapt, Harry falls victim to his daughter, and Ben, mistaken for one of the creatures, is killed by the forces that enforce the old world order. Neither is allowed to join the great family dinner of the living dead, though the film questions how permanent this state of affairs will be.

IV. “Who will survive, and what will be left of them?”

Tobe Hooper's horror film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was released in the fall of 1974 to the drive-ins and grindhouses of America. Hooper was then a modestly established independent filmmaker, though his work tended to be documentary shorts and festival features of some repute. Hooper recalls the genesis of film: “I found myself near a display rack of chain saws...and I thought, ‘I know a way I could get through this crowd really quickly.’ I went home, sat down, all the channels just tuned in, the zeitgeist blew through, and the whole damn story came to me” (qtd. in Bloom 1). Hooper and his ragtag gang scrambled to raise money, and shoot the film the following summer, the script borrowing heavily from Hooper's research into real-life cannibals like Ed Gein. The film proved a huge success, and formed a key point in the new wave of horror that unfolded during the decade.

The film follows five young people, around twenty years old, as they travel through the back country of Texas in an old van, including nominal protagonist (and final survivor) Sally Hardesty (Marilyn Burns). After an encounter with a deranged Hitchhiker (Edwin Neal), the group stops for gas, but are told by gas station owner Cook (Jim Siedow) that the pumps are currently empty. While waiting for the gas delivery, they decide to stop at a nearby homestead that once belonged to Sally's family, and explore the area. The characters are then picked off one by one by the monstrous Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen), named for the dried mask of human skin that he wears. He dispatches them in brutal fashion,

akin to a slaughterhouse, with hammer blow, meat hook, and chainsaw. John Kenneth Muir posits, “Leatherface and his family see no difference between Sally, a rabbit, or a cow. To the cannibals, they’re merely ingredients . . . animal flesh is animal flesh, and meat is meat. If cows can be slaughtered and served up for dinner, so then can Sally” (61).

We can see from this treatment an element of ritual: these ill-fated young people are essentially the meat to be slaughtered; we can read the cannibal clan’s treatment of them as a code for the preparation of the meat. Of particular note are the two characters dispatched by hammer blows to the skull, much as cows would have been in the old days at the slaughterhouse. Sally narrowly escapes the homestead, retreating to the gas station only to learn that the owner is brother to both Leatherface and the Hitchhiker, and she is dragged back to the house in time for dinner. She is able to make her escape during the macabre dinner ritual, due to some confusion over who should kill her, and makes good on the opportunity as the sun begins to rise at the end of the horrible night.

It is at dinner that we learn the dynamics of the family. Leatherface is primarily responsible for the acquisition of the food, assisted in some capacity by his hitchhiking brother, while Cook actually prepares the dinner for the clan and acts as the most “civilized” member of the family, apologizing at one point to the hysterical Sally (while the Hitchhiker and Leatherface mock her terrified screams). Leatherface apparently acts as the server, and is also wearing a dress, something unremarked upon by the other characters. Hooper’s script does distinguish between the family members: Cook is even unwilling to murder anyone, explaining “I just can’t take no pleasure in killing. There’s just some things you gotta do. Don’t mean you have to like it.” Contrasted with the crazed Hitchhiker or the monstrous Leatherface, he appears almost reasonable.

The strange dichotomy of the situation appears in that Cook *acts* as the matriarch should be expected to, entertaining the guests and cooking the meal itself, while Leatherface *appears* as the matriarch, wearing a dress and being the one to serve up the meal. Thus, within this family, Cook and Leatherface take the place of the matriarch of the clan, in the absence of a female presence. The two

brothers take on the roles that would normally be played by the mother, as preparer and server of the meal, respectively, but neither is fully committed to the role. Both remain obvious substitutes, and the lack of a proper female figure in the household might provide some clue as to the family's downfall.

Also at the meal is the family's ancient patriarch, so old that he seemed to be a desiccated corpse in an earlier scene, who at the meal seems to lack any of the power that should be reflected in his position. He is a withered old ghost, just as powerless as his dead wife, whatever virility he had possessed long since departed. He is a symbol of this family, unable to adapt to the times, when the changes in slaughterhouse technology left the clan unemployed and destitute. If *Blood Feast* demonstrated the shadows lurking on the periphery, and *Night* saw any associations of family stripped away by a new world order, *Chainsaw* shows a family in the midst of disintegration, trying, and failing, to hold together some semblance of the way things were.

This family is one warped not only by their rural environment, but also by lack of feminine presence: with the matriarch of the clan long-since deceased, it falls to Cook, who forswears committing murder himself and Leatherface, who takes on the “form” and behavior expected of the woman. That Leatherface and the Hitchhiker react with mockery and yelling is simply a reflection of this new situation: they have become entirely unfamiliar with having a female at the table, as only Cook treats her nicely. This is also a reflection of the family's attempt to put off the drastic changes occurring in their world: with the mechanization of the slaughterhouses, they are put mostly out of work. Leatherface may murder hapless interlopers, but he also wears his mother's dress at dinner, trying to hold on to some sense of what, to him, is normalcy, at least in his traditional family dinner.

The preparation of the meal is never quite witnessed on screen, we do get a few brief shots of Sally's companions meeting their ends, which stands in as the acquisition of the raw materials. The two able-bodied males receive a blow to the head with a large mallet, the another girl is hung from a meat hook, and Sally's wheelchair-bound brother Franklin (Paul A. Partain) has the dubious distinction of being the only person chainsaw massacred in this film. The treatment of these victims reinforces that

they are viewed as little more than animals; with these killings, there is no sense of sadistic glee or any purpose beyond the utilitarian acquisition of meat, just as efficiency is the order of the day in a slaughterhouse.

The key exception to this is the terrorizing of Sally; there is no reason given for the ongoing torment, though it might be born out of the frustration at Sally's continual escapes, as indicated with Leatherface's wild chainsaw dance in the final shot of the film. We do get some small inkling of ritual with this, specifically the decision to have Grandfather kill Sally, though even that ritual becomes a parody of itself when his strength proves unable to deliver a proper blow. It is apparent that they do intend to kill Sally at dinner, they just prove not up to the task. We aren't given much sense of the actual cooking of the meal, other than that it falls under Cook's provenance, as does serving as the “respectable” face to the outside world, and making the only income the household is likely to see. While it is never directly stated, it does seem likely that the chili that Cook sells at his gas station contains some amount of human remains.

The dinner scene is longer in this film than the others, and is a considerably more active event. The set up resembles the traditional family meal, with the patriarch (the decrepit Grandpa) at the head of the table, his eldest son (Cook) and “wife” (as played by Leatherface) seated on either side of him. The guest is isolated, seated at the opposite end of the table, in a fashion quite recognizable to any astute viewer. Muir notes “that it is the dinner table where American families get together to discuss the most important topics of their lives. Eating is a form of emotional bonding and meals offer an opportunity for family members to communicate with one another. In *Chain Saw*, however, Sally sees the dark underneath of the American family” (62).

Cook is almost polite in his treatment of the guest, berating the Hitchhiker and Leatherface when they squeal in mockery of her pleas for help. The captive guest even has an ignored plate of food in front of her, though none of those present pay much heed to the food in front of them either, once Sally's screaming begins. This is perhaps for the best considering it is likely one of her recently

deceased friends. Mark Bernard explains that “consumption is obviously not the focus of this meal as the family is apparently more concerned with tormenting Sally and each other than they are with eating . . . they forget about their food as can probably be expected given their social circumstances, argue over the labor of getting the food . . . only the Hitchhiker is shown taking a bite of the food on his plate” (419). The scene echoes a dinner with particularly insular hosts, with the guest feeling outside of the main discourse, though perhaps not under the duress of being the main course.

The dinner reflects the rituals that the family undertakes for their meals, although this is likely a special case, as live guests seem to be a rarity. The act of having the grandfather strike the killing blow against Sally also reflects the ritual: he is the patriarch of the clan, and thus is the one who acquires the food. Leatherface, who killed the others, has taken on a more feminine role as server in order to complete the mocking ritual of the dinner, and it falls to someone else to carry out the work. While Cook is vicious in his capture of Sally at the gas station, he puts on a more civilized air, in keeping with being the one who cooked the food: he will have no part in actually killing the girl. Newman explains the family as “a parody of the typical sit-com family, with the bread-winning, long suffering Gas Man [Cook] as Pop; the preening, bewigged, apron-wearing Leatherface as Mom; and the rebellious, long-haired Hitch as the teenage son.” (75).

The scene is fairly well-lit, in contrast to *Night's* basement supper, and it allows Hooper to show the twisted family and the layout of the meal. It is a much more ordered event than *Night* or even the similarly themed *Hills*, acting as a direct parody of the family dinner. Hooper wants his audience to recognize what this is: not shadowy doppelgangers in a cellar, but a new sort of family unit, not so much a reaction to the perceived family values of the era, but one still trying to mimic the ideals as they understood them yet failing. Hooper understands that the dinner is much more horrifying when well lit, clearly showing the unfolding nightmare, and allows audiences to have a clearer view of the increasingly twisted shape of the modern American family.

The cannibals here exist on the fringes of civilization, not quite apart from it, and there is some

sense that they want to belong to the family system, but have fallen into poverty and madness. In this respect, the dinner is framed in such a way that Sally is a piece of the proceedings, as both an audience member and main course, a special role in all these films. The strongest parallel among these films to this scene is *Blood Feast*; *Night's* undead see the living only as a meal, *Hills'* cannibals don't allow interlopers to join their meal, while *Ramses* requires his later victims to play a ritualized part of creation of the meal. These cannibals want to belong to the greater society, but they just can't seem to get it right.

V. “A nice American family. They didn't want to kill. But they didn't want to die.”

Perhaps the final great golden age horror film to deal with families and their dinners was Wes Craven's 1977 release *The Hills Have Eyes*. Of the directors discussed here, Craven was perhaps the most experienced, directing two previous films and working on a number of other films as an editor. He was also the only one of the directors that had a background in horror, with his seminal *The Last House on the Left* having been released in 1972, and was familiar with the horror genre films coming out during that era (Wooley 50-51).

In many ways, *Hills* followed up on many of themes Craven dealt with in his debut feature: the line between civilization and savagery, the bonds of family, and the lurking threat of violence even within the confines of modern civilization. Though it featured a more visceral brutality than the similarly-themed *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, many of the same themes were at play, though rendered in starker detail still. The film failed to gain as much attention as the others discussed here, buried under an increasingly crowded marketplace that exploded in the late 1970's with the release of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). Craven's film is still significant in the examination of the uncanny family dinner, but it did mark the end of an era, as the genre became more concerned with singular killers and cannibals became increasingly played for laughs.

The film follows a nominally urban extended family, the Carters, on their way to California, who stop in wastelands of the southwest United States (it's unclear if it is New Mexico, Arizona, or

southern California) to investigate an abandoned silver mine willed to the patriarch Big Bob Carter (Russ Grieve) by a distant relative. An old gas station owner (John Steadman) warns not to continue into the area, explaining it was formerly a test site for nuclear weapons. They head off into the wastes in their small convoy regardless, only to suffer a broken axle a few miles later.

As night falls, it become apparent that they are not alone in the desert, as a clan of deranged cannibals has taken up residence in the distant hills, raiding passers-by for food and other necessities. Using guerrilla tactics, the cannibals assault the family, killing the bellowing patriarch and assaulting the vehicles, causing even more havoc. The Carters are able to regroup and turn the tables back on their tormentors, with the help of the vengeful family dog. The motives of the Jupiter clan become horrifyingly clear here, as Mars (Lance Gordon) explains “Baby tastes good. Baby fat. You fat. Fat and juicy.” In the original script, the baby was in fact cooked and eaten, until protests from the cast and crew changed the ending. With his wife now dead, Doug (Martin Speer) is called upon to protect his child, and brutally murders Mars, as the film fades out in red splatter and horrified screaming.

What makes *Hills* especially interesting is the dichotomy between the two distinct family groups: the city dwelling Carters and the wasteland dwelling Jupiter clan. Tony Williams explains, “the Carter family are affluent beneficiaries of the American Dream. Dominated by overbearing, ex-law officer Big Bob Carter . . . fulminating against American outsiders, whether they are Blacks from Cleveland or wilderness hillbillies” (145). The family unit, despite being expanded with in-laws and a new baby, conforms to the general conception of a patriarchal family unit: this family fits well within the ideals of the 1950s culture, considering it was filmed in 1975. There is some friction between Big Bob and son-in-law Doug, with Bob's traditional role is as supreme head of the household and conservative standard-bearer challenged by the younger interloper.

Meanwhile, hidden in the nearby caves and ridges is another family, albeit one much more savage and brutal than their urban-dwelling doppelgangers. Lead by the hulking “Papa” Jupiter (James Whitworth), the outcast son of the gas station owner, whose brood of mutants have until now had been

complacent in their murdering ways. Within this family, the conflict stems from the teenage Ruby (Janus Blythe) who opposes the actions of her father and brothers, hoping for a less violent lifestyle. Ruby is punished for this opposition, and she later turns upon her mother and brothers, choosing civilization.

Williams argues that “Jupiter's family represents repressed vengeance against a social Darwinist structure that leaves victims to fend for themselves. Jupiter's family later destroys Bob, the patriarchal beneficiary of an economic system that condemns them to starvation and historic erasure” (145). The Jupiter family is the most marginalized a group can be within the United States, pushed even further past the edge than *Chainsaw's* murderous family. They did have some stability raiding a local army base prior to the events of the film, but the closure of the base drove the clan to increasingly desperate measures.

Both families are solid, conservative patriarchies, but each is unable to cope with the changing world. Big Bob and Papa Jupiter are mirrors of each other: distrustful of outsiders, over-confident, hyper-masculine, each is undone by rushing into a dangerous situation without thinking: Bob goes back to the gas station alone and overexerts himself to the point of suffering a heart attack, while Jupiter walks straight in to an exploding trailer trap at the conclusion. The families themselves stand in opposition to one another: Ethel is weak-willed and passive whereas Mama is loud and violent, though both are still beholden to their powerful husbands. Likewise, the rough-and-tumble sons of Jupiter are a stark contrast to the meek and civilized daughters of Bob.

By the end, after the Carters have been pushed to the edge, the distinctions apparent at the beginning of the film are much less clear. Williams asserts of the finale: “the last third of *The Hills Have Eyes* reveals little difference between both families . . . civilized family values are non-existent; both families are identical. The film ends with a low-angle freeze frame red filter shot of Doug. Looking at Mars's body, he appears fully aware of the repressed violent nature that links him to Jupiter's family. Monsters are definitely within the American family” (Williams 148). The ultimate

precept of the film (and *Night*, and to a lesser extent *Chainsaw* and *Blood Feast*) is how fragile civilization really is, and how reliant we are on our easy access to food and security, and how easily that can go off the rails.

There are many parallels between *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, but the films reach different destinations. Whereas *Chainsaw's* gas station attendant was a member of the family, directly assisting and partaking in the meals, albeit still refusing to actually kill, here the similar character, the father of Jupiter, is unwillingly complicit, and dies for his attempt to warn the Carters. Comparisons could be also drawn to the degree of desolation featured in both films: the back roads of Texas, where safety can be gained by making it back to the main road, are not nearly as disconnected as the “dotted-blue line” that makes up the road that the Carters travel; even the hope of help turns out to be the mutant Pluto.

The Jupiter clan women are distorted as well, in much the same fashion as Leatherface, becoming almost parodies of the Carter family: Mama is a fat prostitute who seemingly only drinks, contributing in no discernible way to the marauding of Carter family, nor to the cooking of the food. Ruby seeks to escape her life among the savages, being the most “normal” looking one as well, and even betrays her family at the conclusion, attacking Mars with a snake to protect the baby. John Kenneth Muir explains of Ruby, “Ruby begs Fred for food and says her family is starving. The Jupiter clan is desperate to survive, and although this in no way justifies their ruthless actions, it does make their 'evil' understandable. Like the Carters, they are fighting for survival in a world without resources. Juve's clan does not have the benefits of refrigerators, vehicles and artificial light” (69).

The component of the dinner is much smaller in this film than the others; rather than the extended dinner sequence of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or the off-screen cannibalism of *Night of the Living Dead*, the mutant cannibals are seen eating in only one scene. It features strong themes of family and civilization, and highlights the motive of satiating their hunger. The Jupiter family had just staged a successful raid on the Carters, capturing Bob after he suffers a heart attack, and burning him alive to

draw out the other Carters.

Like the ghouls of *Night*, the Jupiter clan kills to eat, but cook the meat first, over an open bonfire in the midst of the desert, eschewing any modern amenities for their dining. They are the connecting thread between *Night* and *Chainsaw*, driven to consume human flesh for nutrition, but also a seemingly personal hatred of the Carters. It was never personal for Leatherface and his family; it was just their way of life that some unfortunate folks stumbled into. But the Jupiter clan, and Papa Jupe in particular, enjoy the wanton killing for its own sake, though they are desperate enough not to turn down meat when they can find it. They delight in tormenting the family, with the bonus of keeping their targets off-balance and unable to effectively fight back, and don't always act the efficiently. The hatred is engendered by the Carters standing as uncanny doubles of the Jupiter clan.

Jupiter and his sons gather around the roasted corpse, and discuss plans while casually chewing hunks of charred meat. The cannibal family is lit only by the flickering flames of their cooking fire, echoing the shadowy basement of *Night*. Williams lays out the scene as follows: “Jupiter and his family eat Bob's cooked flesh. Between mouthfuls Jupiter ritually speaks of annihilating his family and memory—‘I'll eat your stinking memory.’ He regards Bob as a hated symbol of a system that has condemned his own family to a scavenger existence. Living outside an affluent civilization, Jupiter's family resorts to cannibalism to avoid starvation” (148).

The dinner scene here is much less drawn out as in *Chainsaw*, yet it hits many of the same notes, as the Jupiter clan exists not on the margins of civilization, as with Leatherface and his clan, but outside of it entirely. No outsiders are allowed for their private dinner, feasting on the burned flesh of Bob, nor any women (illusory or otherwise). This is the domain of Papa Jupe and his sons, to enjoy their kill and discuss the next stage of their plans. No women are allowed here; we later find that Ruby has been forced to remain at the cave with Mama. Where the cannibals in *Chainsaw* at least held on the (twisted) illusion of Douglas's gender roles (via Leatherface's dress and Cook's personality), *Hills* posits a place without women, or at least women utterly without influence in the world.

Jupiter has created a world where men reign supreme by allowing Mama to remain a sedentary alcoholic and chaining Ruby up when she becomes an inconvenience. This a reaction to the disintegration of his own family: his mother dying in childbirth, and his father attempting to murder him before casting him out into the desert. However, his family proves incapable of weathering the forces of conflict when faced by their doppelgangers. Jupiter, seeing the world change, has forsaken the traditional family structure, just as his own family had forsaken him, but in doing so, has sealed his own demise. This dinner is symbolic of what happens when the social order breaks down, and families fail to adapt to changing circumstances. In feasting upon Bob, Jupiter only reinforces his own worldview, and thus will be destroyed the following morning, along with most of his family. Of the dinners we discussed here, it is the only one without a feminine presence.

While Leatherface attempted to become a female figure in the absence of anyone maternal, there are no similar attempts here. There has been a collapse into ruin with the Jupiter clan, though they obviously live even further out on the fringe of civilization. There are indications that the lack of civilization of the mutants has been caused by lack of strong female figures, Papa Jupiter's mother having died in childbirth, and his father actively trying to murder him, with Jupiter being a homicidal thug and his common law wife an alcoholic prostitute. The lack of a solid family unit here is what doomed the Jupiter clan to their fate. The Carters almost disintegrate following the death of Big Bob and the raid on the camp, but they band together long enough to rescue the baby and avenge their fallen members, thus adapting to the new world. The powerful, dominant male, the faithful if meek wife, and the loyal, city-bred children utterly fail to keep their own family from shattering under the assault, but manage to pick up the pieces long enough to fight back.

The Jupiter clan continues on its course of masculine bravado and is punished for it, though not directly by the Carter children. Only Papa Jupiter is killed by the Carters, with son-in-law Doug killing Mars, and the family dog brutally slaying Mercury and Pluto. John Kenneth Muir explains, "the Carters and Jupiter family are two sides of the same coin. Both families possess dominating fathers who rule

without question. A sibling from each family dies and each family uses that death as an excuse for more hatred and bloodshed” (69). The Jupiters represent the uncanny to the Carters; they are the horrifying, yet increasingly familiar doubles to the family, as the result of the Carters' descent into savagery. The patriarchs fail to fulfill their roles of protecting their clans. There is little enough food for the Jupiter clan, demonstrating his failure in that regard, and the Carters are failed by Big Bob, who rushes off on his own only to be undone by a heart attack, a failure that itself provides the family Jupiter with much-needed sustenance.

The Carters do prove themselves “superior” in one sense: though they do engage in terrible violence against their foes, they do not succumb to cannibalism, though even this minor victory might be undone if they remain stuck for long, their vehicles and supplies largely destroyed. They destroy their trappings of civilization, give way to their dark urges, but are never tempted to truly become the Other. For all their ruthless brutality, the Carters never stoop to consuming the flesh of their opponents, though they do blow up the corpse of their dead mother as part of a trap, and thus retain some small degree of humanity in the cold, dark world. While the Jupiter clan fails to truly adapt to changing circumstances, clinging to their old ways, the younger Carters successfully adapt and survive, living to dine another day.

VI. Conclusion

Horror films allow us to stare into the face of the Other, showing us that the Other is just a reflection of the world in which we live. Each of the films examine the breakdown of the family structure against the forces of evil, whether they be a crazed cultist hiding out in suburbia, families fighting for survival and their way of life on the fringe, or the dead rising all around to consume the living. Horror cinema often acts as an examination of current event, and these films go a step further, digging into the underbelly of what it means to be “family” in a time when traditions seemed to be slipping into the abyss.

These tales of horror examine the problems of adaptation in changing times, as well as how the

vener of civilization, the very family itself, can wither away so easily under duress. It is no accident that food, and in particular family dinners, are at the center of each of these narratives: they are the impetus for the antagonists' actions, be it symbolic (*Blood Feast*), sentimental (*Chainsaw*), practical (*Night*), or some combination thereof (*Hills*). The directors use the family dinner as a potent image of the family unit and its relation to larger society, and place it into a cultural moment while still horrifying audiences. It is no accident that there are few more universal symbols than that of the family meal, and it still stands as a powerful symbol of peace and tranquility within modern American culture.

The family dinner is perhaps the ultimate example of human civilization: even on the frontier, the family unit is able to enjoy a simple meal, a moment of peace and civility. These films warp this concept: the meal becomes a macabre double of the ideal, the family a horrifying group of murderers, the civilized veneer of humanity lost in the madness of the wilderness. *Blood Feast* first turned the idea of the family dinner, even one as personal as a wedding banquet, into one of horror. *The Night of the Living Dead* transformed the entire landscape into a grand supper for a new “family” made up of insatiable ghouls, while a family breakdown occurs in a murky cellar among parents and a child. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* takes things further, positing the conflict between the old and new worlds, as the breakdown of the family and its links to the old ways widens ever further, with the loss of female presence and abject poverty serving to unhinge what order remained. *The Hills Have Eyes* casts the conflict in stark contrast, but still draws one thin line in the sand that the civilized do not cross, and posits the triumph of the civilized over chaos, in part due to their capacity for adaptation. Each of the films features some commentary on the family and its eating habits, and these ideas symbolize the internal conflicts facing society during the tumultuous decades during which the films were produced.

The filmmakers each sought to examine the state of the American family, and found a common symbol with the cannibal clan. With a foodways methodology and an understanding of the uncanny, we are able to gain some insight into how these directors saw the breakdown of the family. Each dinner sequence gives us some sense of how these uncanny families placed themselves in the world, what

their behaviors regarding food entailed, and an understanding of how the directors saw the existential threats to the family itself. Cannibalism became a shroud to mask the examinations of the nature of the American family in this period, examinations that went deeper (and darker) than most other works that posited a true picture of American family life.

Lewis, Romero, Hooper, and Craven each had a story they wanted to tell, and each brought their own worldview to the work, and their own fears and anxieties. Though the simple act of dinner, we are given a sense of the world across those fifteen years, and the unique horrors that everyday life brought forth. They understood the power of the images they put to film, and knew that their audience would react on a primal level to the twisted familiarity of the nightmares unfolding on screen. These were more than cheap scares, revealing deep-seated far more potent than cannibal countryfolk, revealing just how broken families were beneath the surface. It is not as though the 1960s and 70s broke apart the family; rather, it just made the long festering wounds that much more obvious, and these films had the foresight to recognize just how deep the rot went.

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Forum on American Cinema

A Filmmaker's Foresight: *The Great Dictator* and Chaplin's Views on War

Kelly McAndrews

Although Charlie Chaplin faced intense scrutiny and even government interference for his first true “talkie” feature, *The Great Dictator* (1940) has emerged as one of his most influential films. By blending his trademark slapstick comedy with a poignant, blatantly realistic portrayal of oppression and discrimination, Chaplin gives his audience more than just a farce: he provides a historically significant look into a world on the edge of war. *The Great Dictator* conveys Chaplin's talent as an auteur with its use of slapstick and ideological themes, which serve to both entertain and educate the audience; the film is also momentous to cinematic history because it shows the unstable, disquieting context of the days just before World War II.

Despite breaking tradition by becoming Chaplin's first real motion picture with dialogue, *The Great Dictator* fits into his body of work by exploring several major ideological themes inherent to many of Chaplin's films. As film scholar Timothy Corrigan notes, the auteur is that distinctive kind of filmmaker who “anchors and unifies our perception of the film” (90). *The Great Dictator* is anchored in this way by Chaplin's resounding criticism of “the human thirst for power,” which rings very clearly throughout the film (Singer 1). Chaplin explored the dangers of this lust for power and profit in previous films, most notably by capturing it in the form of industrialization in his 1936 feature *Modern Times* (1). Another important theme Chaplin covers in several of his films is that of spreading compassion. This is seen in *The Kid* (1921), in which

Chaplin's famous Tramp character cares for an abandoned child; it is also seen in *The Immigrant* (1917), in which the Tramp helps a young girl and her dying mother recover the only money they have left. In *The Great Dictator*, this theme manifests itself in the behavior of the Jewish Barber, most notably in his relationship to Hannah (Paulette Goddard) and his five-minute speech at the end: "more than cleverness," he says, "we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities life will be violent, and all will be lost." The theme of humanity—and the dangers of losing it—is crucial to the works of Chaplin.

When most people hear the name Charlie Chaplin, however, they might not immediately think of his integrities, but rather of his legendary brand of slapstick comedy—an element of *The Great Dictator* which gives it a fundamental Chaplin watermark. His slapstick is not just humorous, but is also elegantly choreographed, as with the elaborate globe dance performed by Hynkel the dictator, and with the curb dance performed by the Jewish Barber after Hannah has hit him with a frying pan. This style of intricate, precisely calculated slapstick is seen in most of Chaplin's films, such as in the boxing scene from *City Lights* (1931) or the scenes from *The Rink* (1916) in which the Tramp makes beautifully-maneuvered mischief as a waiter bussing tables, and at the local roller rink. Chaplin's slapstick in *The Great Dictator* is mostly wordless, and falls in line with the graceful but comedic choreography that had made him famous.

Unfortunately, audiences who viewed the film in 1940 were on the precipice of a crisis that was hardly a subject for comedy; and yet *The Great Dictator* serves as a message to continue hoping for a world free of the horrors that were impending at the time of its release. The film could be compared to Roberto Begnini's critically acclaimed *Life is Beautiful* (1998) in this light, because both use comedy to explore the extremely dark setting of the Holocaust (Anderson 1). For example, in the latter, Begnini's protagonist turns the angry, foreign words of a Nazi

soldier into a lighthearted game by falsely translating for the soldier. Chaplin also uses a play on language by making one up which parodies German. But the most important similarity in these films is how each manages to capture the ominous turmoil of World War II, while still keeping the upbeat comedy intact. Charlie Chaplin had the foresight to include this underlying adversity in *The Great Dictator*, which earns it a unique place in film history, whether it was considered “premature anti-fascist” or not (Singer 1).

The narrative design of *The Great Dictator* is also vital in shaping the viewer’s interpretation of it. The principle reason the film provides such a stark contrast between the oppressors and the oppressed is because the audience follows Adenoid Hynkel *and* the Jewish Barber, not just one or the other. But the order of introduction is vital to the overall effect (Baron 7). The Jewish Barber is the first to be introduced, and once it is conveyed through the army sequence that he is a likeable character, the viewer is sympathetic to his objectives from that point on. But on the other hand, Hynkel is brought into the film with no sense of personal connection—he is introduced by a newsreel narrator, in the moments just before he makes a big speech. The viewer is essentially forced to interpret Hynkel as a cold, mechanical character, whereas the Jewish Barber is always surrounded by affection and warmth, with Hannah and his other neighbors. The audience therefore takes delight in Hynkel’s mishaps, of which there are many, and suffers whenever the Jewish Barber suffers. The dissimilarity between the two characters allows them each to have a separate, distinctive way of conveying comedy: for Hynkel, the humor happens whenever he falls into trouble; for the Barber, it happens while he is getting *out* of trouble.

The one scene that is perhaps the most meaningful in the film is the speech at the end. Chaplin, who is at this point playing the Jewish Barber but dressed in Hynkel’s uniform,

nervously approaches the podium to make a speech. The camera tracks him meticulously, leaving just enough space in the shot to see the devoted soldiers saluting him; with this shot, the viewer is meant to rub out the small details of the sparse mise-en-scene in order to experience the same nerve-wracking feeling the Barber must have. The next shot is a close-up of the Barber, which lasts for about a minute and a half—during which time the character’s eyes slowly progress from looking down at the crowd to directly into the camera. It is no longer the Jewish Barber whom the viewer is seeing, but Chaplin himself, speaking out to the world. His message is clear and passionate; to emphasize the extent of the suffering of which he speaks, the camera fades in on a sobbing Hannah. But then the camera fades back onto Chaplin, and he finishes his speech without another interruption. The minimalist approach that Chaplin took with this scene was incredibly effective, because the lack of detail in the mise-en-scene—as well as the almost uncomfortable proximity of the close-up—forces the viewer to focus on nothing but the impassioned monologue. The aesthetic choices in this scene make it the most powerful in the entire film.

The Great Dictator was part of a long line of financially successful, historically significant films by Charlie Chaplin. His use of slapstick comedy and ideological themes give the film worth as part of his work as an auteur; and the content of the film itself gives it a unique position in film history. *The Great Dictator* yields laughter, severe reflection, and even sadness on some levels, and it should be valued as a vital film in cinematic history.

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Universal Monsters: A Marriage of Science & Religion

Ryan Featherston

In the 1930's Universal Studios ushered in a new era of horror films. Dr. Pretorious so aptly boasts in James Whale's classic *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935) it would be "a new world of Gods and Monsters." A slew of iconic imagery and characters like Frankenstein, Dracula, the Mummy and the Invisible Man blended together contrasting motivations from science and religion while entertaining and horrifying audiences worldwide. Many of these films center on a battle between these forces as a means to reanimate the dead or to elevate ones status beyond what is humanly possible. These films elevate the role of the mad scientist that reanimates the dead. This act of creating life without the divine spark of the lord offended some with strong Christian sensibilities. However the many allusions to religion in the films are fascinating. I will be using James Whale's *Frankenstein* films and Todd Browning's *Dracula* (1931) as the primary case studies for this discussion. These films beg the question, can science and religion coexist with one another or are they really "irreconcilable antagonists"? In Universal's canon of films, the result is most certainly no.

The horror film and religion have always had a contentious yet often intermingling relationship. With the exception of pornography, horror cinema is the least amenable to religious sensibilities. It seeks to show audiences the grotesque, to frighten them, to exploit violence and abnormalities and in some cases (like *Frankenstein*) give the audience empathy for violent murderers. Despite that, horror films "have tended to

rely heavily on religious themes, symbols, rituals, persons, and places” (Stone). A huge part of that is the common themes of both that includes the struggle between good and evil, death and what happens to life after death. The way in which horror has exploited these religious themes is fascinating.

The foremost case study of this is *Bride of Frankenstein*, which utilizes countless allusions to Christianity. The most obvious is a scene in which Frankenstein’s monster is hunted down by a mob of townspeople. In this scene he is captured and hung up on the cross in the crucifixion pose. What makes this act so interesting is in the way that the tradition of religion is actually subverted here by director James Whale. Jesus, of course, was the son of god and he is crucified and then resurrected, while the monster is the son of man who is resurrected and then crucified. Later on, the monster escapes and stays with a blind hermit character. Again the monster is involved in Christian ritual as he has his own “last supper” feasting on bread and wine. The act has attention drawn to it when the newly speaking monster says “Bread, good...” and then “Wine... good.” The hermit in this film is essentially a lonely and saintly figure who wants companionship, saying “I’ve prayed many times for God to send me a friend”.

Similarly, *Dracula* contains numerous references to Christianity. The idea of Christianity is integral to the character. Dracula is essentially a stand-in for Satan. Much like the idea in Christianity that evil and sin in our world are influences from Satan, Dracula possesses characters like Mina and Renfield with supernatural power including a bite on the neck and sucking of their blood. This conflict between the pure evil in Dracula and the pure supporting cast is most overtly represented with the crucifix. He reacts violently when Renfield shows the cross to him. The crucifix is the most powerful tool

(other than a wooden stake) to suppress the Count. It is here that “the characters of this Dracula rely on Christian faith to protect them from evil” (Kozlovic).

The simple Christian themes of good vs. evil are expanded upon with numerous imagery. When Renfield is originally summoned to Count Dracula’s castle in Transylvania, Renfield is engulfed in dreary architecture reminiscent of grand European churches. In fact, Dracula briefly stands near an altar of sorts. Afterward, just like Frankenstein and the hermit in *Bride of Frankenstein*, Dracula has Renfield indulge in the drinking of wine and the eating of bread. This once again alludes to the last supper of Jesus Christ.

While the religious imagery in these films play major roles, science also has an overwhelming role in shaping them. The traditional roles of religion in the life of characters in these films are threatened by advancing science. Many horror films from Universal and other studios during this period featured a huge burst of mad scientist films. Amongst the horror films to take on this idea included *Doctor X* (Michael Curtiz, 1932), *Island of Lost Souls* (Erle C. Kenton, 1932) *The Invisible Man* (James Whale, 1933), *The Raven* (Lew Landers, 1935), *The Man Who Changed His Mind* (Robert Stevenson, 1936), *Black Friday* (Arthur Lubin, 1940), *Man Made Monster* (George Waggner, 1941) and of course the *Frankenstein* films. This “classic form of scientific horror is the gothic morality tale” that featured the "mad" scientist character “who inevitably oversteps his bounds and thus stands accused of attempting to ‘play God,’” (Stone). These films drastically fight against Christian understanding that God creates man and presents the “disturbing idea that a scientist can create life” (McQueen).

It is first in *Frankenstein* that advancements in science are deemed dangerous. A

Minor character in the film Dr. Waldman states “You know, his researches in the field of chemical galvanism and electro biology were far in advance of our theories here at the university. In fact, they had reached a most advanced stage. They were becoming dangerous.” The danger was provided by the idea that scientists like Dr. Frankenstein became obsessed with the idea of having the ultimate power of controlling both life and death. As we seen in *Frankenstein*, not only does Victor Frankenstein create life but Frankenstein’s monster is immortal. So *Frankenstein* is not subject to the rules established by a God-made world. We see a clear clash between the monstrous scientific creation and religion late in *Bride of Frankenstein* when the monster topples over a statue of a Catholic Bishop as the figure of Jesus on the cross sits prominent in the background, watching helplessly. Here, the threat of science literally toppling the virtues is manifested. Oftentimes in these films, the “mad scientist” becomes driven insane by the guilt of their creations. We see this in *Bride of Frankenstein* when Dr. Frankenstein is initially hesitant to indulge in Dr. Pretorious’ plan to give the monster a mate.

However, attempts are made to warn audiences against the dangers of science in these movies. In *Frankenstein*, Dr. Frankenstein’s obsession with creating life results in severe ramifications as the monster is mistreated and provoked, which results in several deaths. Frankenstein’s monster (again, created through scientific means) is depicted as a creature that doesn’t belong in this world. Therefore, any plan for science to replace Christianity is presented as inappropriate and wrong. Science is vilified again in *The Invisible Man* (Whale, 1933), where Dr. Jack Griffin turns into a madman obsessed with the power of invisibility, a trait not created in a world governed by a Christian god. Science is looked at as dangerous, sure to only lead to destruction of society.

The fight between science and religion was a common conflict away from the cinema. Legendary scientist Albert Einstein was quoted as saying “the churches have always fought science.” He argued that “science and religion [were] irreconcilable antagonists.” This idea is played out thoroughly in these 30s horror films. The often-rioting villagers in films like *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and the *Invisible Man* are “God fearing and superstitious” and their fear of the supernatural is justified when these monstrous characters kill and terrorize the town. This suggests that these people “have a better grasp of things” than their intellectually superior scientists that succeed in playing god (Humphries 157). However it was these mad scientists that were “introducing then-taboo ideas, preparing audiences for technological development in a world in which moral and scientific values would change and old taboos would be discarded” (Chapman). *Dracula* provides an interesting area where science is not demonized and the taboo of being an intellectual scientist is not inherently wrong. This is seen as Professor Van Helsing has a deep knowledge of science and the supernatural and helps overcome the vampire Count Dracula. Throughout this era, though, the idea of characters playing god made the industry extremely uncomfortable.

1931’s *Frankenstein* features a peculiar opening monologue from character actor Edward Van Sloan previewing audiences for the frightening images they were about to see. However, this opening wasn’t just added to build suspense for the audience. Rather, it was added in anticipation of objections from religious groups. As the intro goes:

We’re about to unfold the story of Frankenstein, a man of science who sought to create a man after his own image without reckoning upon God.

It is one of the strangest tales ever told. It deals with the two great mysteries of creation: life and death.

This intro prepared audiences for the ultimate exclamation by Frankenstein that “In the name of god, now I know what it feels like to be god.” According to film historian Rudy Behlmer, the controversial line was deleted by censor boards in numerous regions. Film studios understood that the public people viewed “just about everyone and everything connected with scientific progress as a little spooky” (Skal 137). Later on, objections to content from the Hays Office demanded all references that “compare Frankenstein to God and his creation of the monster to God’s creation of man” be cut (149). Lucky for us and cinema history, director James Whale was able to keep these many of these references in there. In subsequent years when the Production Code was stiffer and more strenuously enforced, horror films faced significant cuts in subsequent showings. For example, the original 1931 release of *Dracula* included an epilogue that was similar to the prologue in *Frankenstein* and was delivered by the same actor. The epilogue featured him toying with the audience saying, “There really are such things as Vampires!” In a 1936 reissue, this epilogue was removed out of fear of offending religious groups by encouraging a belief in the supernatural. Unfortunately with the lack of preservation, this epilogue has been lost to us now. These fears from the industry at the time about the role of science changing established conventions of religion in our culture create a scenario where science and religion are unable to coexist.

In conclusion, James Whale’s *Frankenstein* films and Todd Browning’s *Dracula* provide insightful case studies on the battle brewing between science and religion in the films. With the demonization of the scientist as a mad, loony character plus the

ensorship concerns by this industry, it is a battle that religious convictions of the time win. Scientific progress is presented not as an amazing tool to help society but rather as a threat to a Christian way of life.

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Essay on *Rock 'n' Roll High School*

Nick Puhala

Allan Arkush's *Rock 'n' Roll High School* (1979) is a film about teenagers using the power of rock 'n' roll, with some help from the Ramones, to overthrow their high school principal's evil reign of terror. The film, which spoke to the teenagers of its generation, works as a surrealist comedy and a musical, fits the classic Hollywood narrative movie structure, and makes a good use of lighting and framing to tell its story.

In terms of national cinema, *Rock 'n' Roll High School* was a film that spoke to the teenagers of its generation. Timothy Corrigan, in his book *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, says that when looking at a film through national cinema, one needs to "understand the cultural conditions that surround a movie" (85). *Rock 'n' Roll High School* is all about punk rock music. Rock 'n' roll music had been around since the 1950s, but punk rock music was just getting started in the time that this movie was released, in 1979, and the music had a very rebellious and anarchist feeling to it. The film was a hit because it resonated with teens at the time by doing something that kids wanted to do, but never could: showing the adults who's boss and taking over their high school, then blowing it up. When asked why the film worked so well, Roger Corman, the executive producer on the film, said that "it's the anarchy of the film; the fact that it is so wild and the fact that the students act out every teenager's ultimate dream" ("Interview"). This movie did well with teenagers because it was edgy and gave them a chance to live out their fantasy. Also, it showed teenagers outsmarting and overpowering the adults in the film. Adults were shown as idiots, while teenagers were shown as being heroes and leaders. This fit in well with the attitude and music of the time of this film.

In terms of genre, *Rock 'n' Roll High School* fits into the category of a surrealist teen comedy musical. According to the syllabus, genre studies asks “what aspects of narrative, performance, iconography, or audiovisual design are consistently found in a group or type of films?” (Baron 10). The film is much more unique than just a comedic musical. The film stands out, even now, 34 years after its release, as a cult classic. We already know that the film is aimed at a teen audience. In the genre of surrealist comedy, there are sometimes situations or aspects of the story that seem a little too ridiculous to be realistic, but that make the movie funny. *Rock 'n' Roll High School* has these surreal moments in the film, such as when the people in the portraits on the school walls suddenly change facial expressions, when Eaglebauer, the school’s go-to man for every situation, points to a desk and a suitcase suddenly appears, and when a 7-foot-tall rat, wearing a leather jacket and headphones, attends the Ramones concert. These unrealistic moments are accepted by the audience, and are funny, because the audience knows that they are watching a comedy and they have a certain set of expectations for that type of movie. The film is also a musical, which is pretty easy to see, because it has constant break-outs of song throughout the film. The music in the film, as in most musicals, is also diageitic. This helps the audience identify the movie as a musical, and also as a comedy, because it is also a little surreal. The movie fits well into both the surrealist comedy genre and the musical genre, as well as the teen movie genre.

The narrative design of *Rock 'n' Roll High School* is very much like other Hollywood movies’ structures. We follow a small group of characters who go through some seemingly impossible problems, and everyone lives happily ever after, except for the villain. The film starts out by introducing us to the “nerdy” girl in school, Kate Rambeau, while also introducing us to football star, Tom Roberts. The scene shows students dancing around and being all crazy, while

Kate is just focusing on Tom. Tom is just trying to find a place to sit and finds all the craziness a little annoying. Kate keeps looking at Tom, but never goes up to speak to him because she's too shy. This scene is perfect for introducing these two characters because it tells us lots of things, without the use of dialogue, that we may not know about the characters if they were introduced somewhere else. We learn that Kate can pick Tom out in a crowd and that Kate really likes him, but is shy. We also learn that Tom is a shy football star, but that he doesn't really have any friends because he is sitting alone. The scene in which they are introduced helps the audience to understand the character better, which John August talks about in his article "How to Introduce a Character." In August's words, "The scene does the work" (August 1). The film starts out with all the students having a good old time, and then we are introduced to the villain of the story, Principal Togar, who is played by Mary Woronov. The response to the villain is character Riff Randall, played by P.J. Soles, who stands for everything that is completely opposite of Togar. Togar represents structure and rules, while Riff represents anarchy and freedom. The two characters clash throughout the whole film.

Throughout the film, we follow the stories of characters Kate, Riff, Tom, and even sometimes Togar. All of these characters have a resolution at the end of the film: Kate ends up with Tom, Riff gets to work with the Ramones, and Togar ends up in a straight jacket being rolled away. This type of typical Hollywood narrative structure plays out for most of the film. The only character that doesn't really have a resolution is the character of Eaglebauer. He doesn't have any issues resolved, but, then again, he never really had any issues to resolve in the first place. His character seems to be in the story just to help move it along for the other main characters, and for comedic relief.

There is one character who plays a very significant part in the story, even though he is not a main character. The music teacher, Mr. McGree, showcases the message, if there really is one, that *Rock 'n' Roll High School* is trying to get across to the audience. The character is introduced in his classroom, teaching classical music to his students and they all seem to be very bored by it. He starts out on Togar's side of the rock music issue, but he slowly transitions to support Riff and the other students. He becomes happier and a free spirit due to rock 'n' roll music. He is showcasing the message of the film: Rock 'n' roll music can help you to let loose, be happy, and improve your life.

The cinematography in this film is not very subtle. It doesn't want the audience to have to question at all who the protagonist is, who the villain is, who's in love with who, etc. For example, Togar is always shown with shadows. There is a particular scene that showcases this in *Rock 'n' Roll High School* where Kate is being questioned by Principal Togar about her friend, Riff Randall. Riff had skipped school to wait in line for tickets to go see the Ramones in concert. Kate gives Togar a note saying that Riff's mother has died and to excuse her from class. Throughout the scene, Togar is standing, while Kate is sitting in a chair. This already puts Togar in a position of power. With the use of extremely low angles on Togar, and extremely high angles on Kate, the camera tells the audience that Togar has power over Kate, especially in this scene. The room is very dark, with only little bits of light let in through the window so that the audience can see the faces of the characters. Her office is dark, whether it is 9 o'clock at night or 11 o'clock in the morning. Kate comes back to Togar's office the next day saying that Riff's father has died, and the following day saying that Riff's goldfish has died. There are also shadows cast on the wall by Togar, which adds to her position of power. In every scene, where Kate is in Togar's office, the room seems to get progressively darker as the film goes on. This

tells the audience that Kate is in a dangerous situation and that Togar is getting closer and closer to finding out the truth behind Riff's fake notes.

The sound plays a little part in this scene, but it is still significant. There is slightly suspenseful music playing in the background during this scene, which gives the scene an increasing feeling of suspense, but there is no diegetic sound in the scene besides the voices of the characters. This gives the audience, and Kate, a feeling of suspense throughout the scene and makes them wait for something to happen.

In conclusion, *Rock 'n' Roll High School* spoke to the teenagers of its generation, works as a surrealist comedy and a musical, fits the classic Hollywood narrative movie structure, and makes a good use of lighting and framing to tell its story.

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Solondz the Humanist?

Jake Savage

Todd Solondz has made controversy a habit throughout his career. Although his films seldom break into the mainstream public, they are still saturated with content that is thought-provoking to some, but simply unpleasant to others. The truth might lie somewhere in between these ideas, as Solondz's work is indeed challenging, but it's not because he's difficult to understand. He is frighteningly direct and explicit, but the interpretation of it leads to a high level of praise. Many argue the mere fact that his films are challenging is an example of them being great, but I find the argument neglects the context. Solondz is a comedy filmmaker first, and comedy comes to first to him; his subjects are unsavory but that doesn't mean he views them with the same level of disgust that the audience does. My argument here and for the rest of the essay is that his world is not one that is nearly as mean-spirited but there is something more profound underneath the misinterpretation of his brutal depictions. There is humor to be had in Solondz's writing, but it does not come from a condescending glance of a camera. Solondz himself is not unlike the pathetic and sad individuals that he depicts.

Solondz's debut full-length feature, *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), is perhaps the guiltiest of all of his films. It is the one that seems to most mean-spirited, the most condescending, and most self-damning. It's a movie about bullying and apparently it is trying to say something productive about bullying, but watching it with other people it becomes abundantly clear that Solondz's humor can be a satire of the bullying culture from one set of eyes and a ringing endorsement to another. Credit to him as a writer, he manages to nail the casual homophobic and sexist rhetoric of teenagers, which is probably more difficult than it seems, but at the same time, the set pieces are structured in such a way that the bullying seems endorsed.

The brutal behavior shown towards the film's protagonist, Dawn Wiener, is frequently played up for laughs. Her attempt to return this bullying is pathetic, and it's played up for comedy as well. There's something a bit more tragic working underneath here and it's the lack of attention Dawn receives. The vantage point of the parents is limited, and it actually does illustrate a sound point about the world of middle school being so separated from actual adults and other figures of authority. Dawn Wiener is the catalyst for the film and, excuse the cliché, but we see things through her eyes. Her life is terrifying and she is understandably terrified, but it's that fear that helps operate her through a series of terrible personal decisions towards the film's end. Her bully, Brandon, who frequently threatens her with sexual abuse, becomes her best friend—a pseudo-boyfriend even—and becomes remarkably sympathetic.

It's a weird turn for the film, but it manages to reverse the table on bullying by somehow implying that the victim is sometimes just as bad. It's a cycle as evidenced by Dawn's tirade against her friend, Ralph. Brandon's final characterization is representative of Solondz's work. He's a terrible person at the surface, who is revealed to be human, and so damn human that some people get tricked into sympathizing with him. Dawn's arc is the opposite, as she receives the brunt of the bullying for seventy some minutes and then retaliates the only way that seems rational: by bullying back. The final turn produces Brandon as sympathetic and Dawn as not, but it should be more complicated than that. Brandon's own home life isn't an excuse for his behavior, but it does bring up a larger problem, one which Solondz uses merely as a tool to provide some leverage for the character's actions. It seems to downplay Dawn's own problems, she is, after all, "just" being bullied at school, where as he has a terrible home life and lives with a parental figure he loathes. This might be putting Dawn's life into some perspective, but it isn't. She's middle class, but her problems seem to be the same: her home life is just as fractured. Her

parents seem like more superficially “reasonable” people than Brandon’s father but they are just as oblivious and mean. The final sentiment for Solondz seems to be that everyone is messed up and everyone has their problems, but I personally find something aching beneath the surface. This is after all a tragic movie that throws the red herring of its deadpan comedy to distract the audience from something really heartbreaking: a little girl is alone and unloved. It’s still a comedy, though. The biggest problem in the film’s interpretation might be that the audience could be laughing at Dawn’s expense or because they can relate with her. This is a problem that Solondz himself is well aware of: “There can be a blurry line between laughing at the expense of a character and laughing at the recognition of something painful and true. But blurry as it may be, it is nevertheless unmistakable, and sometimes the laughter I hear makes me wince.” (qtd. in Nunez)

Solondz’s follow-up film, *Happiness* (1998), immediately addresses the belief that everyone is messed up, as the film seems built upon a group of people, all of whom are middle aged and white, dealing with a bunch of bizarre feelings and events. The film is probably best remembered for producing a semi-sympathetic portrait of a pedophile. Solondz’s dissection of Middle America seems like a damning attack on suburban culture, but it seems that a lot of inspiration comes from there for him. His world does not seem that unlike David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986), a picturesque American small town with a lot of disturbing things happening underneath it. Unlike Lynch, though, the disturbing elements of Solondz work are magnified by the fact that they are all grounded in reality. Of course, the film is once again a comedy, but again the question of seeing the intended humor in it is blurry. There are some that argue the film absolutely belongs in the horror genre, “While at face value *Happiness* would seem to elude classification as a horror film, it addresses these issues [of masculinity] through the generic

conventions of the horror film, employing many of the codes and conventions of horror, evoking an effect on the body of the spectator that is in keeping with the traditional appeal of the genre” (Wadenius) .

It seems that part of Solondz’s audience is the exact individuals he intends to lampoon, and there’s something weirdly heartbreaking about that scenario. Solondz’s uncomplicated aesthetic seems to support this, as his camera doesn’t move very often. The shots are static and linger on the subjects, which are seldom glamorized or made up to look particularly beautiful. This makes his scenes ring with a sense of deadpan comedy, all of the mundane reactions amplified by the realistic sound design. It’s sometimes a staring contest between the camera and the actors. The things like the faint buzzing of a fan are easily heard in his set ups, and make the situation feel more like reality. “The illusion of realism, in short, is a kind of *mise-en-scene* that makes us believe that the images are of an everyday world that is simply ‘there.’” (Corrigan 49) Although, Solondz’s films are not gritty, they do have the essence of realism on the basis that he doesn’t stylize his images, not in an “arthouse” manner or in a slick, mainstream Hollywood way. He is not a careless director, however.

There is a sequence in *Happiness* that is molded from the same structure as one in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. In the latter, Dawn Wiener receives a phone call from Brandon where he threatens to rape her. She is in the foreground of the deep focus shot and her family, unaware of the nature of the phone call sits peacefully in the background. The same deep focus shot is used in *Happiness*, where Joy Jordan receives a phone call at work informing her that Andy, who she briefly dated, has killed himself. Her coworkers are as oblivious as Dawn’s family. It’s an interesting set piece on its own, but the fact that Solondz has repeated it makes it even more fascinating. Both characters are somewhat crippled by their own loneliness, and their inability to

communicate with others is one of just many sources for their anxiety. It might go to show that Dawn's struggle is not a temporary one, sure "bullying" in the form she is enduring it will probably end by High School, but her experiences are not devoid of problems from thereafter. Solondz's work mostly seems problematic because it is so easily to be misinterpreted. He once said that "My movies are not for everybody, especially for people who like them" which implies that he is well aware that audiences receive his heartbreaking portraits for merely their comedic value, as being nothing much more cartoonish and misanthropic. There is humanism to his work, but it's hard to grab on to, but reading through Solondz's own interviews, it becomes very evident that he doesn't see the mocking attitude that so many read into his work. There's an emotional resonance to his films that can be felt even as the other audience members are too preoccupied with laughing at one is ultimately, at least from Solondz's own testimony, not exactly meant to be amusing. The line between satire and realism is thin and blurry, but it makes it all the more meaningful when the experience you have with a film is not like the experience most of the audience has with it.

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Coming to Terms: *Memento*

Skye McCullough

In Christopher Nolan's 2000 film, *Memento*, Leonard Shelby, an ex-insurance investigator, is searching for the man who raped and murdered his wife in order to avenge her death. The only problem is, during the struggle to help his wife, Leonard received a condition that prohibits him from creating any new memories. Much like one suffering from Alzheimer's disease, he cannot remember anything that happened after the murder, which makes his investigation that much more difficult. In this film, Nolan uses form, narration, and genre to leave the audience with more questions at the end of the film than they had at the start. These questions have no discernible answers, but leaves viewers wondering long after the credits have rolled.

Film form, as defined by Barsam and Monahan is, "the means by which the content or subject is expressed" (28). Film form can include patterns seen in the film, the lighting used, the movement alluded to, and the manipulation of space and time (28-39). Films are meant to relay time and space in creative and interesting ways, but it is uncommon to find a narrative told in a non-linear form that can concisely and coherently express its intent. In *Memento*, the story is told, not chronologically, but backwards with select scenes of chronology. Why has Nolan chosen to tell the story in this way? In this film, Leonard only remembers what he learned before his accident. He is completely in the dark about any other elements of his past and by telling the story backwards, Nolan has made the audience as ignorant as his narrator. This ignorance further adds to the mystery behind Leonard's life and serves to make the viewer experience the same

frustrations that plague their protagonist.

Why has Nolan chosen to have the film narrated in such a way? Why Leonard? Leonard is an unreliable, restricted narrator. It is through his mind's eye that we, the audience, are seeing the action of the plot, but his mind is the most unreliable vessel in the film. In the color scenes of non-chronology, Leonard relies on his photographs and handwriting (tattoos) to tell him what he should believe. Each scene is a piece that needs to be put back into a puzzle, but the pieces often don't show their real meanings until their prefacing actions are viewed. Thus, a busted lip 40 minutes into the film can be caused by an abusive drug addict, but the same lip 45 minutes into the movie is caused by the film's protagonist, who is none the wiser. Leonard constantly forgets or is manipulated into distorting events which adds uncertainty and mystery to his own life story.

The black and white segments in the film, on the other hand, are told in chronological order and mirror the non-linear scenes of color; for every scene in color, there is one in monochrome. These scenes are shot in a much more detached or objective way. The camera narrates the story from a 3rd person angle in the monochromatic scenes whereas it seems to follow more a 1st person narration in the scenes of color. The audience sees all of what is going on in the black and white scenes; we are not limited to what Leonard is seeing or doing as we are in the color scenes in which the camera favors close ups or shots from behind the protagonist. The colorless scenes also serve as clarification for the primary story line. It is in these scenes that the audience learns the full story of Sammy Jankis who, at that point, has already been alluded to multiple times in the film, as well as many other repetitive images and concepts.

In many narrative films, repetition, or the number of times in which a story element recurs in the plot, is an important aspect of its narrative form (Barsam and Monahan 133). In

Memento, because of his constant confusion, Leonard often leads his life through repetition and routine. Just as Leonard learns through repetition, so too does the audience learn through the reoccurring elements in the film. One of the most pivotal repetitions in this film is, again, the story of Sammy Jankis. The audience is introduced to Sammy in the first of the black and white scene in which Leonard is explaining his day to day routine. Sammy has the same condition as Leonard and Leonard uses Sammy's story throughout the plot in order to help explain his own situation. In fact, Sammy Jankis is referred to at many different points in the plot, such as when Leonard speaks of the need to fake recognition even if you cannot remember a person. In fact, Sammy is used so often, that he can be considered a main motif, or reoccurring subject, of the film. Without Leonard's explanation of Sammy's memory condition, we would have little knowledge of his own. Nolan also leaves us with the uncertain distinction between Sammy and Leonard. Did Sammy have the same condition as Leonard, or is Sammy just a character that Leonard has created in order to cope with the unsavory events of his past?

Other reoccurring subjects of the film are both Leonard's tattoos and his Polaroid photographs. These are Leonard's main forms of communication with himself. He is constantly telling the audience that he has learned to trust his own handwriting and so, we too begin to trust it. Because Leonard is so sure of his facts, the audience becomes convinced that what they are reading on his body or seeing in the photos is true. It is a constant surprise to the viewer when they realize that Leonard had altered his facts and that nothing that he has written can be known for sure. We learn that that is not his car, we learn that those are not his clothes, what other information has he inadvertently altered? As we come to know the falsehoods in Leonard's reasoning, we start questioning what we know, and what we are meant to believe.

Memento is very obviously categorized as film noir or a neo-noir with touches of suspense with aspects of a thriller: the convoluted narrative, non-linear storyline, and the narrator's skewed perspective all hint at these facts. Film noir focuses on the darker, more realistic aspects of life (Barsam and Monahan 86). This film shows the audience a character with a very realistic memory disorder living a very bleak existence; one who doesn't know or understand the man that he has become. He can only recall events and facts for moments and if he doesn't record them fast enough, they are lost forever. Leonard lives in the shadows of his previous life, existing only for vengeance. Accordingly, this film also falls under the subcategory of the "revenge film" which is often a function of film noir. Leonard even comments that John G. took away his ability to live his life and that his only driving force left was his need for revenge, yet the audience still looks favorably on Leonard because subconsciously we want our protagonist to come out on top. Besides, everyone loves a good vigilante.

Nonetheless, this film exposes the audience the dark side of the human condition—a fallen hero, a doomed love—with a constant atmosphere of anxiety and suspense. The mood of the film is very bleak, melancholy, and unforgiving as we follow our protagonist who is seeking retribution for the wrong done to him and will do anything, even kill, in order to make it right. Leonard must solve the puzzle of his wife's murder using only the "facts" that he has recorded in his police file or on his body. The rub is, how can Leonard ever be sure of his own facts and conceptions?

By the end of the film, the audience is so emotionally invested in the characters and the plot line, that discussions proceed weeks after its viewing. There is no doubt that understanding the structure of *Memento* is not an easy task, especially if it is your first time watching the movie,

but it is interesting to dissect how Nolan tries to help his viewers out in comprehending the film. Nolan has used his film's form, narration, and genre to further confuse the viewer and leave the conclusion of the story completely up to interpretation. Was Leonard actually describing his own circumstances when he told the story of Sammy Jankis? How many deplorable things has he done in his continuous search for John G? Can we really trust Teddy? Can we really trust Leonard? These are the questions that eat at the mind of the viewer and have them watching again and again trying to discern the meaning of it all.

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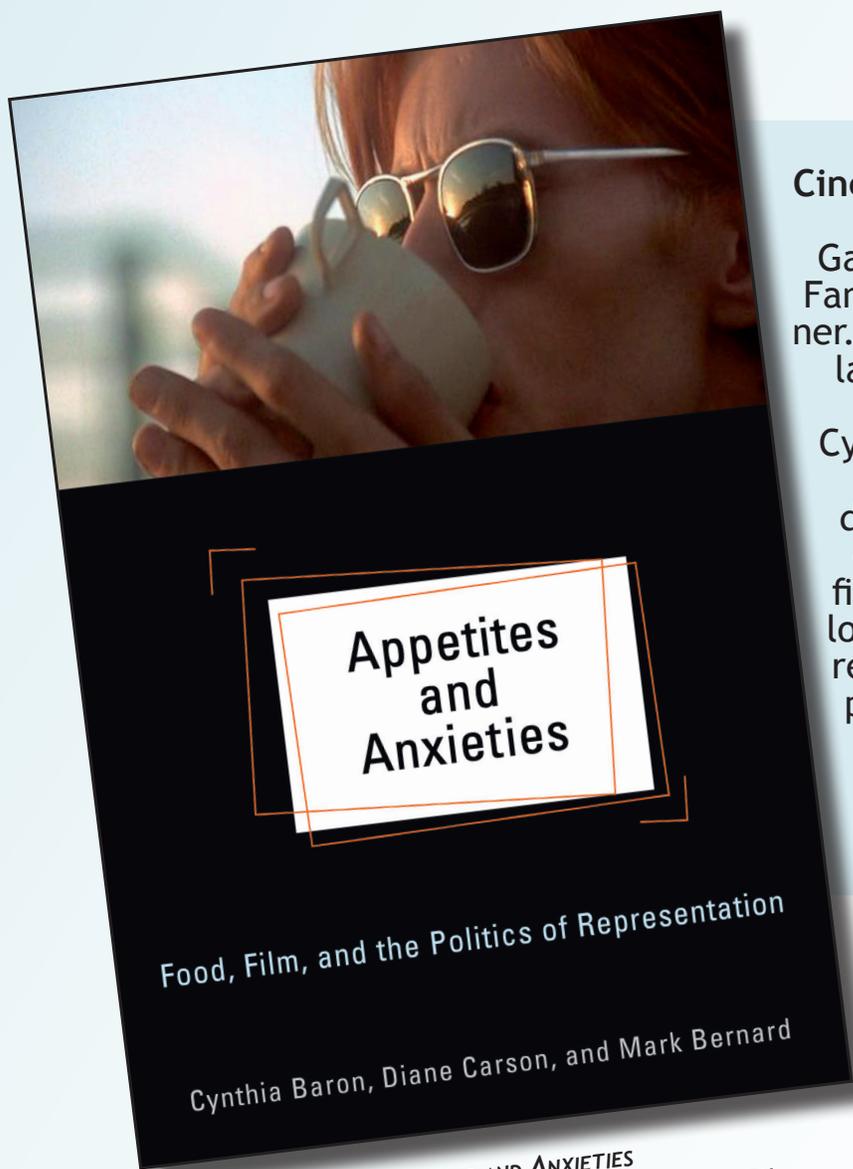
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