

Who Watches This Stuff?!  
The Place of Morality in Film Criticism

by

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Class of 2016

A thesis (or essay) submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors from the College of Film and the Moving  
Image

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm still in disbelief that my experience as a Wesleyan film major has culminated in this privilege. This project has been an amazing experience that has challenged and rewarded me in ways I could have never imagined. Of course, all the work I've done up to this point would mean nothing without the support of some very important people.

First, every fighter needs his Mr. Miyagi, and for this I need to thank my advisor, A.O. Scott. Ever since I first came to him with the idea for this paper, he's been the perfect guide for my curiosity. His sheer knowledge and wisdom on the subject of criticism is totally unmatched, and his role as a guide, an editor, and a friend, has been essential to this project. This was definitely new territory for the both of us, yet I don't think I could have possibly asked for a more intelligent, insightful, and supportive, advisor.

Of course, much like Leatherface, I probably wouldn't be where I am without the support of my loving family. I don't think I can ever show my parents enough gratitude for all the support they gave me as I developed my own passions and obsessions. I also need to thank my brother Leo, who's always been a friend, and a source of new ideas. He first introduced me to the Roger Ebert segment that partially inspired this thesis, so without him this all might not have happened.

Then, of course, there are the High Sheriffs of the Wesleyan Film Department. Jeanine Basinger, Scott Higgins, Leo Lensing, and Lea Carlson have all been of a tremendous help, both throughout this project, and my entire time at Wesleyan. The experiences I've had with this department in the past four years have made an invaluable impact on who I am today, and what I will gain from the world in the years to come.

I also need to thank my roommates in Apartment 312, our personal house of horrors. Colleflups Phillips, Alex Hensley, Ammar Zafar, and Saahil Bhargava. These four boys have always been there whenever I've needed someone to bounce ideas off of, or when I just needed a friend to watch a crazy movie with. They've provided moral support, necessary distractions, and a hell of a lot of laughs.

On a slightly more obtuse note, I need to give due gratitude to Joe R. Lansdale the author who first taught me that line between trash and art isn't always as great as it might seem. I also need to thank Brad Jones, A.K.A. The Cinema Snob, who, since my mid teens, taught me to see the lighter side in even the most disturbing subject matters.

Lastly, I want to thank Lloyd Kaufman for, if nothing else, teaching me that there's no shame in loving something really fucking weird.

## **INTRODUCTION**

When I was growing up, my family was never afraid of violent movies, and my parents were usually willing to overlook the R rating of a DVD, so long as its artistic merit justified the content. When I was twelve, my family sat down and watched *Goodfellas*; when I was thirteen my parents ok'd *Fight Club*; and when I was fourteen, my Dad let me watch *A Clockwork Orange*, on the condition that I read the book first. They stood by these decisions because they believed that these were genuinely good movies that deserved to be seen.

In the years that followed, I steadily become acclimated to the extremes movies could reach; sights like Rhodes getting torn in half by zombies in *Day of the Dead*, or Palmer's head morphing into a spider in *The Thing*, had slowly given me a high capacity for gore, violence, nudity, and general insanity. So I was a little surprised when my mother told me that she had walked out of the cinema during the climax of *Django Unchained*. Sure, the ending was brutal, but it couldn't compare to the climactic bloodbath of *Kill Bill*, or the head-carving finale of *Inglorious Basterds*.

But then she told me that it was because of the Sandy Hook shooting. Even though she was in a different country when it happened, she still felt the pain of such a meaningless tragedy and, two months later, just couldn't sit and watch a cowboy gun down a family, regardless of whether they had it coming or not. She said that watching that kind of violence just felt morally wrong.

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The goal of this thesis is to explore the fascinating phenomenon of moral indignation. More specifically, I wish to explore how this feeling relates to the critic, what kinds of films can evoke this repulsion, and how critics express this feeling.

Moral indignation plays a unique role in critical argument, because it's rarely based on logic or reasoning. It can be difficult to coherently argue, but if done right, arguments based on morals can also be nearly impossible to contradict, because they're entirely drawn from deeply personal beliefs. As a meat eater I can't completely contradict the reasoning of a vegetarian, the best I can do is assert that my own philosophy has led me to a different conclusion. This reasoning can be tricky for a critic because it requires them to analyze the movie in a way that reveals their own personal values. That said, it can also allow the critic to write about a work of art in a way that doesn't just disparage the piece, but outright damns it. It's one thing when a critic uses words like "unremarkable", "dull", and "poorly-written"; it's quite another when words like "sick", "misogynistic", and "sadistic" creep into the mix.

Numerous theorists have written about the relation between art and obscenity, and they reach vastly different conclusions. Crispin Starwell, for example, uses his book *Obscenity, Anarchy, and Reality*<sup>1</sup> to posit that revulsion is really just the shock of being confronted with reality. He argues that, in much the same way that stubbing our toe reminds us of our own fragile bodies, watching a movie's serial killer stalk a female victim is so distressing because it shows the male-female

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<sup>1</sup> Sartwell, Crispin. *Obscenity, Anarchy, Reality*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. Print. Pg. 159.

dynamic stripped down to its most primitive aggression. In contrast, Laura Kipnis, in her essay “I’m Offended”<sup>2</sup> asserts that if we find ourselves sickened by what we view on the screen, it’s usually not by the act itself, but rather by the values that this depiction inherently encourages. Kipnis recounts her experience watching the documentary *Crumb* and feeling nauseated by its central figure, purely because of how he reveled in his own misogyny and sexual frustration; she states “Obscenity isn’t just a matter of obscene content, it’s also a particular sort of form, a repetition, the compulsive return to a scene. Something’s being revisited, memorialized.”<sup>3</sup>

When a film triggers feelings of revulsion rather than mere distaste, the critic’s review is usually all the more memorable, because their dismissal of the film carries a degree of urgency. In his essay “The Obscene in Everyday Life”<sup>4</sup> Micheal Taussig asserts that when we feel offended, we inherently believe our sensibilities are under attack. As a result, so much of the vitriol and passion that a critic can infuse into their work can stem not only from their artistic opinions, but from an instinctive need to defend their sense of right and wrong.

In order to try and understand the cause-and-effect process of moral repulsion, I have decided to embark upon a two-part inquiry. The first part will look at four of the most important critics in film history, exploring the kinds of films that

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<sup>2</sup> Kipnis, Laura. “I’m Offended.” Williams, Charles Francis, and Loren Glass, eds. *Obscenity and the Limits of Liberalism*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011. Print. Pg.

<sup>3</sup> Kipnis, Laura. “I’m Offended.” Charles Francis Williams, and Loren Glass, eds. *Obscenity and the Limits of Liberalism*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011. Print. Pg. 127

<sup>4</sup> Taussig, Micheal. “I’m Offended.” Charles Francis Williams, and Loren Glass, eds. *Obscenity and the Limits of Liberalism*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011. Print. Pg. 15

managed to crack them, and how they expressed their anger. The second part is an exercise in ways of thinking, wherein I have taken four highly volatile films, and have explored just what is required to be either be offended by them or stand in their favor. This is a project about sex and violence, art and anger; ultimately, it's about what a critic does when their subject seems to have no redeeming social value.

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When this project was in its early stages, a lot of people I talked to brought up what they loosely termed the “*Triumph of The Will* Dilemma” (also known as the “*Birth of A Nation* Complication”). It's the uneasy awareness that as film evolved as a medium throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it also memorialized some of the ugliest aspects of social history. There are countless examples of films that were groundbreaking from a technical perspective, yet endorsed a worldview that is abhorrent by modern standards. The problem with exploring these ethical dilemmas is that they stand as more an issue of film history than of film criticism; while many critics certainly moonlight as historians, as professionals, their task is to analyze the films currently on hand.

It was for a similar reason that I decided against making this thesis some kind of greatest-hits list of controversial films. I won't be writing about the movies that usually come up in the “Top 10 most offensive films of all time!” lists that circulate the web (e.g. *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Salo*, *Hostel*). Again, even though these kinds of films are certainly complex in their own right, there's also something remarkably simple to them. The truth is, there are always going to be artists who confuse “shocking” with “artistic”, and try to push the public's buttons for the sake of

attention. Some filmmakers do know how to use volatile material for the sake of an artistic message, but for every David Cronenberg, there will be over a dozen Tom Six's and Eli Roth's who manage to inexplicably get their creations into the limelight. Bush's

The third decision I made was to keep this project focused on the experiences of the critic. This meant that the issue of censorship would largely be off the table (except when it was relevant to the critics' story). Again, this was simply a subject that was too complex, and too far removed from the dilemma that I wished to focus on. I will explore some of the economic and sociological factors that can help explain the impact of a certain film, but only when it's relevant to how the critics interpreted the film's meaning. A critic will pretty much always watch the theatrical copy of a release and judge it accordingly.

With these three conditions in mind, I decided that the most interesting way to analyze this problem would be to focus on how a few different critics dealt with the trends of a specific point in time. First, I will first be looking at one particular case study: the downfall of Bossley Crowther, the long-serving critic of and his eventual demotion at the New York Times. This incident is important because it stands as a worst case scenario, revealing just how much a critic risks when they expose their personal values through their hatred of a film. This incident also serves as a prelude to the critics I will later focus on.

From there, I will be looking at on three critical personalities, and the kinds of challenges that they faced across the 1980's. The 80's are a fascinating time in film history, because there was such a strange nexus of forces within the industry. For one

thing, this was a time when critics were starting to gain more respect than ever, with people like Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel delivering their thoughts to millions through their syndicated television shows. At the same time, the 80's also became a period of cinematic stagnation. While the 70's is seen as the decade that re-defined film with the help of such masters as Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, and the 90's would be known for such wunderkinds as Kevin Smith, Quentin Tarantino, and David Fincher, the 80's has largely been remembered as a time of excess. It was defined by action stars (Schwarzenegger, Stallone, Willis, Norris), an over-saturation of genre films (slashers, buddy cops movies, and Star Wars knockoffs), and by films that celebrated hedonism (raunchy sex comedies like *Porkies* and, basically, every film put out by the producers Golan and Globus).

Through the 80's, I have decided to focus on three critics who faced their own, unique crises. First, there's Roger Ebert, who waged a one-man war against the rising glut of slasher films. Next, I have looked at Pauline Kael, who fought hard against the vigilante films of the 70's, only to watch their values become Hollywood's new norm. Finally, I look at Joe Bob Briggs, a critic who tried to completely turn the values of criticism upside-down, only to make himself more controversial than the films he dealt with.

The final chapter is then an attempt to put some of the lessons from these critics into practice. I will be looking at four controversial films that made a major impact throughout this period. Three of the films evoked polarizing reactions from the three critics I've looked at, so I have written reviews from two perspectives: one that sees the films as harmful and offensive, and another that sees them as innocuous,

if not brilliant in their own way. The fourth film I look at is one that, while treading upon dangerous territory, managed to please Ebert, Kael, and Briggs; in this case, I'll try to understand what, exactly, it did right to achieve this impossible task.

I'd be lying if I said that this project didn't end up with me watching a few films I really wish I hadn't. However, I believe that the stakes of this issue are important, because they speak to more than just how certain films elicit certain reactions. I believe that analyzing the critical phenomenon of moral disgust provides a uniquely candid picture of the relationship between critics, the films that they watch, and the audience that they reach.

## **Chapter 1. The Sad Tale of Bosley Crowther**

It's always been assumed that a critic is able to exert a certain power over a film by using their column to deny the movie an audience. Yet, following the release of *Bonnie and Clyde*, this dynamic was thrown upside down. In the lead-up to its premier at the *1967 World's Fair Film Festival*, Warner Bros was nervously shuffling Arthur Penn's strange film into the limelight, totally unaware of how they could sell something that took French new-wave sensibilities and applied them to an American criminal folk-tale. By the end of that year, however, the film had hit the US by storm, grossing \$23 million and becoming the studio's second highest grossing film of all time<sup>5</sup>, while also gaining ten Oscar nominations in the process. However, after its immediate release, the film was almost dead on arrival, thanks to the efforts of just one man.

The only American representative at the *World's Fair Film Festival* was Bosley Crowther, the head film critic of *The New York Times*. On August 6, he wrote

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<sup>5</sup> Harris, Mark. *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood*. New York: Penguin Press, 2008. Pg. 365.

a piece titled “Shoot-Em-Up Film Opens World Fete” which, while intended as a recap of the first two days of the festival, became almost entirely occupied by his hatred of the film. Beginning with the condemnation “Hollywood moviemakers seem to have a knack of putting the worst foot forward at international film festivals,”<sup>6</sup> the short piece called *Bonnie and Clyde* a “wild, jazzy farce melodrama”<sup>7</sup> attacking for its vast historical liberties, and its tonal mix of comedy and violent tragedy, thereby recreating events “as though it were funny instead of sordid and grim.”<sup>8</sup> Lastly, he wrote off the audience’s applause of the film, calling it a symptom of “how delirious these festival audiences can be.”<sup>9</sup>

As harsh as this initial reaction might seem, it turned out to be just the start of Crowther’s anger. Ten days after his initial festival thoughts, Crowther wrote a longer review, labelling *Bonnie and Clyde* both “a cheap piece of bald-faced slapstick comedy”<sup>10</sup>, and “strangely antique, sentimental claptrap”<sup>11</sup>. He claimed that its Americana campiness turned the titular couple into “the Beverly Hillbillies of next year,”<sup>12</sup> and he dismissed the tone by accusing Arthur Penn of “aggressively”<sup>13</sup> splashing blood onto otherwise comic scenes. Most pointedly, he asserted that the

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<sup>6</sup> Crowther, Bosley. "SHOOT-EM-UP FILM OPENS WORLD FETE." *The New York Times*, August 07, 1967. ProQuest.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Crowther, Bosley. "Screen: 'Bonnie and Clyde' Arrives: Careers of Murderers Pictured as Farce." *The New York Times*, August 14, 1967. ProQuest.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

films overall amoral approach to the Bonnie and Clyde fable was “as pointless as it is lacking in taste”<sup>14</sup>.

To appreciate just how catastrophic this initial review might have been, one needs to understand the truly important role Crowther played at the time. He had written for *The New York Times* since 1940, and while a shameless lover of classic Hollywood values, he had also stood as one of the most tireless proponents of foreign cinema. Throughout the late 40s and early 50s, he proudly championed the Italian neo-realist movement and frequently promoted the works of Ingmar Bergman and Roberto Rossellini. This passion even placed him at the epicenter of controversy when he emphatically supported Rossellini’s 1948 film *The Miracle*, which numerous Catholic organizations condemned for its story of a pregnant woman who falsely believed her child to be an immaculate conception. In spite of the wave of hate mail that his stance incurred, Crowther went so far as to write a six-page defense of movie in a 1951 issue of *The Atlantic*, claiming that censoring the film would mean denying “the same freedom for the medium that is enjoyed by the over-all press.”<sup>15</sup> By the late 1960’s, Crowther had established himself as a fixture within both *The New York Times* and the international film scene. In his book *Pictures at A Revolution*, historian Mark Harris provides a perfect example of Crowther’s power; in 1950, his hatred of the Orson Welles comedy *Falstaff* actually convinced its US distributor to avoid opening the film in New York. Harris summarizes Crowther’s crucial role in the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Crowther, Bosley. "The Strange Case Of The Miracle." *Atlantic* 01 Jan. 1951. Print.

festival circuit by explaining that “[he] delighted in being a kingmaker- and sometimes an executioner- at international festivals”<sup>16</sup>.

If Warner Brothers was nervous about *Bonnie and Clyde* before its release, Crowther’s attack left the studio terrified. Following a two month run localized largely around Manhattan, and a small, 35-theater tour of the southwest, the film was pulled from theaters. In all fairness, Crowther wasn’t the film’s only detractor. Time Magazine’s Alan Rich had called it “a strange and purposeless mingling of fact and claptrap,”<sup>17</sup> while Newsweek’s Joe Morgenstern had labeled it “a squalid shoot-‘em-up for the modern age”<sup>18</sup>. Yet, no other critic managed to hit the film where it hurt quite as much as Crowther. On September 24, an interview with the films producer and star, Warren Beatty, revealed just how much it had stung. In spite of the fantastic reviews the film had been receiving in London (where the interview was conducted), Beatty found himself pensively pacing his hotel room and brandishing a copy of the New York times review. “What really hurts” he had said, “is that one lousy review in the New York Times. Bosley Crowther says your movie is a glorification of violence, a cheap display of sentimental claptrap and that’s that. The New York Times has spoken, hallelujah.”<sup>19</sup> It’s worth noting that the writer of said interview was, himself, a tremendous supporter of *Bonnie and Clyde*; a young critic who had just started his career at *The Chicago Sun-Times*, by the name of Roger Ebert.

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<sup>16</sup> Harris. *Pictures at a Revolution*. Pg. 143.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ebert, Roger. *Awake in the Dark: The Best of Roger Ebert ; Forty Years of Reviews, Essays, and Interviews*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2006. Print. Pg. 4

On September 25, Ebert had a chance to fully express his love of the movie. He gave it four out of four stars, calling it “a milestone of American movies, a work of truth and brilliance.”<sup>20</sup> He described the tone of the movie as “pitilessly cruel, filled with sympathy, nauseating, funny, heartbreaking, and astonishingly beautiful.”<sup>21</sup> Part of the beauty of Ebert’s review is that it almost reads like something written with the gift of retrospect; he was able to subtly link the film’s violence to the horrors of the Vietnam war, and the hokey Americanisms to the growing disillusionment of America’s youth. Most profoundly, he was able to look at the film as something that defined a very specific point in history. He concluded his review by declaring “The fact that the story is set thirty-five years ago doesn’t mean a thing. It had to be set sometime. But it was made now and it’s about us.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet, as powerful as Ebert’s review was, it was just part of a wave that had already been gaining momentum. Even though Warner Bros had given the film a practically moot release outside of New York, it had still become an outstanding hit within Manhattan. Eventually, after a great deal of personal intervention on Beatty’s behalf, the movie found its way back into theatres. A week after his unfavorable review, Morgenstern published a second piece totally countering his previous position. His new review began with the disclaimer “I am sorry to say that I consider [the previous] review to be grossly unfair and regrettably inaccurate. I am sorrier to say I wrote it,” before going on to call the film “scene after scene of dazzling

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<sup>20</sup> Ebert. Pg. 104

<sup>21</sup> Ebert. Pg. 105

<sup>22</sup> Ebert. Pg. 107

artistry”<sup>23</sup>. Between his two reviews, Morgenstern had gone to re-watch the film, this time seeing it in a sold-out theatre, surrounded by an audience who had laughed and cheered the whole time. It also didn’t help that, at a dinner party, he’d received a smug tongue lashing from a rising freelancer by the name of Pauline Kael.

On October 21, Kael wrote a twenty-three-page review for *The New Yorker* that not only vehemently praised the film, but also took some unsubtle jabs at its contrarians. Its opening line proclaimed “How do you make a good movie in this country without being jumped on? *Bonnie and Clyde* is the most excitingly American movie since the *Manchurian Candidate*.”<sup>24</sup> Her review wasn’t quite as glowing as Ebert’s- she took particular issue with the impotency subplot- yet what stood out was her willingness to go beyond the movie and analyze what its success said about its audiences. “People in the audience at *Bonnie and Clyde* are laughing,” she wrote, “they’re demonstrating that they’re not stooges- that they appreciate the joke- when they catch the first bullet in the face.”<sup>25</sup>

In all likelihood, Kael didn’t mean to call Crowther a stooge, but that didn’t stop a flood of later critics from taking him on. *The New Yorker*’s Penelope Gilliatt wrote “Bonnie and Clyde could look like a celebration of gangster glamor only to a man with a head full of wood shavings.”<sup>26</sup> *Variety* went so far as to assert that Crowther had “hurt the cause of serious filmmaking in America by shooting down a

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<sup>23</sup> Harris. *Pictures at a Revolution*. Pg. 343.

<sup>24</sup> Kael, Pauline. "Onward and Upward With The Arts." *The New Yorker* 21 Oct. 1967: 147-71. Print

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Harris, Mark. *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood*. New York: Penguin Press, 2008. Pg. 344.

work of art.”<sup>27</sup> Even *The New York Times* began running a series of letters that accused Crowther of being “blinded” and “insensitive”<sup>28</sup>, and asserted that he wanted to return American cinema to practices of decades-old censorship.

It is worth noting that, just when the general public was starting to discover how much it loved *Bonnie and Clyde*, Crowther took his last chance to save face, and blew it up completely. He wrote a third piece in early September, which actually began by acknowledging the vast outpouring of support from audience members. “Quite as puzzling to me as the production of feelings of empathy and sorrow for a couple of slap-happy killers,” Crowther wrote, “is the upsurge of passionate expressions of admiration and defense of the film.”<sup>29</sup> Through the beginning of the article, he showed some understanding of the film’s originality, describing it as an experiment into the “abstraction of violence.”<sup>30</sup> He promptly shot himself in the foot, however, by trying to contradict this portrayal by directly quoting newspapers from the time of the actual crime-spree, reciting how they described the couple as “the most ruthless and kill-crazy outlaws,”<sup>31</sup> as if these primary sources could serve as some kind of smoking gun to prove his case. Even more bizarrely, he picked apart the idea of an ironic audience being in on the joke with, perhaps, the strangest comparison possible. He wrote, “by this same line of reckoning, one could build up a theme of sympathy and sadness on the thought that the system was the enemy of a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Crowther, Bosley. "Run, Bonnie and Clyde: Run, Bonnie." *The New York Times*, September 03, 1967. ProQuest.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

character named Lee Harvey Oswald...or that the irony of Hitler's terror was that he was so confused by his early rejection that he didn't realize the awfulness of the violence he caused."<sup>32</sup>

In December- shortly after Kael had been offered the position of film critic for *The New Yorker* -Crowther was reassigned to the Roving Reporter desk and, in September of the following year, he left the *Times*.

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Looking at this strange series of events with the gift of hindsight, it's easy to assign archetypes to its players, with Kael and Ebert representing the funky, new, free-love generation; and Crowther standing in the corner, a stubborn member of the old guard. But the gap between these critics wasn't as great as it might seem. At one point in her review, Kael talked about the violence in *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Dirty Dozen* (which she, much like Crowther, found "morally offensive"<sup>33</sup>) and took an unsubtle stab at Crowther, asserting, "too many people - including some movie reviewers - want the law to take the job of movie criticism."<sup>34</sup> The irony of this claim is that Crowther had spent so much of his career fighting against censorship; when, in 1959, the Supreme Court ruled that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* held redeeming social values, he called the decision a "victory for ideas."<sup>35</sup> Crowther never wanted violent movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* to be taken away; he just never wanted them to be

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Kael, Pauline. "Onward and Upward With The Arts." *New Yorker* 21 Oct. 1967: 147-71. Print

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Haberski, Raymond J. *Freedom to Offend: How New York Remade Movie Culture*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007. Pg. 156.

made in the first place. Throughout all three of his pieces, he repeatedly treated the violence of *Bonnie and Clyde* as the personal responsibility of its director, precisely because he thought that Penn, as a filmmaker, needed to hold himself to a higher standard. Crowther believed that a director should have the viewer's best interests at heart. This meant that conveying real-life murders as humorous was tantamount to lying to the audience, and thereby dishonoring history. What Crowther just couldn't seem to comprehend was that history wasn't being twisted in *Bonnie and Clyde*, it was just being made irrelevant. Arthur Penn was intent on making a film that explored the very nature of the American folk tale, trying to expose its audience to both its other-worldly charm and its horrible consequences.

Maybe it's because Ebert and Kael hadn't spent as much time working as full staff-writers, and could therefore look at the violence with the open eyes that that kind of irony usually requires; Crowther, meanwhile, had been taking films seriously, and making a case for them to be taken seriously, for over twenty-five years. Maybe Crowther couldn't keep up because he was of another time, the generation that had optimistically believed in conquering the hardships of the 30's and 40's, rather than the generation that had watched the Vietnam war kill the American dream.

Twenty-five years after its release, *Bonnie and Clyde* would be among the first hundred films to be selected for preservation in the National Film Registry. In this time, the film's profound legacy would be strongly felt in all walks of American cinema, permanently shifting conventions towards violence, and the American conception of the anti-hero. This period would see both Roger Ebert and Pauline Kael challenged by the legacy that the film left. Bosley Crowther, however, died in 1981.

## **Chapter 2. Hand In Your Ticket, And Go**

### **Watch The Geek**

By September, 1980, the PBS show *Sneak Previews* was in its second year, and had made Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel the biggest names in film criticism. The format of placing two critics in a room together and allowing them to talk (and disagree) about movies for half an hour was something that had been unheard of, yet it created the highest rated weekly entertainment series in the history of broadcasting<sup>36</sup>. Part of the show's success came from the elegant simplicity of its format. Each episode would consist of two segments, with each segment focusing on a single movie and culminating in a yes-or-no recommendation.

Yet on September 18<sup>th</sup>, Siskel and Ebert aired an episode that functioned slightly differently. It was titled "Women in Danger," and rather than talking about two movies, the duo addressed an entire trend- the emerging popularity of Slasher films. The episode opened with a trailer for the 1980 horror film *Don't Answer the Phone*, which showed sequences of a woman being stalked throughout

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<sup>36</sup> Stenberg, Joel. "Siskel and Ebert." *Encyclopedia of Television*. The Museum of Broadcast Communications. Web. 09 Jan. 2016.  
<<http://www.museum.tv/eotv/siskelandeb.htm>>.

her own house, before cutting to a very disgruntled Ebert, who stated, “Those ads have been saturating television for the past two years, and the summer and fall of 1980 are the worst yet”<sup>37</sup>. He explained that these movies were all linked by a common set of images- a knife, a woman screaming, a sadistic psychopath- before stating “I think there’s something wrong when images like that become the selling point of an entire genre!”<sup>38</sup> Siskel backed up this assertion by listing the recent glut of titles from that year alone, recalling *Motel Hell*, *Hell Night*, *Prom Night*, *Terror Train*, *Boogey Man*, and *New Years Evil*, just to name a few. As the duo brought out the corresponding posters, the sheer breadth of all these violent movies was dizzying. Indeed, even their decision to show footage of *Don’t Answer the Phone* carried some bitter irony, as the film itself was a carbon-copy of the previous year’s *When a Stranger Calls*.

The duo immediately agreed that these films were gross, tasteless and utterly unenjoyable. From here, the discussion centered on how these films so often featured women as the victims of violence (hence the title “Women in Danger”). Yet what baffled the critics was how movies with no enjoyable qualities could still be turning a profit at the box office. They concluded that the blame didn’t just lie with the films, but also with the audience. If there was a supply of films depicting women being murdered, then it logically followed that violence against women was in high demand. In their eyes, these movies intentionally used female protagonists, solely so

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<sup>37</sup> *Women In Danger (Part 1)*. Dir. Dan Erdman. Prod. Ray Solley. Perf. Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. WTTW/Chicago, 1980. Youtube. *Youtube*. 06 June 2011. Web. 10 Jan. 2016. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iz2N6BMOsyQ>>.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*.

that the audience could enjoy watching them being tormented and stabbed. They even claimed that audience members were actively encouraged to sympathize with the killer, using the first-person shots from *Friday The 13<sup>th</sup>* as proof. Thus, by willingly seeing these movies, the audience was intrinsically supporting and encouraging the violence on screen. As Ebert put it, “These films hate women, and the people who go to them don’t seem to like women either.”<sup>39</sup>

This argument led them to *I Spit On Your Grave* which, in spite of the controversy over its twenty-five-minute-long violent rape scene, had just received a wide release across the US. To Siskel and Ebert, the film represented the pinnacle of misogynistic trash. Ebert not only called it “the most violent, extreme, intense, and nauseating R-rated picture I’ve ever seen,”<sup>40</sup> but recounted how the men sitting next to him in the audience audibly enjoyed the on-screen violence, even calling out encouragements at the screen during the rape sequence; he referred to one of these hecklers as “a vi-carious sex criminal.” *I Spit On Your Grave* played a pivotal role in their argument, not only because it featured such graphic sexual violence, but also because the violence was directed at a woman who was single, independent, and career-oriented. Both Siskel and Ebert mentioned how the female protagonists in these films were often pursuing a new job, or trying to enjoy a vacation, before being attacked. According to them, this meant that the women were being punished for their independence. Their ultimate theory was that the popularity of these films was

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *Women In Danger (Part 2)*. Dir. Dan Erdman. Prod. Ray Solley. Perf. Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. WTTW/Chicago, 1980. Youtube. *Youtube*. 06 June 2011. Web. 10 Jan. 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPgA1OE-XS0&nohtml5=False>.

actually a male rebellion against the woman's liberation movement, and an attempt to keep women in their place on screen or, as Siskel put it, "a primordial response by some very sick people."<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the segment, the two hosts repeatedly asserted that they weren't inherently against violence in film, bringing up *Halloween* as an example of a Slasher they liked precisely because it aligned the viewer with the female protagonist. Yet, near the end, Siskel went so far as to suggest that the popularity of these films could lead to actual violence against women, and asserted that the R rating wasn't enough to keep people from seeing them. Censorship was never overtly called for, yet Siskel did make the rather strange assertion "they outlawed bull fighting because it was cruel... I almost have some feelings towards these films."<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, the segment ended with a call to action, with both critics urging viewers to boycott these films in order to break the trend.

There was, however, something disingenuous about the duo's discussion, primarily because it was riddled with contradictions. They went back and forth over how much agency the viewer had in witnessing this violence, sometimes asserting that every member of the audience was a creepy pervert, other times seemingly believing that a viewer could go into a movie called *I Spit On Your Grave* expecting campy Vincent Price-esque hijinks. They also made a habit of crucially misrepresenting some films. When they showed the POV shots from *Friday The 13<sup>th</sup>* they never mentioned the movie's twist: the killer is a woman avenging the death of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

her son, which necessitated the POV shots as a means of conveying the action while keeping the killer's identity a secret. In condemning *I Spit On Your Grave*, they discussed the rape in the first half of the movie, completely neglecting that the second half is entirely focused on the victim taking brutal revenge on her rapists, literally castrating one of them. It's also worth noting that both Siskel and Ebert had given positive reviews to *Motel Hell* and *The Howling* (although, at the time of recording, the latter hadn't even been released).

There is one point in the segment, however, where their anger starts to reveal a little more about the critics than the films. Referring to a scene of a woman being axed in *Friday The 13<sup>th</sup>*, Siskel exclaimed, "In the past year I must have seen that scene a hundred, a hundred and fifty times, every movie I see has eight, ten just like them, and I'm sick of them; it really has become the most depressing part of my job!" To this, Ebert chipped in "I almost feel like I don't belong in the theatre, because everybody else seems to be happy to be there." This exchange puts their outrage in a new light; maybe the critics weren't upset over the existence of these films, but rather, that their jobs had forced them to stand as the cultural vanguards in the face of a rising trashy trend.

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In 1979, Roger Ebert gave John Carpenter's sleeper hit *Halloween* a four-star review. The opening line exclaimed "Halloween is an absolutely merciless thriller, a

movie so violent and scary that, yes, I would compare it to *Psycho*.”<sup>43</sup> He praised the plot, the performances, and, most importantly, the sheer level of terror it achieved. In describing the dread of the film, he saw it as almost transcendent, calling it “a visceral experience – we aren’t seeing the movie, we’re having it happen to us.”<sup>44</sup> He even made a special point to defend the violence of the movie, arguing that it was justified thanks to Carpenter’s skills as a director, ultimately giving the slightly condescending warning “if you don’t want to have a really terrifying experience, don’t see *Halloween*.”<sup>45</sup>

As it turns out, a lot of people did want a really terrifying experience.

*Halloween*- a movie that had been shot on a \$300,000 budget, and had cut so many corners that its killer was dressed in a \$1.98 William Shatner mask- went on to make \$47 million at the box office, plus \$23 million internationally, making it one of the highest grossing independent films of all time<sup>46</sup>. *Halloween* was by no means the first film of its kind. In his book *Blood Money: A History of The First Teen Slasher Film Cycle*<sup>47</sup>, Richard Nowell points out that *Black Christmas* had already made waves, and was, itself, a holiday-themed slasher. Yet, *Black Christmas* didn’t stick to the American psyche like *Halloween* did. Much of *Halloween*’s impact came from its simplicity. Whereas *Black Christmas* tried to frame its horror within a murder

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<sup>43</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Halloween." *Chicago Sun Herald*. October 31, 1979. *RogerEbert.com*. Web. 11 Jan, 2016 <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/halloween-1979>>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> "Halloween." *Box Office Mojo*. Web. 05 Jan. 2016. <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=halloween.htm>>.

<sup>47</sup> Nowell, Richard. *Blood Money*. New York, US: Continuum, 2014. ProQuest. Web. 8 April 2016.

mystery plot, *Halloween* focused on the simple terror of a force of nature invading idyllic small town suburbia. It's rather telling that the 2007 remake of *Black Christmas* ditched its mysterious killer in favor of a Michael Meyers rip-off. Of course, as any economic historian will tell you, whenever one low-risk/high-reward strategy is found, imitators are bound to follow. Nowell describes "by July 1980, three films had been produced to capitalize on *Halloween: Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, *Prom Night*, and *Terror Train*... that number almost quadrupled a year later."<sup>48</sup>

By 1982, serial killers had successfully invaded Hospitals (*Visiting Hours*), High Schools (*Prom Night*), Valentines Day dances (*My Bloody Valentine*), New Year's Eve balls (*New Year's Evil*), Slumber Parties (*The Slumber Party Massacre*), and even the sets of other movies (*Effects*). Even when entire countries tried to keep these movies out, they still managed to cross their shores. In her book *Trash Or Treasure*,<sup>49</sup> Kate Egan traces the immense impact that these films managed to hold on Great Britain, which overtly seemed to despise them. Even if a film wasn't out-right banned, film critics across the country almost universally refused to spend more than a paragraph writing about horror. Yet, thanks to a mix of censorship loopholes and underground marketing, uncut video tapes of formally banned films still managed to flood the British market. There truly was no stopping this global phenomenon.

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Reading Ebert's reviews over this period, one can see the cynicism slowly build within him. Before the Slasher bulge, Ebert often respected horror movies, even

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<sup>48</sup> Nowell. Pg. 108

<sup>49</sup>Egan, Kate. *Trash or Treasure?: Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

if he didn't necessarily get them. For example, even though he gave the 1975 horror flick *Beyond the Door* a one-star review, he still approached the film with a cautious amusement, understanding why the audience laughed at the scary scenes and commenting that it was probably popular because "it lives up, or should I say down, to it's promises."<sup>50</sup> Ebert was even willing to see the virtues of something as unflinchingly bizarre as the 1979 inter-dimensional horror *Phantasm*, which he called "a labor of love, if not a particularly skillful one."<sup>51</sup> And yet, as the 80's approached, Ebert also began to exhibit a heightened sensitivity towards films that could be deemed exploitative. In his 1979 one-star review of David Cronenberg's *The Brood*, he approached Samantha Egger's lead role as something that was done to her, rather than a performance that she gave, asking "do performers feel it's noble to take hideously unpleasant roles?"<sup>52</sup> This review was also somewhat of a landmark as, for the first time, Ebert attacked not only the film, but also the audience that received it. He ended the review by exclaiming "the last gruesome moments seem more like a geek show than a movie", before asking "Are there really people who want to see reprehensible trash like this?"<sup>53</sup>

The term the "geek show" is an important one to remember, because it started to appear in more and more of Ebert's reviews. Modern colloquialisms have associated term "geek" with a nerd or an eccentric; some have even embraced the term, affectionately retitling "pop-culture" as "geek-culture". However, when Ebert

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<sup>50</sup> Ebert. Review of *Beyond The Door*. January 1, 1975

<sup>51</sup> Ebert. Review of *Phantasm*. March 28, 1979

<sup>52</sup> Ebert. Review of *The Brood*. June 5 1979

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

uses the word, he's referring to the older tradition of the circus geek, the sideshow attraction that would usually accompany freak shows; but whereas freaks were usually physically abnormal, the geek would be a seemingly normal person performing gross and humiliating actions. Most famously, they would bite the heads off live chickens. When Ebert used the term "geek" it asserted that film amounted to nothing more than an act of humiliation for all involved, while also painting the audience as a jeering, debased, peanut gallery. This was a word that he started to use more and more in years to come.

Unsurprisingly, a month after *The Brood* was released, he called *I Spit On Your Grave* a "geek show". His review of the film was almost a masterpiece of contempt, not only for the movie, but also for its audience. Starting off by calling it "a vile piece of garbage"<sup>54</sup>, Ebert proceeded to give a synopsis of the entire film, including dispassionate descriptions of every death. He then described how members of the audience made remarks like "that was a good one" and "that'll show her" during the rape sequences, and how one woman shouted "Cut him up sister!" during the castration scene.<sup>55</sup> He also mentioned how the entire audience burst into laughter during the scene in which the mentally-retarded member of the group was goaded into raping the woman. By the end of review, it felt as if Ebert has been left broken, as he described how, when the movie ended, he walked home "feeling unclean, ashamed, and depressed."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ebert. Review of *I Spit On Your Grave*. July 16 1979

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

It's worth noting that *I Spit On Your Grave* wasn't really a slasher movie, but rather a rape-revenge film, more in line with something like *Ms. 45* or *The Last House On the Left* (which Ebert gave a favorable review<sup>57</sup>). Yet the film still heavily affected how he looked at horror films from that point on; there wasn't the same anger he would unleash upon other bad movies, but instead a sense of sad resignation. In his review of *Prom Night*, he described how he and a few other audience members stood outside for fresh air, occasionally popping back into the theatre whenever they heard a scream.<sup>58</sup> In his review of *Terror Train*, he lamented the end of an age when "classic horror films appealed to the intelligence of their audiences, to their sense of humor and irony,"<sup>59</sup> before asserting that modern horror was "a series of sensations, strung together on a plot."<sup>60</sup> In his review of the Troma film *Mother's Day* he proclaimed, "there seems to be no end to the vogue for geek films. And there seems to be no limit to the inhuman misery their makers are prepared to portray in them."<sup>61</sup> Even when he actually found something redeemable in one of these movies, like the sense of humor present in *New Year's Evil*, he still threw in a final caveat of cynicism, stating "at least it subscribes to the old-fashioned standards of traditional schlock. These days you're relieved if they don't actually feed entrails to zombies."<sup>62</sup>

The two bleakest reviews of this period were both published on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1981, and were both films that introduced the new tradition of franchising to the glut

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<sup>57</sup> Ebert. Review of *The Last House On The Left*. January 1, 1972

<sup>58</sup> Ebert. Review of *Prom Night*. January 1, 1980

<sup>59</sup> Ebert. Review of *Terror Train*. October 9, 1980

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ebert. Review of *Mother's Day*. December 1, 1980

<sup>62</sup> Ebert. Review of *New Year's Evil*. December 31, 1980

of slashers. The first was for *Halloween II*, and even though Ebert gave the film a mediocre two-star rating, his review was tinged with disgust at the transition from trend-setter to follower. He began by recalling the brilliance of the first film, while also bitterly remarking how “the movie inspired countless imitations, each one worse than the last, until the sight of a woman’s throat being slit became ten times more common than the sight of a kiss.”<sup>63</sup> He then proceeded to call *Halloween II* “a sad fall from grace,”<sup>64</sup> and of course a “geek-show.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, as he blasted the films reliance on gross-out kills and its poor plot, he didn’t offer many redeeming qualities to justify the two-star rating. Perhaps there was still a lingering fondness for the original, or perhaps all his angry vitriol had been spent on the other review.

That same day, he reviewed *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part 2*. This was the installment which added the machete-wielding revenant Jason Voorhees to the horror cannon, and Ebert’s response seemed to imply that the geeks have won. He began with a moment of nostalgia; he saw the movie at the Virginia Theater in his hometown of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, a place where “in this very theatre, on countless nights, I’d gone with a date to the movies.”<sup>66</sup> Ebert went on to recount how the theatre had been packed with high school kids, and how much his reaction differed from theirs: “The audience screamed loudly and happily: It’s fun to be scared. Then an unidentified man sunk an ice pick into a girl’s brain and, for me, the fun stopped. The audience, however, carried on.”<sup>67</sup> After a paragraph describing the audience’s jeering

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<sup>63</sup> Ebert. Review of *Halloween II*. January 1, 1981

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ebert. Review of *Friady The 13<sup>th</sup> Part 2*. January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1981

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

reaction, Ebert provided next to no actual criticism of the film, instead just giving a dispassionate laundry list of all the ways people die. If, in previous occasions, Slasher films had left Ebert appalled, this just deflated him, as he wrote: “Sinking into my seat in this movie theater from my childhood, I remembered the movie fantasies when I was a kid. They involved teenagers who fell in love, made out with each other, customized their cars, listened to rock and roll, and were rebels without causes. Neither the kids in those movies nor the kids watching them would have understood a world view in which the primary function of teenagers is to be hacked to death.”<sup>68</sup>

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In 1983, Ebert, now on the syndicated show *At The Movies*, called *Friday The 13<sup>th</sup> The Final Chapter* a “sad, cynical, depressing movie,”<sup>69</sup> yet his hatred now felt somewhat contrived. Even though he asserted that “the makers of this movie ought to be ashamed of themselves,”<sup>70</sup> his disgust was based entirely on the bleak philosophy of the franchise, rather than on any grander narrative of misogyny in mainstream cinema. Indeed, even Gene Siskel, who had once publicly shamed Betsy Palmer for appearing in the original<sup>71</sup>, didn’t buy Ebert’s reasoning, arguing that the movie was more a harmless set of sensations than anything else. When Ebert reviewed the next installment (aptly titled, *The New Beginning*) the following year, he had calmed down

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> *At The Movies, Friday The 13<sup>th</sup> The Final Chapter*. Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. Disney-ABC Domestic Television 1983. YouTube. Web. 10 Jan. 2016. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5bWkv0eV3M>>.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Siskel, Gene. "'Friday the 13th': More Bad Luck." *The Chicago Tribune* 12 May 1980. Web. 15 Jan. 2016. <<http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1980/05/12/page/25/article/friday-the-13th-more-bad-luck>>.

and was finally willing to chuckle at the absurdity of the film; at one point, he asked “where does a guy like that go to buy new hockey masks?”<sup>72</sup>

The anger had faded, largely because, without the need of a boycott, the “Women in Danger” films had turned out to be just another passing fad. Though there was a glut of Slashers up to 1981, as Norwell Richard points out, *Night Train* was actually the last non-franchise Slasher film to receive distribution from an MPAA studio.<sup>73</sup> While, granted, studios continued to pump out sequels to *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* on a yearly basis, independent filmmakers no longer looked at the Slasher sub-genre as a way to print money. Indeed, it’s worth noting that the most profitable horror movie of 1982 was *Poltergeist*, which was not only a non-slasher, but had been released with a PG rating. In his review of *Poltergeist*, Ebert noted that part of what made this film so effective was its emphasis on showing the story through the innocent eyes of a suburban family.<sup>74</sup> This tradition would be kept alive with Joe Dante’s *Gremlins*, which also delivered suburban scares with a PG rating, and became the third-highest-grossing film of 1984. This, in turn, created an important trend, because even while slashers had a resurgence after the immense success of *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, the mid-80’s also saw the proliferation of horror films that either delivered scares with tongue-in-cheek sensibilities (such as *Return of the Living Dead* and *Fright Night*) or intentionally turned the genre’s tropes on their heads (such as *Aliens* and *Predator*). At any rate, Ebert and Siskel could rest

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<sup>72</sup> *At The Movies, Friday The 13th A New Beginning*. Perf. Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. Disney-ABC Domestic Television, 1983. YouTube. Web. 10 Jan. 2016. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcClPrnNVqg>>.

<sup>73</sup> Nowell. ProQuest. Pg. 65

<sup>74</sup> Ebert. Review of *Poltergeist*. Jun 1, 1981

easy, knowing that the women-hating cinematic dystopia they had once predicted ultimately hadn't come to pass.

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Recounting the strange burst of on-screen serial killers throughout the first two years of the decade, it's hard to make sense of just what exactly happened. Looking at it from a strictly economic perspective, Norwell Richard sees the slasher film-makers of 1980-81 as comparable to the carpet baggers of the post-civil war era, opportunists who jumped on a trend because of the potential for easy money.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Gabe Summer, the producer of *Terror Train* seemingly vindicated this cynicism when, during an interview with *Variety*, he explained "I think we will just slip in before the market becomes too saturated."<sup>76</sup> It's also worth noting that when *Friday The 13<sup>th</sup>* became a smash, the press made a habit of overselling the film as a rags-to-riches story for Victor Miller and Sean Cunningham, the film's directors. As such, many prospective filmmakers began to see the slasher film as a calling card, something that could be made cheaply, and then earn enough money to attract the studio's attention. Of course, economic cynicism aside, this still doesn't answer the central moral question.

Roger Ebert never wrote any kind of retrospective on the slasher boom, yet by looking at his later work, it seems apparent that he didn't undergo a substantial change of heart. He pulled out the term "geek show" twenty years later during his review of the remake of *A Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Comparing the film to *Kill Bill*

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<sup>75</sup> Nowell. ProQuest. Pg. 41

<sup>76</sup> Nowell. Proquest. Pg. 120

of that same year, he asserted that while one celebrated the kitschy joys of Kung-Fu movies, the other used modern technologies to recreate gross traditions of exploitation. He stated “Tarantino’s film is made with grace and joy. This film is made with venom and cynicism.”<sup>77</sup>

In a lot of ways, horror films can be tough to critically assess, because it’s a genre that depends on stimulating an audience, evoking their discomfort and sometimes even disgust. In her analyses of how they were received in Britain, Kate Egan shows that horror films found themselves trapped in a strange Catch-22. They would either be seen as too unrealistic to actually be scary, or as so realistic that they were physically repulsive<sup>78</sup>. Indeed, Egan goes so far as to assert that British critics started to see the rise of exploitation films as a fault of an uneducated underclass, popularizing socially disruptive “low art”.<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, the perspectives and values that a viewer carries into the theatre can have a monumental effect on how the value of horror is interpreted.

Perhaps the best way to try and dissect Ebert’s theories on the Slasher movie is to weigh them against a form of interpretation that looks at these films on their own terms. In her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol Clover tries to seemingly do the impossible by tackling the horror genre from a feminist perspective. Clover admits, very early in the book, that she was not a fan of horror. What fascinated her about the genre, however, was that audience seemingly held tremendous patience for

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<sup>77</sup> Ebert. Review of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. October 17, 2003

<sup>78</sup> Egan, Kate. *Trash or Treasure?: Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. Pg. 57

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

repetition and formulae. In her introduction, she repeats an observation made by Andrew Britton about the audience of 1982's *Hell Night*, stating "It became obvious at a very early stage that every spectator knew exactly what the film was going to do at every point, even down to the order in which it would dispose of its various characters... the predictability was clearly the main source of pleasure."<sup>80</sup> The point of her book is to try and dissect the symbols of the Slasher flick, and to understand both the appeal of the formula and the ways good horror films build upon it.

Her first conclusion is that the gender conflict isn't quite as clear cut as it might seem. As she points out, placing a woman at the receiving end of vicious scares is nothing new; after all, it was Edgar Allen Poe who once said "the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic thing in the world."<sup>81</sup> Yet while women in these movies are often victimized, it's masculinity that finds itself being degraded. In films like *Halloween* and *Friday The 13<sup>th</sup>*, male figures are typically useless characters who sometimes don't even receive the dignity of an on-screen death. However, the most pathetic men in these movies are usually the killers themselves who, from Norman Bates through to Jason Vorhees, have always been figures so confused about their own masculinity that their interactions with femininity force them to rely on phallic objects (such as a knife or a chainsaw). Clover brilliantly surmises the devoted asexuality of these characters, stating "actual rape is practically nonexistent in the slasher film, evidently on the premise... that violence and sex are not concomitants

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<sup>80</sup> Clover, Carol J. *Men Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. London: BFI, 1992. Print. Pg. 9

<sup>81</sup> Clover. Pg. 42

but alternatives.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, even when a movie such as *I Spit On Your Grave* does have their killers stray into the realms of sexual violence, these actions are then punished by literal acts of castration.

Clover asserts that, in stark contrast, women often find themselves being strangely exalted in these movies. The most obvious indication of this is that the survivor of these films is almost always a woman, leading to the trope of the “Final Girl.” Clover offers an account of these movies as stories of women who get picked off for their inability to rise above the role of victim, until finally settling on one who is strong enough to expel the killer from the narrative. Indeed, this can also be seen in the frequent sexual reluctance of the final girl, as she develops to a point of coming to terms with both her own femininity and the masculinity required to defeat the killer, or, as John Carpenter once put it, “if you turn it around, the one girl who is the most sexually uptight just keeps stabbing this guy with a long knife.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, this conclusion can also refute Ebert’s disgust at audience reactions because, as Clover ultimately points out, while the audience might applaud the killer’s violence early on, they cheer even harder when the heroine turns the tables on him. This leads Clover to her final theory on the serial killer genre: that these films aren’t about attacks on women, but rather attacks on femininity. The killer is the embodiment of feminine sexual frustration trapped inside a man’s body, while the final girl epitomizes all the heroic traits of masculinity within an idealized female body.

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<sup>82</sup> Clover. Pg.29.

<sup>83</sup> Clover. Pg. 48

The most interesting part of this analysis, however, is the implications it holds as to why an audience actually enjoys horror. Clover draws immense importance from the genre's frequency of self-consciously reflecting on the viewer's gaze, whether by equating voyeurism with murder in films like *Peeping Tom* and *Friday The 13<sup>th</sup>*, or by punishing characters for the act of watching in *Videodrome* and *Demons*, or even by the habit of trailers and posters to incorporate rhetoric in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person. With this observation, she reaches a conclusion that the audience's allegiance doesn't lie solely with the killer or the victim, but rather the film itself. As she puts it, "the performance has the quality of a cat-and-mouse game: a 'good' moment (or film) is one that 'beats' the audience, and a 'bad' moment or film is one in which, in effect, the audience 'wins'."<sup>84</sup> Her ultimate conclusion is that the act of watching horror isn't an experience of sadism, but rather one of masochism; we want the film to shock us or gross us out in a way that defies our expectations. Furthermore, this masochism is so effective within the slasher movie precisely because it reflects anxieties of gender and masculinity back at the audience. As a result, if an audience member cheers when Jason impales his prey on the machete, it's not because of they enjoy violence, but rather because they respect the movie for fulfilling its task of outwitting and punishing its audience.

Clover's summation of the film is by no means flawless. For one thing, she makes a habit of going overboard with the Freudian interpretations of certain scenes. For example, in her analysis of the infamous rape scene from *I Spit On Your Grave*, it's not enough that the extended sequence makes the audience uncomfortable, as she

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<sup>84</sup> Kael. Pg. 202

proceeds to assert that the viewer's allegiance in the sequence is with both the victim and the aggressor, meaning that the enjoyment of this sequence comes from an audience's desire to both rape and be raped. Clover is also reluctant to assert that her own conclusions are necessarily a good thing, since they seemingly imply that every woman just needs to act less feminine. She states "it must surely be the case that there is some ethical relief in the idea that if women would just toughen up and take karate or buy a gun, the issue of male-on-female violence would simply evaporate."<sup>85</sup>

However, while one can certainly poke holes in this theory, there's a core value to the simple fact that Clover has managed to pull such complex psychological symbols from films that, in all honesty, probably didn't even intend to put them there. Indeed, Clover's book ends with a mention of more critically respected films such as *Arachnophobia* and *Silence Of The Lambs*, stating that "they are in any case not films that take the kind of brazen tack into the psychosexual wilderness that made horror in the seventies and eighties such a marvelously transparent object of study."<sup>86</sup>

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To take Clover's conclusions and frame them against the repeated arguments of Roger Ebert, one question becomes clear: if we say that the slasher flicks of the early 80's were 'geek movies', is that necessarily a bad thing? Whenever Ebert used that term, it carried the implication that the audience only cared about moment-by-moment acts of exploitation, that they only went into *Friday The 13<sup>th</sup>* for the

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<sup>85</sup> Clover. Pg. 152

<sup>86</sup> Clover. Pg. 236

momentary thrill of pretending that they were killing teenage girls, or that they only saw *I Spit On Your Grave* because it was the closest they could get to the thrill of an actual rape without being arrested. In essence, this is the interpretation of someone who were overwhelmed by the movie, meaning every scene following a pinnacle act of violence would just wash over them. Perhaps by being such a grisly and gruesome experience, violent horror achieves a direct line into our deepest psychosexual processes that no other film is capable of. But, for this deeply personal affect to be possible, one needs to be willing to take in the experience in its entirety; you can't remove the "final girl" from the slasher movie template, and you can't ignore the revenge portion of the 'rape-revenge' tradition. There's a reason why some of the biggest cult stars of 80's cinema are "Scream Queens", women such as Jamie Lee Curtis, Barbra Crampton, and Sigourney Weaver, who portrayed some of the strongest female characters in 80's cinema thanks to their ability to achieve the impossible task of overcoming a psychotic, or even inhuman, killer. A horror movie can't be boiled down to a single kill, because it's an experience that lasts from the moment the killer first rears its head, to when it's finally taken down by someone who refuses to remain a victim.

The only flaw that arises from comparing Clover's conclusions with Ebert's, lies with the context of her writing. Clover confesses that, from the beginning, she was fascinated more with the appeal of *A Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *I Spit On Your Grave*, rather than the movies themselves. It's also worth noting that her book was published in 1992, by which point slasher films had already risen, diminished, and then returned, in the American consciousness, and by which point Jason

Voorhees had slaughtered his way through nine films. Clover's method more or less consisted of finding the most frequently rented horror videos, and watching them with the intent of analyzing them through the lens of gender theory. As a result, everything that Clover has written comes with the gift of hindsight, an awareness that a generation could grow up with these kinds of movies without mutating into misogynistic psychopaths.

One of the defining characteristics of *The Chicago Sun-Times*, was its characteristically blue collar approach. In comparison to its rival publication, the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Sun-Times* was considered the publication more in-touch with the local goings on in Chicago. This was something that bled into Ebert's writing routine; when, in his autobiography, he looked back on the lessons learnt from his experiences at *The Sun-Times*, he wrote "When you have to march, march. This included writing a story you lacked all enthusiasm for, and meeting a deadline no matter what hours were necessary."<sup>87</sup> Even though Ebert was a critic with license to explore his own opinions, he was also a journalist and, as such, his subject matter was defined by what was going on in the world around him. As a result, if Slasher films kept returning to the cinemas of Chicago, it was because there was money to be made selling tickets to the people of Chicago, meaning Ebert really had no choice other than to go cover the latest specimen. Thus, his perceptions of this trend were coming from someone who had found himself caught within its violent grasp rather than comfortably analyzing it with hindsight. Furthermore, while Clover had the privilege

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<sup>87</sup> Ebert, Roger. *Life Itself: A Memoir*. New York: Grand Central Pub., 2011. Print. Pg. 28

of reading about audience reactions to rape and violence, it was Ebert who was repeatedly forced to endure a movie that made him uncomfortable with an audience that made him even more uncomfortable.

One of the most poignantly self-aware moments in the history of horror analysis comes from James Twitchell. In his book *Dreadful Pleasures*, he addresses one of the key dangers in trying to look at films as parts of a larger trend, stating “You search for what is stable and repeated; you neglect what is ‘artistic’ and ‘original.’”<sup>88</sup> With Ebert this becomes especially apparent, as his “Woman In Danger” segment was born from anger, frustration, and a desire to understand why his job had suddenly been forced to incorporate such an unpleasant component. He once described films as “machines of empathy”<sup>89</sup>, and as a result, found himself in troubled that a certain audience could find joy in movies totally devoid of compassion.

But to bring this back to the “geek show” analogy, one must consider that the show wasn’t filled just with misanthropic hicks, but regular people with a morbid curiosity, a desire to see their greatest fears of their own depravity reflected back at them. In his song, “Ballad Of The Thin Man”, Bob Dylan explored this theme that, perhaps, the people who remain assured of their own normalcy when they walk into a freak show are the greatest weirdoes of them all. There’s a sequence of the song that rings strangely familiar with Ebert’s description of himself as a stranger within these movie theatres. As it goes:

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<sup>88</sup> Twitchell, James B. *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Print. Pg. 175

<sup>89</sup> *Life Itself*. Dir. Steve James. Perf. Roger Ebert. Magnolia Pictures, 2014. DVD.

*“You hand in your ticket  
And you go watch the geek  
Who immediately walks up to you  
When he hears you speak  
And says, "How does it feel  
To be such a freak?"  
And you say, "Impossible"  
As he hands  
you a bone.”*

## **Chapter 3. Not A Hack; Kael and The American Revenge Saga**

Pauline Kael's tenure as *the New Yorker's* film critic lasted twenty-three years, during which she built a reputation as one of the most respected voices in film criticism. Roger Ebert once stated that "Kael had more influence on the climate of film than any other single person in the past three decades,"<sup>90</sup> and when writing a retrospect on her career, Renata Adler of *The New York Review of Books*, described her mass acolytes and her autonomy over her own writing by referring to Kael as "a critic with a cult."<sup>91</sup> Throughout her career, Kael asserted immense control over her columns, and reviewed more than 2,680 films. *I Spit On Your Grave* certainly wasn't one of them.

Looking at Kael's entire body of work can be a baffling experience. The archives of someone like Ebert are extremely coherent, largely because he used the same simple rating system throughout his fifty-three years of writing. Kael, on the

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<sup>90</sup> Staff, Mark Feeney Globe. "VIEWING THE PARCELS OF PAULINE." *The Boston Globe*. 6 Sept. 2005. Web. 25 Feb. 2016.

<[http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-7923734.html?refid=easy\\_hf](http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-7923734.html?refid=easy_hf)>.

<sup>91</sup> Adler, Renita. "The Perils of Pauline." *New York Review of Books* 14 Aug. 1980. Print.

other hand, never provided her readers with that kind of simple fix. One was required to read the entire piece to understand her complicated, and often contradictory, views on a film. Some movies would receive eight-page breakdowns, while others would be graced with a single paragraph. She sometimes treated film goers like uneducated masses who wouldn't recognize art if it bopped them on the nose, only to turn around and cruelly ridicule the auteur theory as the desperate musings of lonely losers. There were also certain grudges that she held onto throughout her entire career, such as her mistrust of film executives, and her belief that television dumbed audiences down.

Kael did, however, provide a treatise very early in her career that expressed her view on the distinctive features between movies that could be considered art, and those that couldn't, through an 1969 essay titled "Trash, Art, and the Movies." The essay offers a brilliant explanation of the effect of bad movies, explaining "our awareness of the mechanics and our cynicism about the aims and values is peculiarly alienating"<sup>92</sup>. Alienation is a key word, because it asserts that a bad movie can be observed at a distance, without forcing the critic to be dragged down to its level. The piece then concludes by accepting these trashy films in a sort of détente fashion, accepting a clear separation between trash and art with the conclusion "Trash has given us an appetite for art."<sup>93</sup>

What's crucial about this statement, is that it willfully accepts that films aimed at provoking the audience on an emotional and intellectual level can safely be judged on a different level than the films aimed at evoking a more sensory reaction. Ebert

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<sup>92</sup> Kael. *For Keeps*. Pg. 200

<sup>93</sup> Kael. Pg. 227

believed that all films should aspire towards a certain level of feeling and compassion, and that if one film reveled in cruelty, then it had the potential to damage film as an art form. Kael, on the other hand, placed much more faith in a sophisticated audience that would consistently gravitate towards more high-brow films. Granted, this distinction was easier to maintain for a *New Yorker* columnist, writing for a more selective audience, than for a staff writer for *The Chicago Herald-Sun*; nevertheless, it stood as a key philosophy within Kael's writings.

However, even with this loosely-defined qualifier in mind, Kael still encountered films that greatly unsettled her personal philosophies. Ten years before Ebert raged against films that reveled in the audience's baser instincts, Kael found herself confronted with pictures that tried to justify the most primitive convictions of American society.

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In the fall of 1971, three films managed to penetrate Kael's barrier of aloofness, and disturb shook her on a very deep level. Yet, whereas something like first wave of Slashers would exist within a clearly defined genre, the trend that bothered Kael was something more ephemeral.

The first strike came with the release of William Friedkin's *The French Connection*, on October 23<sup>rd</sup>. Starring Gene Hackman and Fernando Rey, the film received more or less universal praise from critics (Roger Ebert gave it four stars<sup>94</sup>), and proceeded to make history as the first ever R-rated movie to win the Academy Award for best picture. Yet Kael saw the film as not just a gritty detective story, but

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<sup>94</sup> Ebert. Review of *The French Connection*. January 1, 1971.

as something dangerously raw and guttural. Her review seemingly began with praise, describing the film as a benchmark in portraying the grittiness of New York, stating, “movies have captured the soul of this city in a way that goes beyond simple notions of realism.”<sup>95</sup> Yet, as she proceeded, it became clear that this wasn’t necessarily a compliment, as she wrote “the panhandler who jostles the hero looks like the one who jostles you in as you leave the theatre: the police sirens in the movie are screaming outside; the hookers and junkies in the freak show are indistinguishable from the ones on the streets.”<sup>96</sup> From there Kael made a rather strange claim that modern film audiences were either unfazed by what was on-screen, or that they were intentionally going to the movie to become rowdy. She went on to assert that this violence tangibly resonated within the audience, stating, “it’s there in the theatre... and you feel that the the violence on screen may at any moment touch off violence in the theatre. The audience is explosively alive.”<sup>97</sup> From there, Kael claimed that the greatest threat of the film lay in how it used violence and moral ambiguity to side the audience with the brutal corruption of its protagonist. In comparing the film to 1969’s *Z*, she stated “the purpose of the brutality in *Z* was moral- it was to make you hate brutality. Here you love it, you wait for it- that’s all there is.”<sup>98</sup> She concluded the review by calling the film’s message nihilistic, describing the audience’s reaction as primitive, and ultimately dismissing the whole experience as “jolts-for-jocks.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Kael. Pg. 390

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Kael. Pg. 392

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

Then, on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, *Dirty Harry* came out. To be fair, the release of Don Siegel's ultra-violent detective thriller was met with a much more complicated reception than *The French Connection*. Some critics adored the film's tight pacing, along with Clint Eastwood's performance as the titular anti-hero; others, however, deplored the violence, with some reviews even bringing in fascist implications<sup>100</sup>. Kael didn't imply anything. Instead, she outright stated, "this action genre has always had a fascist potential, and it has finally surfaced."<sup>101</sup> When Kael blasted the film, her words had particular venom thanks to her ability to concede to the film's technical strengths. She stated that the film was directed in "the sleekest style,"<sup>102</sup> and described Clint Eastwood as "six feet four of lean, tough saint, blue-eyed and shaggy-haired, with a rugged creased, careworn face that occasionally breaks in a mischief-filled Shirley MacLaine grin."<sup>103</sup> However, she gave the film's thrills a backhanded overview, stating "it's hard to resist, because the most skillful suspense techniques are used on very primitive levels."<sup>104</sup> Some of Kael's anger towards the film was definitely politically charged outrage that the film would dare make buffoons out of liberals and paint Miranda rights as a police inconvenience. Indeed, Kael took an opportunity to reflect on her own distrust of police, stating "I remember a high school teacher telling me that it never ceased to amaze him that his worst students- the sadists and the bullies- landed not in jail but on the police force."<sup>105</sup> And yet, what

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<sup>100</sup> "Dirty Harry- Critical Reception." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. Web. 10 Mar. 2016. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirty\\_Harry#Critical\\_reception](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirty_Harry#Critical_reception)>.

<sup>101</sup> Kael. Pg. 421

<sup>102</sup> Kael. Pg. 420

<sup>103</sup> Kael. Pg. 419

<sup>104</sup> Kael. Pg. 420

<sup>105</sup> Kael. Pg. 419

makes Kael truly take offense to the movie, is its skill in making the audience go along with its interpretation of justice; she points out that the movie is shrewd enough to create easy alignments for the audience by making the killer a well-dressed white man, and to diffuse charges of racism by giving Harry a Mexican partner. In a moment reminiscent of Ebert's description of the movie geeks (while also oddly racially charged), Kael wrote "the movie was cheered and applauded by Puerto Ricans in the audience, and they jeered- as they were meant to- when the maniac whined and pleaded for his rights...the rights of the accused are seen not as remedies for the mistreatment of the poor by the police. but as protection for evil abstracted from all social conditions."<sup>106</sup>

Less than a week later, this year of cinematic violence was concluded with the release of Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* which, in Kael's eyes, was a movie of "stupidity and moral corruption."<sup>107</sup> While *Straw Dogs* wasn't an amoral police thriller like *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry*, it still disgusted Kael because of its portrayal of David, the protagonist, as a weak and sexually-inferior man because of his tendencies towards intellectualism and pacifism. Kael described "the vision of *Straw Dogs* is narrow and puny, as obsessions with masculinity usually are."<sup>108</sup> She described the characters in the movie as "pawns in the overall scheme,"<sup>109</sup> and asserted that every action in the film was reduced to a matter of "points being racked up."<sup>110</sup> She also critiqued the audience reaction, once again, stating "not surprisingly,

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid

<sup>107</sup> Kael. Pg. 425

<sup>108</sup> Kael. Pg. 422

<sup>109</sup> Kael. Pg. 423

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

the audience cheers David's kills; it is after all, a classic example of the worm turning."<sup>111</sup> She then dug even further into the viewer experience, stating "you know that the response has been pulled out of you, but you're trapped in that besieged house... and if you believe in civilization at all you want David to win."<sup>112</sup> Once again, this was also a film where Kael found herself begrudgingly admitting her admiration of the director, calling him "so passionate and sensual a film artist that you may experience his romantic perversity kinesthetically, and get quite giddy from feeling trapped and yet liberated."<sup>113</sup> Yet, she ultimately concluded that Peckinpah has used these skills to create a work that was not only fascistic, but borderline dangerous, because "it gets at the roots of the fantasies that men carry around from the earliest childhood."<sup>114</sup>

Kael wasn't the only critic to be disturbed by this series of films, yet her disgust was unique because it was based on more than the mere depiction sex and violence. To understand just how unfazed Kael could sometimes be, one must merely look at her review of *A Clockwork Orange*, possibly the most infamous film of that year. While her review was conscious of the disturbing nature of the on-screen actions, she still managed to approach it from a surprisingly objective lens, asserting that it failed at its goal of stimulating the audience because of Kubrick's "academic style."<sup>115</sup> At one point she described how "he tries to work up kinky violent scenes, carefully estranging you from the victims so that you can *enjoy* the rapes and

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<sup>111</sup> Kael. Pg. 424

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Kael. Pg. 425

<sup>114</sup> Kael. Pg. 426

<sup>115</sup> Kael. Pg. 416

beatings. But I think one is more likely to feel cold antipathy toward the movie than horror at the violence- or enjoyment of it either.”<sup>116</sup> One of Kael’s strengths as a critic, was her ability to understand the visceral thrills that an audience could draw from a viewing experience, which then allowed her to step back and analyze how well the film achieved that function. Ultimately Kael was disturbed when she looked below the surface and saw the raw reactions that could be provoked from the most uneducated viewers.

In these three films, Kael saw a philosophy that associated violence with moral superiority (as in *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry*), or a sense of masculine purity (as in *Straw Dogs*). While this legacy would be continued with *Dirty Harry*’s inevitable sequels, none of the later entries in this franchise managed to disturb Kael quite as much as 1973’s *Walking Tall*, which introduced a very different type of Hollywood hero. *Walking Tall* told the true story of Sheriff Bufford Pusser (albeit with immense creative liberties), who waged a one-man war against organized crime in his county. Interestingly, Kael began her review with a look backwards, writing about how Westerns had fallen out of favor in American cinema, following the slow decline of the Spaghetti Western at the beginning of the decade. When she brought the genre back to *Walking Tall*, and its conceptions of small town justice and vigilantism, she seemed to assert that the Western should, in fact, stay dead. She described the appeal of the Western’s unique form of brutal justice, stating “Maybe, during all those years of watching Westerns, we didn’t believe them but we wanted to. The child in us wanted to, and maybe the Westerns softened us up for primitivism

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<sup>116</sup> Kael. Pg. 418

in the guise of realism.”<sup>117</sup> She linked *Walking Tall* to the works of D.W. Griffith, asserting that it promoted a form of “biblical justice,”<sup>118</sup> even referring to its hero as a “one-man lynch mob.”<sup>119</sup> She was so repulsed by the saintly portrayal of Sherriff Pusser, that she actually referenced sections of his autobiography, pointing out which parts of the film, such as his black deputy, were completely fabricated, and quoting how “he has boasted that in his first term he ‘wore out more pistol barrels banging mean drunks over the head than the county would pay for.’”<sup>120</sup> Most interestingly, she called the film a “Street Western,”<sup>121</sup> damning it for its willingness to celebrate a mythology that was either inflated, or outright false. The ultimate effect, she argued, was a film that was “integral to the fundamentalist politics that probably all of us carry inside at some primitive level,”<sup>122</sup> and one which “makes one know how crowds must feel when they’re being swayed by demagogues.”<sup>123</sup>

It would be easy to write off Kael’s assertions as a mistrust of police, or as the pretensions of a cynic confronted with populist filmmaking. Yet what really angered Kael about these films was the ways in which technical skills were used to deliver overt agendas. These four films weren’t just “shocks for jocks,” they were shocks that have been carefully calculated to lead the audience to a particular conclusion. They were also the first roots of a new development in the American action film. It’s worth noting that Sam Peckinpah had made a name for himself directing Westerns, and that

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<sup>117</sup> Kael. Pg. 550

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Kael. Pg. 554

<sup>120</sup> Kael. Pg. 553

<sup>121</sup> Kael. Pg. 550

<sup>122</sup> Kael. Pg. 554

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

Harry Callahan was played by the iconic Man with No Name; both *Straw Dog* and *Dirty Harry* adhere to the western's classic holy sense of inherent, masculine, justice. All four of the aforementioned movies carry the assertion that whether you're a cop trying to catch a killer that society chooses to forgive, or just an everyday man protecting your wife from rapists, the ends ultimately justify the means, so long as one adheres to older, traditional values.

Unfortunately for Kael, as America entered the 1980's, the adoration of simple, brutal traditions was about to become more than just an on-screen phenomenon. The 70's was a decade marred by cynicism towards government and society at large; after experiencing defeat in Vietnam, the Watergate Scandal, and the resignation of President Nixon, the country was, as the journalist Roger Rosenblatt put it, "famished for cheer."<sup>124</sup> However, all of this would change as America entered a new decade. Even though anti-heroes such as Dirty Harry and Sheriff Pussler were born out of a sense of cynicism towards the establishment, their mystique would ultimately become something that an entire national identity clung to.

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From 1981 through to 1989, Ronald Reagan was not only the President of the United States, but also, according to Gallup poles, the most admired man in America. In his inaugural address, he made a speech pre-empting the adoration of exceptionalism that would define the decade. He stated:

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<sup>124</sup> Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994. Print. Pg. 1

“Those who say that we’re in a time when there are no heroes, they just don’t know where to look. You can see heroes going in and out of factory gates. Others... produce enough food to feed all of us and then the world. Now, I have used the worlds “they” and “their” in speaking of these heroes. I could say “you” and “your”, because I’m addressing the heroes of whom I speak- you, the citizens of this blessed land.”<sup>125</sup>

In her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Susan Jeffords points out that Reagan- the former President of the Screen Actors Guild- used a style of statesmanship that blurred the lines between Hollywood and reality. During speeches, he often recounted an anecdote of the captain of a damaged B-17 bomber telling his crew “we’ll ride it down together,”<sup>126</sup> which he claimed to be true when, in reality, it was a scene lifted from the 1944 film *A Wing and a Prayer*. He once called the United States “the A-Team among nations”<sup>127</sup>, and famously referred to the USSR as an “Evil Empire”<sup>128</sup>. Most telling, however, was that, when promising not to raise taxes at the 1985 American Business Conference, he stated “I have only one thing to say to tax increasers, ‘go ahead, make my day.’”<sup>129</sup> This was a quote from *Sudden Impact*, the second sequel to *Dirty Harry*.

To understand Reagan’s movie masculinity, it’s important to understand the context in which it became prominent. Jeffords asserts that right when Reagan took office- in the wake of numerous political scandals, military failures, and, particularly,

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<sup>125</sup> Jeffords, Pg. 21

<sup>126</sup> Jeffords. Pg. 4

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

the Iranian hostage crisis- the American sense of masculinity was at a point of crisis. Jeffords argues that “because [the previous] period was dominated by a president who seemed to have turned “feminine” in midstream, not only was the nation in peril but the whole world was at risk of becoming “slaves” to the Soviet Union.”<sup>130</sup> Reagan responded by presenting himself as the solution to the country’s identity crisis. Jeffords explains that “it cannot be an accident that one of Ronald Reagan’s most powerful and effective activities in the White House was to convey certain distinctive images of himself as a president *and* as a man- chopping wood, breaking horses, toughing out assassination attempts... making himself into what John Orman called ‘the quintessential macho president’”<sup>131</sup>.

Jeffords proceeds to argue that Reagan’s machismo soon rubbed off onto America as a whole. She calls the Reagan period “an era of bodies,”<sup>132</sup> an age in which a former Mr. Universe became Hollywood’s biggest box office draw, and in which drug addicts and victims of AIDS, became some of the scariest boogymen in American society. This newfound obsession then lead to the popularity of a new kind of hero, one that Jeffords terms a “Hard Body Hero,” a character who would simultaneously firmly stand for individualism while also embodying, and fighting for, the values of American exceptionalism. These heroes embodied a unique social order, “in which the men who are thrust forward into heroism are not heroic in defiance of their society but in defiance of their governments and institutional bureaucracies.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Jeffords. Pg. 11

<sup>131</sup> Jeffords. Pg. 12

<sup>132</sup> Jeffords. Pg. 24

<sup>133</sup> Jeffords Pg. 19

In his 2006 essay *80's Noir*, Robert Arnett adds to Jeffords' conclusion by pointing out the strange paradox that authority played in the Buddy Cop movies that became prevalent throughout the 80's. He shows that while figures such as John McClane and Martin Riggs share Harry Callahan's renegade spirit, they're still separated by a key ideal; whereas *Dirty Harry* ended with Callahan throwing his badge away in disgust, the new breed of Cop films ultimately concluded with a return to the order of the status quo. He describes, "whereas youth films of the 50's, 60's, and 70's portrayed young people questioning the values of previous generations... the mainstream genres of the mid-1980's relied on the conventional narrative structure of upsetting a status quo only to put it back together in ways that embraced the cultural hegemony of Reagan's America."<sup>134</sup>

While the Buddy Cop genre embodied this patriotic utopianism at home, other action movies brought it to an international scale. Jeffords shows how this obsession with flawless American exceptionalism can be seen in the pure shift of the Rambo character over the course of just two movies, transforming him from an outcast of American society into a revisionist embodiment of renegade strength. As Jeffords puts it, "In the first film it was unclear whether his body was clean or dirty, lawful or unlawful, strong or weak; by 1985 Rambo's body-strength is indisputable."<sup>135</sup>

This phenomenon isn't just something that was recognized in retrospect. In 1985, the film critic David Edelstein, a protégé of Kael's, wrote an article for *Rolling Stone* titled "Somewhere Over the Rambo," lamenting the rise of action

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<sup>134</sup> Arnett, Robert. "Eighties Noir: The Dissenting Voice in Reagan's America." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 34, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>135</sup> Jeffords. Pg. 34

franchises based around the likes of Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and Chuck Norris, stating “incessant paramilitary action has become the New Wave in Hollywood, and automatic weapons are its surfboards.”<sup>136</sup> Throughout the article, he not only went after hyper-violent, borderline nationalistic films such as *Commando* and *Invasion: USA*, but also criticized the audience demand for stimulus, remarking, “What’s remarkable today is that the public demands to be assaulted: Make me laugh, make me cry, make me scream, give me a roller-coaster ride, give me a hard-on, do it to me.”<sup>137</sup> Indeed, the article even referred to Kael’s theories on the action genre, stating “How far we’ve come from the days when Pauline Kael, in her review of *The French Connection*, feared that movies would amount to little more than ‘jolts for jocks.’ Now *The French Connection* looks like a character study; we’re pathetically grateful for whatever bits of humor, good acting and style the filmmakers deign to pitch in.”<sup>138</sup>

In many ways, this was some of the highest praise Kael could hope to receive. It was a vindication of all her theories about the degradation of American cinema, the acknowledgment that by ignoring her warnings, America had doomed itself to an onslaught of Harry Callahan’s and Sherriff Pussers. One might expect Kael to be riding this wave of films with a mix of vindicated ire and smug satisfaction, possibly even stepping up her efforts. Perhaps she could have even turned to the dreaded medium of television to create her own ‘Women-in-Danger’ segment, warning America of the growing nationalistic trend and calling for a boycott of all overly-

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<sup>136</sup> Edelstein, David. "The Year In Movies; Somewhere Over The Rambo." *Rolling Stone*, December 19, 1985.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid

<sup>138</sup> Ibid

macho action films. In reality, however, Kael stuck within her own territory, and largely chose to keep her head down.

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While the most popular films of the decade were filled with the same macho-vigilante heroism that disgusted Kael in the early 70's, her perception of the movies of that era was actually dominated by a very dull pessimism. In June, 1980, Kael published an article titled "Why Are Movies So Bad? Or, The Numbers" in which she asserted that while the "Jolts for Jocks" movies had become the norm, they'd also managed to negate their own threat. "People just want to go to a movie," she wrote, "they're stung repeatedly, yet their desire for a good movie- for any movie- is so strong that all over the country they keep lining up."<sup>139</sup> The theory that she constructed stated that audiences had been dumbed down, both from the degradation of movies, and because "TV accustoms people to not expecting much."<sup>140</sup> As a result, the process of moviemaking had become so heavily subjugated to profit obsessions that "movie companies wind up with top production executives whose interest in movies rarely extends beyond the immediate selling possibilities; they could be selling neckties just as well as movies."<sup>141</sup> In many ways, Kael was precisely on the ball with her predictions about both the decade, and much of the future of blockbusters. Her final assessment was that studios insisted on only green lighting films with inflated budgets, necessitating a constant push towards bigger and flashier, yet spiritually empty, styles of filmmaking.

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<sup>139</sup> Kael. Pg. 817

<sup>140</sup> Kael. Pg. 820

<sup>141</sup> Kael. Pg. 819

Kael would then repeat these assertions five years later in an interview with *The Chicago Review* titled “Pauline Kael Finds Movies Today as Tired as She Feels.” She sums up the state of films by saying “The technical effects are pretty good, but there’s a blandness and dullness of mind about the movies themselves. The process of the conglomerates’ takeover of the movies has accelerated, and the changeover in executives has been so fast in the last few years that they don’t want to do anything that isn’t absolutely safe.”<sup>142</sup> Indeed, she even asserted her conscious avoidance of most iconic action blockbusters, stating “I give the immediate space to the movies worth seeing. There was no hurry in writing about *Rambo*. Sometimes, you wonder, ‘Is there anything left to say about this?’”<sup>143</sup> However, probably the most telling section of the interview comes near the end, when the self-imposed aloofness starts to sound intrinsic to her success. Explaining why she didn’t review *The Karate Kid*, she claimed, “I wouldn’t have had anything new to write about it, and who cares anyway? After all, I don’t want to become a hack.”<sup>144</sup>

For what it’s worth, the few cases in which Kael did bother with bloated action flicks showed a willingness- albeit a reluctant one- to understand the movies on their own terms. For example, as Sylvester Stallone’s characters started fighting seven feet tall Russians on both the battlefield and the boxing-ring, Kael was content to poke fun at his image. In her review of *Rambo First Blood Part II*, she described the titular character as “programmed with (a) homoeroticism, (b) self pity, (c) self

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<sup>142</sup> Christiansen, Richard. "Pauline Kael Finds Today's Movies Are As Tired As She Feels." *The Chicago Tribune*, December 09, 1985.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

righteousness, (d) sweat, and (e) a need to be crucified over and over,<sup>145</sup> but then acknowledged that his character traits weren't even pertinent, since "you're supposed to be intoxicated by his lumpy muscles."<sup>146</sup> She did acknowledge the political edge to the film, stating "according to Rambo we didn't lose the war in Vietnam, we weren't allowed to win,"<sup>147</sup> only to then disarm any actual danger in these implications with phrases like "and boy-oh-boy, what this Christ-killer does to those commies!"<sup>148</sup> Indeed, her final assessment even passed some approval upon the film, claiming that it "has the same basic appeal as professional wrestling or demolition derbies: audiences hoot at it and get a little charged up at the same time."<sup>149</sup>

In some cases, Kael was even willing to simultaneously acknowledge her traditional grudges, while still embracing a new ironic campiness. In her review of 1986's *Raw Deal*- the only Schwarzenegger film she ever reviewed- she offered the seemingly paradoxical assessment of the film as "reprehensible and enjoyable."<sup>150</sup> While she never quite specified what about the film was reprehensible (aside from the usual tale of renegade justice), she was willing to praise the film's self-deprecating style, and even concede to the appeal of its star, stating, "Schwarzenegger seems happy to laugh at himself; he's like a granite Teddy Bear."<sup>151</sup>

Even Clint Eastwood, whom had once emerged as Kael's nemesis, started to be treated more as a joke than anything else. In her review of 1984's *Tightrope*

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<sup>145</sup> Kael. *Taking It All In*. Pg.

<sup>146</sup> Kael, Pauline. *State of the Art*. New York: Dutton, 1985. Pg. 374

<sup>147</sup> Ibid

<sup>148</sup> Ibid

<sup>149</sup> Kael. *State of The Art*. Pg. 375

<sup>150</sup> Kael, Pauline. *Hooked*. New York: Dutton, 1989. Pg. 169

<sup>151</sup> Kael. *Hooked*. Pg. 170

(which Eastwood also directed), she stated “Eastwood is the only one left who makes these movies about how tough it is to be a man,”<sup>152</sup> before writing off the movie as “*Halloween* taking itself more seriously.”<sup>153</sup> Likewise, in 1985’s *Pale Rider* (also directed by Eastwood), she described him as “playing some spectral combination of Death, Jesus, Billy Jack, and the Terminator,”<sup>154</sup> before adding “still, isn’t it a bit unseemly for this man- he’s fifty-five now- to have a scene in his own production in which a fourteen-year-old girl wants to have sex with him?”<sup>155</sup>

However, as much as Kael liked to hold herself above these movies, this pride was somewhat in bad faith. Looking back on her “Why Are Movies So Bad?” essay, she at one point asserted that corporatization had ensured that “a movie should also be innocuous; it shouldn’t raise any hackles, either by strong language or a controversial theme.”<sup>156</sup> What’s ironic, is that this would change from a prediction to a commandment. While she could tolerate the action movies that accepted their role as trash, she couldn’t stand those that aimed for something higher.

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The one cop movie that did manage to get under Kael’s skin was 1986’s *Year of The Dragon*. Directed by Michael Cimino, and based on a screenplay by Oliver Stone, the film divided critics, with some praising the movie’s light tone and hedonistic action sensibilities, while others took issue with its portrayal of the

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<sup>152</sup> Kael. *State of The Art*. Pg. 238

<sup>153</sup> Kael. *State of The Art*. Pg. 240

<sup>154</sup> Kael. *Hooked*. Pg. 15

<sup>155</sup> Kael. *Hooked*. Pg. 16

<sup>156</sup> Kael. *For Keeps In*. Pg. 820

Chinatown community<sup>157</sup>. Kael was firmly situated in the latter camp. She described the film as “hysterical, rabble-rousing pulp, the kind that generally goes over with subliterate audiences- people who can be suckered into believing that the movie is giving them the lowdown dirty truth about power.”<sup>158</sup> What’s ironic about Kael’s critique, is that even though she’d previously asserted that Hollywood’s identity was in the hands of corporate executives, *Year of The Dragon* enraged her precisely because it indulged the egos of its two lead creators. She theorized that Stan White, the films protagonist, was intended as a stand in for Cimino himself, stating “the only thing that’s clear at the end of the movie is how Cimino wants to be taken- as bloody proud, as possessed and smoking hot.”<sup>159</sup> She also asserted that pairing the personalities of Cimino and Oliver Stone- who’s previous film, *Scarface*, she had laughed at- was a recipe for disaster, stating, “one brazen vulgarian working on a movie might enliven it, but two- and both xenophobic- bring out the worst in each other.”<sup>160</sup> Lastly, she was outraged that the film tried to incorporate themes of the post-Vietnam era, turning it into “a war between good and evil.”<sup>161</sup>

Stone, and his mix of masculine theorizing and left-wing politicizing would eventually become a major thorn in her side. The next year, she called *Salvador*, which Stone both wrote and directed, a “self-righteous nihilist fantasy, and even more sensationalistic than the others.”<sup>162</sup> That same year she slammed *Platoon*, calling it

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<sup>157</sup> Tse, Mariko. "The Dragon Is Unreal." *Los Angeles Times* 01 Sept. 1985. Web. 15 Mar. 2016.

<sup>158</sup> Kael. *Taking It All In*. Pg. 33

<sup>159</sup> Kael. *Taking It All In*. Pg. 36

<sup>160</sup> Kael. *Taking It All In*. Pg. 35

<sup>161</sup> Kael. *Taking It All In*. Pg. 32

<sup>162</sup> Kael. *Taking It All In*. Pg. 180

“overwrought, with too much filtered light, too much poetic license, and too much damn romantic insanity,”<sup>163</sup> while, like *Year of the Dragon*, asserting that it reduced its issues of war and masculinity to basic tags of “good and evil.”<sup>164</sup> In spite of Kael’s criticism, *Platoon* still went on to win the Academy Awards for Best Film and Best Director. Stone would receive another Best Director Oscar, three years later, for *Born on the Fourth of July*, another Vietnam war drama, which Kael referred to as “chaotic sensationalism,”<sup>165</sup> asserting that its goal was to make sure the audience “experiences a breast-beating catharsis.”<sup>166</sup>

In some ways, Stone made for a strange choice of targets, after all, his political ideals were much more left-wing than those of Eastwood, and far more complex than those found in *Straw Dogs* or *Walking Tall*. And yet, what ultimately bothered her about Stone’s films didn’t necessarily lie with the message per se, but rather with his willingness to simplify real life events for the sake of an agenda. Taking another look at “Why Are the Movies So Bad” one can’t help but wonder if her broad overview of Hollywood films isn’t so much a denunciation, but rather a compromise. She was willing to tolerate the action movies of Stallone and Schwarzenegger because, in her eyes, they accepted their place as trash. What really managed to disturb Kael, however, was when a movie that she deemed as trash somehow aspired for something greater.

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<sup>163</sup> Kael. *Taking It All In*. Pg. 253

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Kael, Pauline. *Movie Love: Complete Reviews 1988-1991*. New York, NY: Dutton, 1991. Pg. 253

<sup>166</sup> Kael. *Movie Love*. Pg. 254

Another excellent example of this can be seen in comparing her ability to laugh at *Tightrope*, with her utter revulsion towards 1987's *Fatal Attraction*. While she was largely able to dispel the erotic-thriller aspects of *Tightrope* as simply a case of Eastwood trying to tackle serious material that was beyond his range, the philanderer's cautionary tale of *Fatal Attraction* struck Kael as something much more sinister. She wrote that by crafting the obsessive Alex Forrest as an outwardly independent business woman, the film ensured that its real horror came from "seeing feminists as witches"<sup>167</sup> further adding "*Fatal Attraction* doesn't treat the dreaded passionate woman as a theme; she's merely the monster in a monster flick."<sup>168</sup> At one point, Kael does seemingly write the film off as just "a gross out slasher movie in a glossy format," but the final lines of the review betray just how much the film disturbed her. She concluded, "This is a horror film based on the sanctity of the family- the dream family. It enforces conventional morality (in the era of AIDS) by piling on paranoiac fear. The family that kills together stays together, and the audience is hyped up to cheer the killing."<sup>169</sup>

One could, if they were so inclined, posit the argument that since Kael was one of the few influential women in the field of criticism, it's only natural that she'd be repulsed by films that overemphasize a masculine interpretation of their context. Indeed, Kael herself sometimes drew attention to these circumstances; in her review of *Platoon*, she acknowledged herself as one of the few dissenting opinions by stating "I know that *Platoon* is being acclaimed for its realism, and I expect to be chastised

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<sup>167</sup> Kael. *Hooked*. Pg. 376

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> Kael. *Hooked*. Pg. 377

for being a woman finding fault with a war film.”<sup>170</sup> However, to this end it’s worth pointing out that while Kael hated films that tried too hard to link their excessive violence to a cause, she also loathed when others tried to pretty up their grit for the sake of their humanist message. The best example of this can be seen in the way she tore apart *Empire of the Sun* precisely because it tried to depict the occupation of Shanghai through the lens of a nostalgic coming of age story. In describing Spielberg’s use of his trademark style, she stated “this is more than a breach of taste: it’s a breach of sanity, and it rattles your confidence in the movie,”<sup>171</sup> even asserting that the film was a disservice to J.G. Ballard’s original novel. Again, her disgust ultimately came down to the idea of a film being used as a tool to goad a gullible audience. Granted, *Empire of the Sun* wasn’t seeking to reinforce a political agenda, but rather an overbearing sense of nostalgia. Yet, for Kael, it still reeked of dishonesty, and a willingness to use sleek filmmaking tools as a way of instilling a false ideal.

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In 1988 *Rambo III* was released, which Kael did not review. She had been writing for the *New Yorker* for two decades, and had been vehemently expressing her hatred of Hollywood’s obsession over masculinity, nationalism, and revenge, for over 15 years. After so long, it would probably become a little difficult to find new ways of expressing the same argument. When writing about Kael’s career, Renata Adler concedes that she more or less managed to avoid the pitfall that befalls most critics,

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<sup>170</sup> Kael. *Taking It All In*. Pg. 255

<sup>171</sup> Kael. *Movie Love*. Pg. 413

how “some critics go shrill. Others go stale. A lot go simultaneously shrill and stale.”<sup>172</sup> With this in mind, a tremendous amount of meaning emerges from Kael’s line about becoming a hack. She didn’t just avoid the episodic adventures of Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger because she knew she wouldn’t enjoy the movies, but also because turning into a broken record could have meant the death of her career.

Roger Ebert stood as somewhat of a fixture that all movies had to pass through and, as a result, his humanistic dismay towards a violent movie can almost be seen as its rite of passage, something the film would inevitably undergo. However, Kael’s critical voice was so unique because it was largely unanchored from any format or philosophy, meaning that her views on films were distinctively her own. One of the conditions of this unique voice, was that it needed to perpetually provide unique content. In some ways, this might explain why she dove at the opportunity to find a new nemesis in Oliver Stone. Whereas she’d said everything that could be said about the Dirty Harry’s and Sherriff Pussers of cinema, Stone brought about a new evolution of these traditions and, as a result, a whole new world of arguments.

Kael had once said that bad art could alienate the viewer; what’s ironic, is that when she reviewed a movie she disliked, she could sometimes be even more alienating than the film itself. Whenever Ebert was shocked, he always made a conscious effort not to talk down to the fans of a film, instead pleading with them on a frank and emotional level. Kael, on the other hand, was much more willing to

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<sup>172</sup> Adler, Renita. "The Perils of Pauline." *New York Review of Books* 14 Aug. 1980. Print.

condescend an audience. If they felt passionately about the systemic struggles of Harry Callahan, or found themselves moved by the masculine crises in *Platoon*, it was because they had allowed themselves to be tricked into a false view of the world. If they cheered during *Straw Dogs* or *Year Of The Dragon*, then they had fallen into the hands of Sam Peckinpah or Michael Cimino. In Kael's eyes, this was far more dangerous than any of the dumb thrills Schwarzenegger and Stallone had to offer.

Kael managed to maintain this dismissal throughout an entire decade, saving her energy for the targets that deserved to be taken down a peg. The best thing about her zeitgeist, is that only Kael and her readers were in on it. The average rubes attending these movies were just too dumb to notice.

## Chapter 4. The Man of Blood, Beasts, and Breasts

*“You should never attack an anarchist, he has nothing to loose,”* – John Bloom<sup>173</sup>

In 1982, the Weekend section of *The Dallas Times Herald* introduced a strange segment, a weekly film column by a previously unheard-of film critic by the name of Joe Bob Briggs. His name was first introduced to readers by John Bloom who, for the past year, had served as the *Times Herald*'s film critic. “Joe Bob Briggs once told me that he had seen 6,800 drive-in movies,”<sup>174</sup> the piece began. “I told him that was impossible because nobody 19-years old could have possibly seen 6,800 drive-in movies, but Joe Bob said, no, I was wrong, because he was counting triple features.”<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Trillin, Calvin. "The Life and Times of Joe Bob Briggs, So Far." *The New Yorker*, December 22, 1986. Print. Pg. 82

<sup>174</sup> Briggs, Joe Bob. *Joe Bob Goes to the Drive-in*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1987. Print. Pg. 1

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

According to the introduction, Briggs was a Texan redneck with three ex-wives, who loved movies filled the three B's (Blood, Beasts, and Breasts), and hated viewing them anywhere other than the driver's seat of his own 1976 Tornado. In the piece, appropriately titled "How Joe Bob Briggs Became a Film Critic, or, As He Said, 'What?'" Bloom was lax to explain precisely how such a strange figure was hired by the second most read newspaper in the Dallas area; however, he did eagerly recount Briggs' simple philosophy towards cinema as, during the exchange, "he straightened up and said 'I don't from film but I know movies. I don't know from critic but I know what I like.'"<sup>176</sup>

Bloom's introduction was then accompanied by Brigg's first ever review, looking at the Joe D'Amato cannibal-slasher horror film *Antropophagus* (which at the time, went under the title *Grim Reaper*). Even though D'Amato's career was littered with questionable material- titles such as *Love Goddess of the Cannibals* and *Porno Holocaust*, just to name a few- *Antropophagus* stands as his most infamous work. This is largely because of a scene in which the cannibal removes and then devours a pregnant woman's fetus, which some authorities believed to be a case of snuff-filmmaking (in reality they had used a skinned rabbit). Needless to say, Briggs loved the movie, titling his review "Grim Reaper; It's Got Some Teeth to It." Describing the killer as "a believable human bean who likes to kill people and then chew on them for a while,"<sup>177</sup> his review mainly rattled off a series of tense and disturbing moments from the film, playfully raising gripes over the movies plot alongside disappointment

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<sup>176</sup> Briggs. Pg. 4

<sup>177</sup> Briggs. Pg. 13

at the lack of nudity, before giving the third person recommendation that would soon become his trademark; “Joe Bob gives *The Grim Reaper* three stars for scary and two and a half stars for story.”<sup>178</sup>

In the weekly reviews that followed, Briggs slowly found his stride by developing a routine that mixed his gonzo critical style with a healthy dose of hillbilly shtick. During his second review, of the 1981 monster flick *Venom*, he introduced May Ellen Masters, his on-again-off-again girlfriend, and the first of his recurring characters. As he started to widen his cast of regulars— including the dimwitted mechanic Horace Busby, and the loudmouthed, tasteless Wanda Bodine- his reviews became like strange little journal entries, with the first half dedicated to his strange, drunken misadventures. After a few months he also introduced a unique rating system, by concluding each review with a summary of its juicy bits. For example, he concluded his review of 1982’s *Ninja* by stating “We’re talking ten corpses. Five breasts. No motor vehicle chases. One beast, green frogman variety. Two pints of blood. No kung-fu. Heads do not roll...<sup>179</sup>” followed by a rating, and his signature sign out “Joe Bob says check it out.”<sup>180</sup>

Briggs focused entirely on low-budget exploitation films, movies by companies like Troma and Full Moon productions, which most critics wouldn’t even touch; he dismissed everything else as ‘hard-top theatre’, and this distinction made him a novelty. Granted there had been publications since the 70’s that catered more towards particular genre tastes, ranging from small fanzines to nationally distributed

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<sup>178</sup> Briggs. Pg. 14

<sup>179</sup> Briggs. Pg. 189

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

publications, such as Fangoria. However, this was the first time that a syndicated newspaper would hire a columnist who would go to the 1982 Cannes Film Festival and claim that the best film he saw was Frank Henenlotter's *Basket Case*. Indeed, with almost every review, Briggs seemingly strove to be just as outrageous as the films in question. For example, he began his review of the 1981 monster movie *The Beast Within*- in which a woman is raped by a giant insect- by stating "Any movie that starts off with a woman being diddled by a giant katydid can't be all bad." Briggs frequently referred to women as "bimbos"<sup>181</sup>, his detractors were usually "pinko quiche-eaters,"<sup>182</sup> break-dancing was called "negro dancing"<sup>183</sup>, and his outrageous humor was usually justified asserting that he was on good standing with many "meskins" of his local community<sup>184</sup>. He was also willing to publicly reply to hate-mail, responding to outraged Baptists and offended feminists alike.

Yet, as crude as language often was, Briggs always embraced the opportunity to tout thorough knowledge of film history. For example, when reviewing the 1983 bikesploitation film *Hells Angels Forever*, he felt the need to compare its levels of on-screen violence and nudity with every previous on-screen iteration of the Hells Angels motorcycle gang, including 1954's *The Wild One*, 1966's *The Wild Angels*, and 1969's *Hell's Angels '69*, and 1967's *Hell's Angels On Wheels*, which Briggs recounted as "one of Jack Nicholson's best flicks before he started making indoor bullstuff."<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Briggs. Pg. 176

<sup>182</sup> Briggs. Pg. 187

<sup>183</sup> Briggs. Pg. 267

<sup>184</sup> Briggs. Pg. 200

<sup>185</sup> Briggs. Pg. 185

In 1982, *The Wall Street Journal* ran a front-page story titled “Aficionado of Trash at the Times Herald is a Big Hit in Dallas.”<sup>186</sup> By 1985, Brigg’s column had grown so popular that it was being syndicated in fifty papers. When the editors of the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* tried to drop his column, they were bombarded with reader mail until it was brought back. His presence had even extended beyond the pages of the Herald; in 1982 he began hosting the annual *World Drive-In Movie Festival and Custom Car Rally* which would attract guests such as Roger Corman, Charles Bronson, and Steven King. Indeed, in 1985 he even began a one-man show, titled *An Evening With Joe Bob Briggs*, which consisted almost entirely of him rattling off anecdotes, stray observations, and obscure movie references.

Not bad for a man who, prior to 1981, literally did not exist.

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It may seem strange to consider in hindsight but, for the better part of a year, some readers and members of the *Times Herald* believed that Joe Bob Briggs was an actual person, and that his strange misadventures were at least somewhat rooted in reality. Those who suspected that Briggs was a pseudonym created a wide range of theories; some even believed it was being penned by the feminist columnist Molly Ivins, which would, in turn have meant that the entire Joe Bob person was some complex satire of Texan masculinity. Given all the facts, it should probably be obvious that Briggs’ alter-ego was John Bloom, the only man who could claim to have actually met him. Yet, in a lot of ways, knowing the truth of his authorship just makes this persona all the more confounding.

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<sup>186</sup> Trillin. Pg. 74

In his 1986 profile of Joe Bob Briggs for *The New Yorker*, Calvin Trillin recounted “Bloom’s basic defense against the accusations of authorship was that he could hardly have been less like Joe Bob.”<sup>187</sup> While definitely a born-and-raised Texan, Bloom was also an honors graduate of Vanderbilt University, a tall, skinny, well-groomed man who loved foreign films and drove a Toyota (a car brand that Briggs once condemned as “a bunch of rice rockets.”<sup>188</sup>) Even people who had worked closely with Bloom struggled to picture him as the infamous Afficianado of Trash; Gregory Curtis, Bloom’s one-time editor, claimed, “I wasn’t surprised he could become someone else, but I thought he might have turned into a Baptist preacher.”<sup>189</sup> Even on the cover of his own books, the schism seems hard to grapple with. Briggs’ first collection, *Joe Bob Goes to The Drive-In*, features a grinning, beer-swilling caricature of Joe Bob at center stage, while Bloom awkwardly folds his arms and stands in the background, like the plus-one at a wedding<sup>190</sup>.

The idea for the character began when Bloom was tasked to write a piece on why Drive-In theatres, which had been folding in most parts of the country, still somehow thrived in regions such as the Dallas area. Bloom’s response was to create an entire character based around the Drive-In phenomenon, one who took the exploitation films that usually played at these venues and looked at them, not as a matter of taste, but as a matter of trade-qualities. As Bloom himself put it, “What

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<sup>187</sup> Trillin. Pg. 74

<sup>188</sup> *The Tonight Show*. Perf. Jay Leno, Joe Bob Briggs. NBC, 1990. *YouTube*. Web. 05 Mar. 2016. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hd3UYoocuxI>>.

<sup>189</sup> Trillin. Pg. 76

<sup>190</sup> Briggs. Cover.

would happen if a movie critic loved *I Spit On Your Grave* and hated *Dumbo*?”<sup>191</sup> To be fair, Bloom did, eventually, turn in a piece on why Drive-Ins had managed to survive in the Texas area, however, it was a Joe Bob Briggs piece on the survival of the Drive-In, meaning that it claimed God had created Drive-Ins as a respite from Hollywood’s “Commie-influences,”<sup>192</sup> and called Herschell Gordon Lewis “the greatest filmmaker in the history of Chicago, who put nekkid garbanzos on the Drive-In screen for the first time in 1959.”<sup>193</sup> When Bloom’s editors green-lit the column in 1981, it was probably intended as a short-running gag. Four years later, it had become one of the newspaper’s most popular recurring bits.

By 1984, Bloom had become the *Herald*’s Metro columnist, and was producing four articles a week, plus Briggs’ weekly rants. In the *New Yorker* piece, he revealed that the Joe Bob persona was always something easy to tap into, even stating that it took him only three hours to write a review, including the time spent watching the movie. However, this ease of creation was actually a strength for the column, as it translated into an easy read reading experience. Trillin recalls “Bloom wanted Joe Bob to ‘talk about movies the way most people talk about movies: they give the plot, with emphasis on their favorite scenes, then they sum up what they think of it.’”<sup>194</sup> When explained, the concept seems simple. Yet, considering just how widely read this idea became, one needs to ask just how, exactly, the Drive-In column can be classified.

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<sup>191</sup> Trillin. Pg. 73

<sup>192</sup> Briggs. Pg. 8

<sup>193</sup> Briggs. Pg. 10

<sup>194</sup> Trillin. Pg. 74

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The central question that puzzles readers- both at the time, and to this day- is who, exactly, Briggs is mocking. One obvious answer is to say that critics are the targets. After all, the Joe Bob Briggs rating system is a total inversion of how most critics proudly judge art. The benefit of this interpretation is that it appreciates the precise logic that Briggs operated upon; one that prizes stimulus rather than meaning. In stark contrast to someone like Roger Ebert, who saw evil in the repetition of horror franchises, Briggs saw a very strange kind of art. For example, like many critics Briggs lambasted *Halloween III* for its decision to remove Michael Meyers in favor of trying out an anthology style; unlike most critics, however, the more-of-the-same alternative was exactly what Briggs wanted. He stated “the people who made *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part 3*, those turkeys had *integrity*. They made the exact same movie three times, which is not easy”<sup>195</sup> (interestingly, Briggs was one of the very few critics to concede to the films tense moments, and unique practical effects). There were also moments in his reviews where Briggs took intentional swipes at more mainstream forms of critical thought. When writing a retrospect on Tobe Hooper, he began the article by using the character of Wanda (whom he allegedly dragged to the Cannes Film Festival) as a straw-man, with her stating, “there’s a lot of violent antisocial, demeaning trash on the movie screens of America today,” before Briggs remarks “As you can see, Wanda Bodine is back from France. Somebody told her to say that, probably someone in Cannes.”<sup>196</sup> With statements like these, the rebellious edge of

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<sup>195</sup> Briggs. Pg. 89

<sup>196</sup> Briggs. Pg. 50

the Joe Bob persona proudly shines. This is a character who has not only formulated his own precise logic for loving trash, can use his critical skills to take down any of his detractors.

However, this interpretation is somewhat lacking, as it fails to account for how little time his columns spent actually reviewing a film. For example, in his review of *Malibu Hot Summer*, he spends three quarters of the review writing about his friend's experience with Arlington Stadium's nachos, and the Welter Weight Kick-Boxing Championship; when he does get to the movie, he only has enough time to focus on how many "garbanzos" get exposed.<sup>197</sup> It's also worth noting that Joe Bob never gave a single movie less than two stars, and always ended his review by telling the audience to "check it out." This was almost certainly because there would be no real joke in beating down a movie that most critics wouldn't even approach. So, just by merit of being a Drive-In exploitation flick, it was already a film worth watching.

An alternative interpretation is to say that Briggs wasn't poking fun at critics, but rather at the audience of these films. Again, there are a few reviews that give weight to this theory, most particularly his review of *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part IV*. In this piece, he went on a long bit about how the victims in this movie are usually killed after (or during) sex, which he describes by stating "one thing I like about these numbers is they have a lot of moral philosophy."<sup>198</sup> It's a strange thing to address, and one is almost unsure how seriously to take this tirade, until he goes on to mention how one female character seemingly forms the exception, by being murdered without

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<sup>197</sup> Briggs. Pg. 97

<sup>198</sup> Briggs. Pg. 246

having onscreen sex. He stated, “but you have to remember, she was fat,” before adding “as you all know, I don’t approve of gratuitous violence unless its necessary to the plot. That’s why I had to explain about the fat girl being fat.”<sup>199</sup> The humor of an absurd statement like this comes from calling attention to the weird discriminations present in most horror movies, how they tend to prioritize the survival of attractive, white characters, while letting people of diversity serve as Slasher-fodder. Taking this degree of self-awareness, one could even see Joe Bob as a purposeful embodiment of Kael’s jolts for jocks theories, a representation of an audience totally desensitized to visceral thrills.

The problem with this assessment, is that it opens Briggs’ column up to a dilemma that some have termed the “Archie Bunker Effect”. It’s one thing for a character to present an audience member with intentionally incorrect views for the sake of satire, yet it becomes problematic when the audience is encouraged to laugh with the character, rather than at him. Indeed, during the rare occasions Bloom did offer candid thoughts on Briggs, it became resoundingly clear that he didn’t intend Briggs to play the fool. Trillin wrote “Bloom saw Joe Bob not simply as a redneck but as a particularly smart, diabolical, anarchistic redneck who was ‘full of latent sexual and violent energies.’”<sup>200</sup> Furthermore, Briggs never intentionally tried to alienate the reader; quite the contrary, he constantly tried to bring readers into his world. When San Francisco critic Peter Stack mocked Briggs for calling *Basket Case* the “single best movie of 1982”<sup>201</sup>, Briggs organized a letter writing campaign,

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid

<sup>200</sup> Trillin. Pg. 76

<sup>201</sup> Briggs. Pg. 66

encouraging audience members to vote, “In your opinion, is the French-fry-head San Francisco writer named Peter Stack a wimp or not?”<sup>202</sup> If, at any point, Bloom became weary of sleazy violence, then he certainly managed to prevent that from ever seeping into the column.

Yet choosing to view Briggs from a critic-audience dichotomy fails to answer one of the most critical questions surrounding the Joe Bob Briggs persona; why did he only review Drive-In movies? It’s a facet so built into this character that it’s easy to take the quirk for granted, yet if Bloom’s intention was to satirize the relationship between critics and audience members, wouldn’t it make more sense for Briggs to be a hillbilly criticizing mainstream cinema? That way, the character could take the role of the everyman, taking apart critical darlings of the time like *Ordinary People* and *Empire of the Sun* because of their lack of bare breasts and car-chases. Not only would this have achieved a much more stinging attack on both movie-snobs, and mass-audiences; it would have also made the job far easier, allowing Bloom and Briggs to review the same films, rather than forcing Bloom to go out and watch the likes of *Pieces* and *Blood Sucking Freaks*. The truth is, Joe Bob Briggs wasn’t meant to satirize drive-in movies from either a critical or an every-man level; his goal was to celebrate them vehemently.

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Drive-In theaters weren’t just an alternative projection venue; they were the epicenter for a totally unique cultural form. To understand its presence, one first needs to appreciate the Drive-In’s unique history. In his PHD dissertation

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<sup>202</sup> Briggs. Pg. 67

*Retrosploitation: Cultural Memory, Home Video, and Contemporary Experiences of Exploitation Film Fandom*, David Church traces the evolution of the Drive-In, showing that it was intrinsically linked to the post-war boom, a rising novelty embraced by a growing middle class that enjoyed the sudden luxury of car ownership. Part of this economic upsurge eventually meant that even working class families could afford a car, which transformed the Drive-In into what Church calls “a locus for cultural memories infused with overlapping connotations of middle-class suburban escapism and working-class rurality.”<sup>203</sup> More than just attracting people of different socio-economic backgrounds, Drive-Ins also offered the ability to watch movies in a venue that was simultaneously public and private. Church argues that even though the movies were sometimes projected to audiences in the hundreds, all of these attendees were watching the movie from the comfort of their own car, creating a sense of personal space equitable with a living room. As a result, white suburban audiences could find themselves surrounded by less-disciplined, and often less-permissible, behaviors, leading Drive-Ins to be seen as disreputable “passion pits”<sup>204</sup>.

The precarious culture of these theaters wasn't helped by the kinds of movies they would exhibit. Church points out that since movie studios usually took a 70% cut off first-run films, there was actually an economic incentive for theaters to focus on B or exploitation movies, which usually charged a flat rate.<sup>205</sup> When the studio system was broken up, their B releases started to dwindle, particularly during the Summer,

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<sup>203</sup> Church, David. *Retrosploitation: Cultural Memory, Home Video, and Contemporary Experiences of Exploitation Film Fandom*. PhD diss. Indiana University, 2014. ProQuest. Pg. 64

<sup>204</sup> Church. Pg. 69

<sup>205</sup> Church. Pg. 70

which created a market gap that a swarm of exploitation companies could dive in and fill. During this period, some films were marketed so shrewdly, on a region-by-region basis, that they could actually rival the big studio's box-office receipts. This brought about a new age, which saw the rise of directors such as Roger Corman and Russ Meyer, who held absolutely no misconceptions about their audience. As Meyer once explained "drive-in people... do not read reviews. They're influenced by a shrieking, shouting radio spot, bombastic TV spot, and bigger-than-life ads. They go to eat the tacos and hamburgers and maybe make out a little bit, and it's just a nice place to go. So those people don't give a shit about Judith Crist or Rex Reed."<sup>206</sup>

Yet, beyond socio-economic values, there was also a key element of regional identity at play. Quoting film historian Robert C. Allen, Church points out that Drive-Ins have often been overlooked in modern film history because of what Allen calls a "determinative connection between the experience of metropolitan urbanity and the experience of cinema."<sup>207</sup> Drive-Ins would have been rather scarce in the areas surrounding, say, New York and Chicago, not only because of the lack of cheap land, but also because of the weather, which would have required distributors to constantly chase the fading summer. Drive-Ins were ultimately most popular in the southern states, and, as Church points out, this meant that, in these regions, Drive-Ins became the primary means of viewing exploitation films. This is important, because urban centers already provided clearly defined outlets for transgressive cinema in the form of Grindhouse theaters, such as those that populated 42<sup>nd</sup> street. For Southern, rural

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<sup>206</sup> Church. Pg. 92

<sup>207</sup> Church. Pg. 61

areas, however, the Drive-In became the key gateway for films that strove to breach taboos. This explains why Joe Bob's persona as a Texas good old boy identity being intrinsically woven with his love of Drive-In cinema; as a Texan, the love of the Drive-In and the love of strange movies are synonymous with each other .

The act of reading Briggs' columns not only made the reader aware of this cultural context, but actively tried to make them a part of this world. In an article that rounded up his favorite films of 1984, Briggs began the article by inviting all of his readers to recite what he called the Drive-In code. It went;

*We are drive-in mutants.*

*We are not like other people.*

*We are sick.*

*We are disgusting.*

*We believe in blood,*

*In breasts.*

*And in beasts.*

*We believe in Kung Fu City.*

*If life had a Vomit Meter,*

*We'd be off the scale.*

*As long as one single drive-in*

*Remains on the planet Earth*

*We will party like jungle animals,*

*We will boogie till we puke.*

*Heads will roll.*

*The drive in will never die.*

*Amen.*<sup>208</sup>

On one level, the irony in this pledge is clear; it's an assertion of holiness in the place of profanity, of art in the presence of trash. And yet, it's also an earnest declaration of love, a dedication to a certain form of experience, regardless of how gory, cheesy, or sleazy it might become. Briggs once wrote a separate piece titled "Brigg's Guide to Impeccable Drive-In Etiquette," wherein the term "etiquette" referred to rules such as "when the sound goes bad or the picture goes blank, ride that horn like your life depends on it,"<sup>209</sup> and "decide immediately whether you are interested in public or private entertainment" (with the latter option necessitating fold-back seats and a retractable steering wheel)<sup>210</sup>. It almost goes without saying that any pedestrian viewer- someone actually going to the Drive-In to become engrossed in the quality of the film- would be horribly alienated by the kind of experience Briggs is prescribing. Yet this potential for alienation is actually a core factor of Brigg's appeal.

Briggs constantly asserted that his views were opposed by "wimps" and "quiche-eaters". In some ways, Brigg's "wimp" was the polar opposite of Ebert's

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<sup>208</sup> Briggs. Pg. 314

<sup>209</sup> Briggs. Pg. 99

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

“geek”; someone who lacked the constitution to handle on-screen blood and nudity. They typically preferred ‘hard-top material’ which, in Briggs’ vernacular, could mean any film that was intended for a classical cinema setting. In Briggs’ eyes, “wimps” were pretentious cowards, who chose to hide in the dark closure of a theatre and soak up movies that were considered “high art”. A “wimp” is the kind of viewer to prefer a movie they might only pretend to understand, simply because they couldn’t handle the raw intensity of the Drive-In, even though, according to Briggs, that’s how god intended movies to be watched.

Sometimes, Briggs’ use of the term breached into uncomfortable territories, such as when he bordered on homophobia by referring to San Francisco as “the wimp capital of the world”<sup>211</sup>. However, the “wimp” stood as less of a brand of viewer, and more as a symbol of the Hollywood system itself. Briggs would frequently mourn how Tobe Hooper was “lost to us as a drive in director,” because he had moved to making studio pictures like *Poltergeist*, which Briggs wrote off as “indoor trash.”<sup>212</sup> Briggs’ style was one that rewarded dedication with a sense of community; if the reader could appreciate references to movies like *Machine Gun Kelly* and *Death Race 2000*, then they could count themselves as one of “the weird”. Anyone unable to read Briggs’ column and situate themselves within his world would be reduced to trying to appreciate Joe Bob through an anthropological lens.

Yet, trying to appreciate Joe Bob on his own level carried its own dangers. In his essay *The Communal Constraints On Parody: The Symbolic Death Of Joe Bob*

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<sup>211</sup> Briggs. Pg. 67

<sup>212</sup> Briggs. Pg. 51

*Briggs*, Barry Alan Morris points out that when viewers consider themselves *in* on the joke, it carries a rather unique social contract. Morris explains, “when a parodist says ‘Nothing is sacred,’ the audience assumes that means ‘Nothing is sacred as expressed within the context of our mutual understanding of what constitutes acceptable behavior- which is sacred.’”<sup>213</sup> In April, 1985, both Joe Bob Briggs, and John Bloom, were forced to learn this lesson the hard way.

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In March, 1985, Motown Pictures released *The Last Dragon*, an American Kung-Fu/Musical that followed the adventures of Leroy Green, A.K.A. the Bruce Lee of Harlem. Unsurprisingly, Briggs adored the film, giving it four stars because of its “Disco-fu,” “Kid fu,” and “lightning fist negro-fu.”<sup>214</sup> However, for some strange reason, he decided to spend the first half of his review taking a jab at *Band-Aid*, the star-studded recording of “We Are the World” aimed at raising money for humanitarian aid in Africa.

“This is the first official day of the drive-in song, “We Are the Weird,” written and performed by all the drive-in artists of the world,”<sup>215</sup> Briggs wrote. At first the joke was fairly clear, albeit a little esoteric; it was the Drive-In world reinterpreting modern news headlines and taking a stab at mainstream celebrity philanthropy. However, Briggs pushed the joke to weirder territory, adding that the song was “for

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<sup>213</sup> Morris, Barry Alan. "The Communal Constraints on Parody: The Symbolic Death of Joe Bob Briggs." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 4 (1987). Pg. 468

<sup>214</sup> Briggs. Pg. 322

<sup>215</sup> Briggs. Pg. 320

the benefit of minority groups in Africa and the United Negro College Fund in the United States, cause I think we should be sending as many Negroes to college as we can, specially the the stupid Negroes.”<sup>216</sup> At this point, Briggs started to dig himself into a hole, and it only got worse, as the song itself chose to double down on the racial overtones, with one verse stating;

*“We are the weird  
We are the starving,  
We are the scum of the filthy earth  
So let’s start scarfin...  
There’s a goat-head bakin  
We’re callin it their food,  
If the Meskins can eat it,  
They can eat it too.”*<sup>217</sup>

According to Trillin’s *New Yorker* piece, one of the reasons a passage like this got past Bloom’s two copy-editors, was that since Briggs had spent months trying to sneak the word “twat” into one of his columns, they were so accustomed to scanning for hidden gems of profanity that they had become numb to the bigger picture of his articles. It’s also worth noting that a majority of Briggs’ readership was white. As such, it would inherently bring trouble if Briggs entered the radar of Dallas’ black community with phrases like “As the Big Guy told us, we should always clean our

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Briggs. Pg. 321

plate/ Cause then all the African stomachs won't look gross.”<sup>218</sup>

On the Friday of its release, the “We Are the Weird” column had aroused the attention of Willis Johnson, a morning talk show host for KKDA, Dallas’ leading black radio station; as well as John Wiley Price, a black county commissioner with extensive ties to Dallas’ black ministers. On air, Johnson and Price agreed to march downtown the following Tuesday, after a weekly black-leadership lunch, and protest outside the *Times Herald’s* offices. When they showed up, they were accompanied by several hundred other angry members of the community. That a satirical column could evoke such a commotion was surprising; that it happened in Dallas, of all places, was astounding. As Trillin points out “In a city that had basically skipped the public confrontations of the civil-rights struggle, the presence of a large crowd of black people marching into a white institution in an angry mood was virtually unprecedented.”<sup>219</sup>

The editors of the *Times Herald* met with the protestors in a stuffy auditorium, and tried to appease them by bringing out an apology column their staff had published that very morning. They also promised that twelve of the next twenty-two editorial positions filled would be filled by members of minority communities. However, the audience wouldn’t settle for anything less than Briggs’ resignation, and so Will Jarrett, the *Times Herald’s* editor, nervously announced “the Joe Bob Briggs column, the *Weekend* column, is dead.”<sup>220</sup> Bloom was out of town at the time of this decision,

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Trillin. Pg. 84

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

however, upon hearing that Briggs' had been canned –which only reduced his duties at the *Times Herald* by a fifth- he announced his resignation.

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In a final, unpublished, column for the Herald, Bloom asserted that the controversy had nothing to do with racism, but was rather about how some subjects, such as African famine, were simply off-limits because “they are too close to our subconscious fears and guilts.”<sup>221</sup> This argument received next to no support from other critics. Morris asserts that by shifting his focus to race, Briggs had more or less betrayed an audience that had been willing to place themselves on his level, writing “*We Are The Weird* was a pie-in-the-face for audience members who were willing to tolerate Joe Bob’s screeds because doing so made them ‘in on the joke.’”<sup>222</sup> Even fellow critics at the Herald Times struggled to side with Bloom; Molly Ivins, who had previously commended Briggs, wrote “satire is a weapon to use against the powerful, you don’ use satire against the weak”<sup>223</sup>. Indeed, Jim Schutze, and editor at the *Times Herald*, points out that almost the entire editorial staff grew to loathe Briggs, stating “they were the ones who answered the phone when people started calling in and saying ‘the trouble is these colored people don’t know good *say-tire* when they see it.”<sup>224</sup> Almost everything about the *We Are The Weird* piece felt out of place, just by nature of Bloom trying to insert musical satire into a written film column. Even the choice to attach the piece to a review of *The Last Dragon* was a bizarre choice, as it

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<sup>221</sup> Trillin. Pg. 85

<sup>222</sup> Morris. Pg. 468

<sup>223</sup> Trillin. Pg. 85

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

was a movie that actually set some minor cultural benchmarks, earning a cult appeal by respectfully appropriating Hong-Kong martial arts tropes to a Harlem setting<sup>225</sup>. Ultimately, by deciding to mock victims of famine and racial stereotypes, he had chosen to make his reader complicit in something needlessly mean-spirited. Worst of all, he had made the persona seem like less of a loveably goofy hillbilly, and more like a dangerously realistic redneck.

However, most of the press still hadn't turned their back on Briggs. Almost immediately after leaving the *Times Herald*, Bloom was signed with the Universal Press Syndicate, a group that was already accustomed to dealing with volatile content, such as as Garry Trudeau's *Doonsbury*. A week after "We Are the Weird" had made its stir, Briggs came out with a new column titled "November 22, 1963. April 16, 1985. They Said It Couldn't Happen Again" in which he jokingly compared his 'death' to the Kennedy assassination, before ridiculing the "Slimes Herald"<sup>226</sup> and proclaiming "I can find other papers to print *Joe Bob Goes to the Drive-In*."<sup>227</sup> While Bloom did find new outlets for Joe Bob, the free-lance life simply wasn't the same. As Trillin points out, John Bloom would struggle to publish books and articles, however, Briggs readily found ways to publish his material. After leaving the Times Herald to defend Briggs' honor, Bloom was forced to double down on his dedication to the persona. Eventually, Bloom received phone calls, asking him to make speaking

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<sup>225</sup> Onigiri, Amy Abugo. "He Wanted To Be Like Bruce Lee." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 5.1 (2002): 22-41. *Project Muse*. Web. 10 Mar. 2016. <[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal\\_of\\_asian\\_american\\_studies/v005/5.1ongiri.htm](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_asian_american_studies/v005/5.1ongiri.htm)>.

<sup>226</sup> Briggs. Pg. 324

<sup>227</sup> Briggs. Pg. 325

engagements as Briggs; he could also appear as himself, for a lower rate.

For someone who's persona was so firmly rooted in nostalgia, Briggs became surprisingly savvy towards new trends in the coming years. While he had always criticized mainstream Hollywood, Briggs had been reluctant to condemn television; this was a wise move as, in 1986, TV became his new home. For ten years, Briggs hosted *Drive-In Theater* on *The Movie Channel*, before moving to *TNT* in 1996 to host *Monstervision*. While he held creative control over the show's material, he ostensibly held the same role as Cassandra Peterson's Elvira persona, a host to sit in the chair and introduce the movie, delivering brief monologues and commentaries between commercial breaks. Briggs also took his one man show on tour, even appearing on *The Tonight Show* to promote his work. During the live shows, he isn't afraid to talk about the "We Are The Weird" column, although he does so to an audience that he knows would have let it slide. Currently, all his work is posted on [www.joebobbriggs.com](http://www.joebobbriggs.com), with a dopey cowboy illustration proudly standing next to the masthead, and his upcoming speaking dates posted below.

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In his profile, Trillin asserted that Briggs' flash-in-the-pan effect had more or less concluded once he resigned from the *Times-Herald*, leaving behind "a widespread feeling that the giant stretched and then went back to sleep."<sup>228</sup> One unnamed colleague even equated the continued life of Briggs, with the creative death of Bloom, stating "what bothers me is that John Bloom is a significant talent who can

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<sup>228</sup> Trillin. Pg. 88

endure, and Joe Bob is an ephemeral kind of thing.”<sup>229</sup> To a certain degree, Bloom does deserve more credit than this, as he’s managed to make a living off a single comic persona for over thirty-years. As a comedian, Bloom has enjoyed considerable success, even appearing as a correspondent for the first two seasons of *The Daily Show*.

Yet, in embracing Briggs’ modern role as a comedic personality whose material just happens to focus on movies, Bloom has seemingly overwritten his own genuine skill as a critic in favor of being a novelty. For example, in 2002 he published a review of *I Spit On Your Grave* directly to his website, in which he proudly proclaimed “*I Spit On Your Grave* may be the most despised movie in the history of film. Sometimes I think I’m it’s only defender,”<sup>230</sup> shortly after casually mentioning that he also provided commentary for Elite Entertainment’s Millennium re-issuing of the movie on DVD<sup>231</sup>. What’s weird, is that this was published twenty-five years after the film had come out and made names as a controversy, and after countless other critics (including Carol Clover) had already defended the film. Ultimately, no one was really looking to Briggs and asking him to defend *I Spit On Your Grave* (except, possibly, for the producers at Elite Entertainment), instead he just sort of provided it, and hoped people would take interest.

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<sup>229</sup> Trillin. Pg. 86

<sup>230</sup> Briggs, Joe Bob. "I Spit On Your Grave." *JoeBobBriggs.com*. Web. 15 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.joebobbriggs.com/index.php?/i-spit-on-your-grave-movie-reviews.html>>.

<sup>231</sup> Briggs, Joe Bob. Commentary. *I Spit on Your Grave*. Dir. Meir Zarchi. Perf. Camille Keaton. Cinemagic Pictures, 1978. DVD. Elite Entertainment. 2002.

In 2003, a book titled *Profoundly Disturbing; Shocking Movies That Changed History*, was published under Joe Bob Briggs' name. It's a strange book, because while it certainly deals with Briggs' kind of movies (e.g. *Shaft*, *Blood Feast*, *Ilsa; She-Wolf of the SS*) it does so in the least Briggsian way possible. The author earnestly analyzes these movies, often accepting both the failures and successes of their legacies. For example, whereas Briggs would assert that every movie that Hooper made after *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was nothing but "hard-top wimp material,"<sup>232</sup> *Profoundly Disturbing* is willing to admit that the film was an absolute nightmare to make, and that it more or less killed the careers of everyone involved, other than Hooper<sup>233</sup>. Likewise, in discussing the tremendous impact of *Deep Throat*, the book is also willing to consider the tragic exploitation suffered by its star, Linda Lovelace.<sup>234</sup> In a lot of ways, the book is a slight glimmer of what could have been.

One can't help but wonder what kind of pieces Bloom would continue writing, had he used Briggs as a stepping stone, rather than an island. It's undeniable that Briggs brought something radical to the table. His style of criticism was willing to single out a unique and rebellious audience, and bathe in a mutual admiration of transgressive thrills. Yet, the more he dedicated himself to the joke aspect of it, the less important the underlying concept became. When Bloom and Briggs were writing simultaneously, the beauty of the gag lay in its anomaly; how a single man could embody the roles of both the critic and the anti-critic. Yet, when Briggs more-or-less

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<sup>232</sup> Briggs. Pg. 51

<sup>233</sup> Briggs, Joe Bob. *Profoundly Disturbing; Shocking Movies That Changed History!* New York: Universe, 2003. Print. Pg. 134-153

<sup>234</sup> Briggs. *Profoundly Disturbing*. Pg. 153-172

consumed Bloom, it stopped becoming an act. Now, the long-running ‘joke’ is also the only means of staying relevant, and Briggs’ new material just feels like a comedian repeating gags that have grown old and stale.

If you google his name in a search engine, John Irving Bloom’s written pieces will almost never come up; instead, one will find themselves redirected to the cowboy hat-clad, good-ol’-boy grin of Joe Bob Briggs.

## Chapter 4. The Experiment

What becomes clear by looking at the struggles of these three critics, is that moral outrage usually stems from a choice. Ebert, Kael, and even Briggs, all decided to view films through a very specific lens that would, in turn, reflect both their critical voices, and their ongoing beliefs. The more I researched into these critic's distinct personalities, the more fascinated I became over what kind of details these diverse perspectives would fixate upon. How vastly different could two interpretations be, even if they were based on the same signs and symbols?

This chapter is dedicated to exploring just that. I've taken three particularly controversial films and challenged myself to write two reviews, one that condemns the film and another that appreciates its merits. Then, I've turned my attention to a film that Ebert, Kael, and Briggs all liked, if not loved, to try and understand what a film would need to do to appeal to these three vastly different tastes.

The first film I look at is Tobe Hooper's 1986 *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part II*. Even though Ebert called it a "geek show" movie, he was more bored than anything else, pointing how the chainsaws never looked like they were turned on, and

that the film ultimately equated “screaming and mayhem with suspense.”<sup>235</sup> The first review attempts to be even more offended than Ebert was, focusing, especially, on the film’s ability to conflate exploitation with comedy. The second, however, is inspired by a mix of Carol Clover and Joe Bob Briggs, and tries to understand what kind of transgressive fun could be had, so long as it’s experienced by the right audience.

Next, I turn my attention to Micheal Winner’s 1982 *Death Wish 2*. Kael had called the original film “vindictive and sadistic”<sup>236</sup> and, unsurprisingly, chose to ignore the second installment completely; Ebert, on the other hand, awarded the original three stars, but gave its sequel a “no-star”<sup>237</sup> rating. The first challenge with *Death Wish 2* was to argue why it deserves more negative attention than it received, for its disturbingly sexist and fascistic overtones. Even more challenging was the defense; my ultimate conclusion is that the same features that make it a bad movie, also make it largely innocuous.

The third film I’ve looked at is David Lynch’s 1986 *Blue Velvet*, which grabbed my attention because it completely polarized Ebert and Kael. Ebert believed that the film genuinely exploited actress Isabella Rossellini, particularly by mixing her tragic performance with scenes that were more absurd and lighthearted, leading him to ask “What’s worse? Slapping somebody around, or standing back and finding the whole thing funny?”<sup>238</sup> Kael, meanwhile, adored the film, claiming that it placed the

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<sup>235</sup> Ebert. Review of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part II*. August 25, 1986

<sup>236</sup> Kael. *For Keeps*. Pg. 449

<sup>237</sup> Ebert. Review of *Death Wish II*. January 1, 1982

<sup>238</sup> Ebert. Review of *Blue Velvet*. September 19, 1986

audience in an “erotic trance,”<sup>239</sup> and calling David Lynch a “genius naïf.”<sup>240</sup> This exercise was particularly interesting, because writing in favor of either of these arguments required a drastic re-consideration of the film’s intent. Taking Ebert’s stance meant that the film needed to have some kind of underlying message to justify its depictions of sexual violence. Siding with Kael, however, required a more ephemeral interpretation of the movie, taking it more as a meditation on the nature of sexual desire.

The last piece is a breakdown of *Re-Animator*, which was liked, if not adored, by Ebert, Kael, and (unsurprisingly) Briggs. *Re-Animator* is such a unique film because it treads across so many dangerous territories, yet gracefully avoids coming across as cruel, or mean-spirited. My analysis is not just a breakdown of everything that the film did right, but also a look at where it could have gone wrong, and what kind of decisions could have alienated Ebert or Kael.

What’s just as important as the voice of all these pieces, is the assumed audience. In all three cases, the offense demands a momentary awareness of how the movie presents itself, a consideration of what acts it presents its audience as a source of entertainment. Meanwhile, the defense always required a greater knowledge of context, and thus a larger appreciation of intent. In all three cases, what’s important is that neither side outweighs the other, they’re simply two vastly different interpretations of the same symbols. Granted, I don’t take the same approach towards *Re-Animator*, but don’t think I could muster hate for that movie, even if I tried.

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<sup>239</sup> Kael. For Keeps. Pg. 1110

<sup>240</sup> Kael. For Keeps. Pg. 1109

## **The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2**

### **Gross in So Many Ways**

Early in life, I was taught two basic rules of good taste, things you don't do in polite company because they're simply revolting. When I was five, I was told that you don't play with your food; whether it be a strand of spaghetti or a chicken wing, it's just nauseating to watch grubby fingers wiggle it around. When I was ten, I was told that you don't make fun of the mentally handicapped; it's gross and predatory, and all for the sake of a cheap laugh. I bring up these two rules, which most members of civil society tend to obey, for a simple reason; *Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2's* attempt to explore the realms of horror-comedy resorts to breaking them both, and doing very little else.

On paper, the progression of the franchise makes sense. The first movie was all about five spacey teenagers looking for a nostalgic getaway, only to unwittingly stumble into hellish insanity. While a sequel could bring back some iconic monsters, Tobe Hooper wouldn't be able to evoke that same surprise that the original relied on. So it's only logical that a sequel would place its heroes on the offense by having a spunky heroine and a grizzled cowboy teaming up to take down the Sawyer family. Oh, but if only...

The tricky thing about a concept like this is that it requires a certain tact and subtlety, a careful balancing of the heroes and the villains; *Aliens* doesn't work without a careful power-play between Ripley and the Xenomorphs. However, Hooper isn't interested in creating this kind of balance, because while he brings in Dennis

Hopper as a Texas ranger out for revenge, he does practically nothing with the character other than tantalizing the audience with the promise of a climactic chainsaw duel. Indeed, Hopper's character is pushed so far to the background that he could almost be considered the movie's comedic relief, minus the comedy.

But what sinks the *Texas Chainsaw 2* revenge premise the most, is its weird infatuation with its chainsaw wielding maniac, who becomes the film's real protagonist. When Leatherface first steps into the scene, it's like something out of a modern superhero movie; two teenagers' drunken hell-raising is interrupted when a truck pulls up beside them with Leatherface dancing on the roof to an old surf rock tune. There's nothing inherently wrong with a horror movie giving fan-service through its villain, but what's really strange is that Leatherface is the only character who undergoes a dramatic arc. Stretch, even though she's supposedly the movie's heroine, really does nothing other than repeatedly delivering herself into the hands of her cannibalistic tormentors; it's only at the end that she actively repels one of her attackers, and this act costs her her sanity. Leatherface, meanwhile, ends up falling in love with Stretch midway through the film, and then finds himself torn between loyalty to his family business and the calling of his heart.

Now, what I just described could lend itself to some silliness, but there's one element you need to consider; Leatherface is mentally handicapped to the point of being unable to string words together. There's something too real about his performance, making him look not like a scenery-chewing villain, but rather like the victim of a serious neurological disorder. This means that whenever the movie tries to show Leatherface expressing his love in his own unique way, it ends up being neither

scary nor funny, but just really uncomfortable. In one sequence, he phallically strokes Stretch's inner thigh with his chainsaw, before pulling it out, letting it roar, and collapsing in an exhausted heap. In another scene, he ties Stretch up then places the freshly peeled face of a dead coworker over her own (holding it in place with a cowboy hat no less) and dances with her. Both these scenes are distressing on such a deep level, yet they both refuse to cut, with Leatherface parading around screen and letting out animalistic grunts for minutes on end.

Now, credit does need to be given to the design of the Sawyer family's lair since it really is an amazingly high quality haunted house. I'll even admit that there is something just so surreal about watching the three cannibals act out an old Three Stooges routine in a room furnished with tastefully arranged skeletons. And yet, this is all ruined because Stretch simply isn't in on the joke. She has no dialogue after the end of the first act, she just desperately wails at the top of her lungs. As a result, any potential fun in the movie's climax is ruined. Sure, Leatherface and his brothers might be laughing and having a good time, but when you're constantly hearing a woman scream bloody murder in shot after shot, you just want the scene to end.

It really feels like Tobe Hooper wanted to be Sam Raimi in this movie; after all, both this and the *Evil Dead* series share terrified teenagers, gruesome monsters, three stooges-esque wackiness and a badass hero with a penchant for chainsaws. The problem, however, is that Sam Raimi knows just when to pull back and give the audience something to laugh at, and to constantly remind the audience to have fun with the material. With *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, Tobe Hooper wants a similar sense of craziness, yet he also can't drop the gross sense of realism that, ironically,

made his debut film so great. If there's anyone out there who would actually laugh at a mentally retarded man dancing around with a screaming helpless woman, I really don't think I'd want to meet them.

### **Faint Hearted Wimpy People, Need Not Apply**

One of the biggest compliments I could give to Tobe Hooper's long awaited sequel to the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, is that it's a hard movie to love. People walking into the movie probably knew exactly what they wanted; crazed violence at the hands of rednecks with chainsaws (the movie's poster has the Sawyer family posing like the *Breakfast Club*, for Chrissakes!). And yet, what's so interesting about the movie is that it intentionally refuses this satisfaction, instead delivering something that's surprisingly thoughtful, if not a little bleak.

Now, it should be said that the first two scenes completely adhere to audience expectations. When Leather face makes his grand debut, there's something so delightfully surreal about watching him dance in time to "Goo Goo Muck" by The Cramps - who, in my mind, epitomize goofy horror punk. We then jump from that insanity, to the humorless Dennis Hopper, inspecting the remains of the carnage and swearing to bring god's wrath down on these monsters. As the film's first act introduces the key players, it keeps the scenes loaded with a uniquely deadpan sense of humor; during a chili contest, one judge finds a tooth in the chili, to which Drayton Sawyer (the Moe of these three stooges) quickly claims "oh, that there's a peppercorn!"

Yet, something odd starts to happen around about the second act. The movie begins with seemingly high ambitions, introducing multiple characters and establishing a broad scope to the Sawyer's business, only to instead focus on locking you in a room with a trio of psychopaths. It really needs to be emphasized just how cuckoo the Sawyer family is. When we first meet Chop-Top, he's a twitching, Charles Manson-esque hippy who's heating a coat-hanger with a lighter, before using it to scratch his scalp and eat any wayward bits. His character is almost a disturbing parody of the hippy protagonists of the first movie; whereas they held spacey conversations about astrology, he nervously rants about the "infinite eternal" and occasionally screeches "Nam flashbacks!" But what really stands out about this character, and indeed with all three of the Sawyers, is that he doesn't feel "movie-evil", but rather dangerously mentally ill. I suppose that in a horror movie about cannibals, that might seem like a no-brainer, but compare this to the other famous villains of the horror movie cannon. From Freddie Kruger to Jason Vorhees, and from Hannibal Lecter to Jigsaw, horror movies have a weird tradition of creating villains who commit actions that society would deem as crazy, without actually acting crazy. They're almost like Bond villains in that regard; sure, Kruger is a child murderer, but he's also a masterful architect of dreams, and a wisecracker to boot. But in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part II*, all three of the Sawyers have an erratic nature about them that's so intense that it becomes terrifying. Even when they're acting funny, such as when Drayton espouses his small business wisdom over a pot of human chili, you're always laughing at them, but not with them.

Probably the most interesting aspect of this separation, comes when the movie deals with sex. Even though movie monsters typically target beautiful woman, the most famous killers in horror are completely asexual. When Jason chases after his screaming teenagers, his desires are never sexual, he simply wants to impale them on his machete. However, Leatherface breaches the asexual tradition by developing a crush on his victim. When he has Stretch cornered, Hooper outright admits to the audience “yes, his chainsaw is a substitute for his dick,” as he proceeds to stroke her inner thigh with the chainsaw, then pulling it back and revving it in the air. Now, admittedly, it is uncomfortable to watch these close-ups of a weapon exploring that area (and I’m not sure whether Stretch egging him on makes this better or worse), but Hooper at least actively strives to make sure the scene isn’t in the least bit sexy, by constantly cutting back to Leatherface bulging his eyes and licking his lips. While the scene is certainly gross, it also makes Leatherface feel really pitiful, showing him as an idiot victim of his own base instincts. Indeed, this effect spreads to the rest of the family; when they find out he’s fallen in love with Stretch, Drayton tells him “sex is a swindle, don’t fall for it!” It’s a funny line, but it also drives home something pathetic about the whole family; deep down, they’re all just a-sexual weirdos.

This strange breakdown of sexuality also extends to the heroes/victims of the movie, who stand as some of the most pathetic masculine figures in horror history. No women die in the film, and all of the Sawyer family’s four victims are macho men, self assured that they can take on the psychos and easily rescue Stretch. Dennis Hopper’s character is particularly interesting in this regards, because he’s totally

useless at everything other than waving his own phallic chainsaw around, before finally getting into a pissing contest with Leatherface.

Yet, as much as one could postulate the sexual-gendered implications of this movie, it's also telling of the movie's real intentions that, as opposed to the mansion of the previous film, the Sawyer family now resides in a literal circus tent. By exploring this bizarre home, the movie manages to be bloodier than its predecessor, while showing fewer deaths. The walls are stuffed with human entrails, skeletons are arranged in bizarre positions, and the dinner table has chairs made entirely of human skulls. At one point, Stretch falls down a trapdoor, and Hooper tries to save her by extending a decaying, literal helping hand. To say the movie is like a haunted house ride wouldn't do it justice, because at one of her worst moments Stretch is literally saved by an exit sign inexplicably pointing to freedom. The sign is a perfect metaphor for the kind of tension that the film achieves; it pushes the boundaries for how close and uncomfortable the horrors can be for the viewer, but always keeps the comedic absurdity present as an emotional backdoor, and a reminder that it isn't all bad.

Ultimately, there's something very punk-rock about the movie's attitude. It touts a good humored nihilism that refuses to let anyone come out on top, and creates a world wherein everyone's a little crazy, in their own unique way. Much like most punk bands, a lot of the acts of this movie sound cool in practice, but are a just grimy and nauseating when you actually see them. But, ultimately, if you're willing to stand back and take an ironic sense of apathy towards the whole experience, there is a lot of fun to be had.

## **Death Wish 2**

### **Just a White Man, and his .45**

Trying to make an action-movie franchise out of *Death Wish* is a bad idea. In fact, it's a really bad idea. Sure, *Dirty Harry* spawned four successful sequels and, just like *Death Wish*, it had to navigate the quagmire of issues like vigilantism, police brutality, and civil liberties. When Bronson and Eastwood have their guns drawn, they even carry a similar mystique of the infallible old man who's willing to use violence to solve even life's most complex problems. But actually watch *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish*, and you'll see that they're two very different beasts.

From the beginning, Harry Callahan is basically a Spaghetti Western cowboy dropped into San Francisco. His character is like Sherlock Holmes, but with bullets instead of deductive reasoning, so it makes sense for multiple movies to pit him against new and varied opponents. Yet, the original *Death Wish* was unique precisely because Bronson's character wasn't an unflinching machine of justice. Quite the contrary, he was an ordinary man, pushed to his limit by the cruelty of his bleak surroundings. His journey towards vigilantism was also marked by constant contemplation, as we watched his first killing make him literally sick to his stomach. There was an ambiguity to it all, that even lead critics to debate whether the film was pro or anti vigilante. But *Death Wish* is kind of like the *Blair Witch Project*, in that once you make sequels, you risk tarnishing the true-to-life feel that the original movie depended on.

By the third movie, Bronson was blasting entire armies of drug dealers with a grenade launcher, and by the fifth he was taking on the mob with a female sidekick.

When you reach this level of silliness, a certain harmlessness ensues. But, with *Death Wish 2*, there's something a little different at play. The movie wants to move towards a bigger, more plot-heavy story, yet it's also stuck trying to repeat the emotional beats of the first film. It tries to have its cake and eat it too, and the result is more than a little despicable.

The first movie ended with a playful, yet oddly unsettling, implication that even though Kersey had relocated to Chicago, he would continue his violent tendencies. Yet this movie begins with the man seemingly on top of the world; he's nicely settled in LA, his daughter is recovering from the trauma of the first film, and he's found himself a new fiancée with a fancy, yet inexplicable, British accent. The movie then proceeds to take all of this away from him by repeating the events of the first movie, except with twice as much rape; first the maid is stripped naked, forced to crawl on all fours, and then tied up and raped; then the daughter is kidnapped to the hooligans' lair and raped, before jumping out a window and being impaled on a fence.

This scene just leaves the viewer feeling dirty in a way that the equivalent sequence of the previous film didn't. Whereas the sexual assault of the first film was something disturbingly chaotic, in this film it feels calculated, as if director Michael Winner wanted the audience to extract real pleasure from watching two naked women be totally broken. The death scene compounds this by forgoing any respectful end for the protagonist's daughter in favor of a gruesome death, thereby turning her into a tool to incite Bronson's wrath. It doesn't help that the movie later throws ANOTHER rape for good measure, plus a gratuitous topless scene near the climax.

What's almost equally distressing is how Kersey responds to the situation. He actively refuses to help the police and wastes no time grieving, instead grabbing his pistol and heading out to the streets to hunt down the perpetrators of the crime. Suddenly, all sense of reality disappears, as the everyman-vigilante can now easily track down the whereabouts of specific street-punks, and can hold his own in gunfights with armed drug-dealers. In the first film, we watched the character swing a sock filled with quarters, simultaneously excited and terrified by the power it brought. In this, we watch him impersonate a doctor, just so he can sneak into the locked room of a rapist who's already been arrested and hospitalized. There's no regret, and no shame. The film concludes with him smiling and walking the streets of LA to the sounds of gunshots, seemingly implying that his daughter's rape was just the excuse he was waiting for.

When the original *Death Wish* came out, some critics asserted that the movie posed a legitimate danger, that its message really would inspire a new wave of vigilante killers. While I think the original *Death Wish* did have some interesting ideas, it wasn't nearly profound enough to hold that kind of impact. I'd also be lying if I said I wasn't considering watching *Death Wish 3*, just to see the bizarre lengths Cannon Films was willing to push an aging Bronson into. But what's truly upsetting about *Death Wish 2*, is that it seems to believe its own hype. It really thinks that viewers will be enthralled into believing a world in which every street-walker is a rapist, every young woman is a prospective victim, and that, equipped with a handgun and enough wits, any older middle-class white man can become a god of divine justice. Honestly, I just pray that they're wrong.

## **Fun with A Gun**

*Death Wish 2* isn't a good movie; it's exploitative, paranoid, and profoundly mean spirited. And yet, the features of the film that make it a terrible movie manage to push it into territory that's harmless, and even a little funny. The original *Death Wish* was by no means a perfect movie, but there was a certain force of will to it, as it wove its uncomfortable narrative of an old man inspiring an entire city to take justice into its own hands.

The sequel has tried to build on the Paul Kersey mythology by putting a set of faces on the evil that he fights; he's not just baiting random muggers, but actively pursuing the people who raped his daughter. This could have given the movie a chance to explore the other side of the equation, to question what drives these youths, or at least show the vigilante struggle from both sides of the coin... but no. The teenage hooligans in this movie are nothing but cardboard cut-outs. What results is a movie that's not only too cartoonish to coherently deliver a message to an older generation, but is also so out of touch with reality that a younger generation could never take it seriously.

What first stands out about these five youngsters -and I say this with only a slight hint of irony- is that their sense of style is truly magnificent. In the first film, when Kersey's wife and daughter were attacked, the transgressors had an unsettling simplicity that complimented the every-man tone of the film; they dressed in flannels and bandannas, and the only thing truly remarkable was that one of them was a

skinhead. But that was 1974, and by 1982 the world had become a very different place; the hippie movement had breathed its last breath and was overtaken by the punk rock scene growing out of Manhattan; meanwhile, figures such as Grandmaster Flash and The Sugarhill Gang had started the genesis of rap as we know it. America's new generation was creating a whole new style, one that was bathed in irony and rebellion for the sake of its self. These trends were new and complex, and when the makers of *Death Wish 2* tried to understand them, they failed tremendously.

The movie's villains form a multiracial pick-and-mix. The gang's leader is white, and dressed in a yellow tank top with jeans and a denim beret. His second in command wears riding boots, cargo pants, a sleeveless button up, and a tie, all of which are colored in the same nauseating shade of khaki. Their Puerto Rican associate wears a black leather vest (unbuttoned and bare-chested underneath) with a matching black dog collar. But the real award for outstanding achievement goes to a young Lawrence Fishburne, who enters the scene in a flannel button-up plus a black and red vest, as well as a fedora and (most impressively) slim, pink, wraparound shades.

When we first see these colorful goons, they're huddled around a jukebox, blasting the film composer's best interpretation (or assumption) of what the kids were listening to those days. However, as the film progresses, we soon find out that they're also skilled pickpockets who occasionally dabble in robbery, kidnapping, drug-smuggling, and arms dealing. But it's not enough for the movie to localize evil around these five; the streets they frequent are filled with hookers, pimps, and leather-clad punks. Indeed, if it wasn't for the (predominantly black) churches that Kersey

occasionally walks past, one would think when the lights went out, LA became an overwhelming hotbed of sin. But, thankfully, Kersey mercilessly slays these five delinquents and, by the end of the film, has become the guardian LA never asked for, walking the streets at night with Colt .45 at his side.

Watching these misadventures, one can't help but ask just who, exactly, the film is trying to reach. The film's tone is too divorced from reality to possibly please fans of the original *Death Wish* (who, let's face it, probably weren't hankering for a sequel anyway). The movie is too chocked full of sleazy sex and violence to appeal to an older conservative crowd, and it's tone deaf, borderline racist portrayal of LA probably didn't earn it too many favors from a younger generation. 1982, as a year, brought much better crime films (*48 HRS*, *Bladerunner*), better exploitation films (*Porky's*, *The Last American Virgin*), and even better nationalistic action films (*Rocky III*, *First Blood*). The only real explanation for the film's \$29 million gross is that an aging Charles Bronson was still a big enough draw. Indeed, this might explain why, from this point onwards, Cannon Films would start to churn out films starring Bronson on a yearly basis- with the man looking increasingly tired through each installment.

On one level, *Death Wish 2* is innocuously terrible. Yet, at the same time, it turns around and almost becomes endearingly misguided. I am willing to assume that most young people within the punk and hip-hop scenes didn't dress this way. However, I'm also willing to bet money that -at the time- if you pulled over someone in their late 40's and asked them to describe how modern kids were dressing, he'd describe something akin to what we see in *Death Wish 2*. We live in a world where

most elements of punk and hip-hop have lost their shock; today we can hear Clash songs play in the background of cruise commercials, then switch the channel and see Disney movies starring Ice Cube. The people who grew up with the radical changes brought by punk and hip-hop ended up creating the world we live in today, so imagining a world before their influence is like imagining a world before computers.

And that's precisely what makes *Death Wish 2* such a fascinating viewing experience. The movie is counter-counter-cultural. It gives us a look at a decade of tremendous change from the perspective of someone who simply didn't understand these trends. There's just something hypnotic about being taken into a world view that takes itself so seriously, and yet is so deeply divorced from reality. Of course, this kind of enjoyment requires one to laugh *at* the movie, not *with* it.

## **Blue Velvet**

### **Tears for Rossellini**

The American Dream isn't as perfect as it seems. It's an idea that *Blue Velvet* hinges most of its appeal upon, seemingly ignoring the fact that literature, music, and film have been exploring the concept since the end of World War II. Now, that's not to say that *Blue Velvet* isn't doing something unique, because I've definitely never seen any movie like it. But, a problem arises once it starts trying to do two different things, both of which are equally shocking, but actually contradict each-other.

The movie is more or less split into two halves, both of which embody a type of story that Lynch obviously adores. The first is film noir; giving us this strange mystery of a woman held at the whims of an insane gangster, and of an innocent

youngster who is pulled into a dark underworld to try and save her. At the same time, we also have this prevailing campy-nightmare, where a college kid returns to his college home, reconnects with his father, and romances a high-school sweetheart, all the while dealing with the residents of a creepily idyllic town.

In isolation, both of these elements certainly succeed in evoking tension. With the bright over-world, everything's just too superficially perfect, the colors too bright, and the dialogue too reminiscent of a 50's sitcom. It manages to evoke so much discomfort because all the performances are just a little off, creating an uncanny valley effect that assures us something lies beneath the surface. Meanwhile, in the underworld sequences, the tension comes from too much realism. For example, Dennis Hooper's gangster has no grace or cool to him, instead he's an unstable psychopath, who will laugh with his violent cronies one minute, then huff gas and scream "Mommy!" as he clutches the leg of his forced mistress the next.

And yet, somehow, the one character who feels two-dimensional is also the one who's supposed to tie these worlds together. Rossellini's performance is so distressing to watch because she's been reduced to a sexual object on all accounts. When she's with Hooper, she's a victim, forced to degrade herself and subjected to numerous beatings. However, when she encounters the hero of the story, the connection she makes with him is still entirely a sexual one, first making him strip for her, then encouraging him to beat her as a means of bringing her sexual satisfaction. Meanwhile, her actual sense of suffering is seemingly undercut at every opportunity. Sure, Hooper has essentially forced her into sexual slavery, but then the sheer masochistic pleasure she seems to draw from these encounters muddies the tragedy.

We know that she also loves her son and husband, but then the movie subverts every opportunity to show how these relationships effect her on an emotional level.

No doubt the worst example of her treatment occurs in the infamous sequence wherein she's dropped off at Kyle's doorstep. The scene begins with her character humiliated by being forced to stand naked in his front yard. However, from there we watch as the humiliation is exacerbated on her own volition, wrapping her arms around Kyle, trying to kiss him, and proclaiming to his friends "he put his disease in me." In this moment, her character is defined not as a struggling victim, but as a weird nymphomaniac from another world, completely unfamiliar with basic human customs.

What makes this whole ordeal so off-putting, is how it frames her character as a mediator between the underworld and the over-world. Despite being a wife and mother, she has a complete inability to preserve the dignity of herself, or the people around her. It's as if Lynch actively tries to make the audience disgusted by her. Perhaps some could argue that in this moment she's representing some sinful underbelly that this perfect Americana would choose to ignore. However, if that were the case, surely it would make more sense to alienate the idyllic family, rather than Rossellini. Instead, we don't pity her, we just want her to disappear.

For its conclusion, the film tries to end on a sentimental image, showing Dorothy playing with her son, who wears a hat that Kyle spotted earlier in the movie. Maybe this moment would seem like a victory if we'd seen her maintain a shred of her humanity, but we haven't. All we know is that a sexual object is now trying to

masquerade as a mother, the consequences of which we can only imagine as frightening.

### **The Terrors of Kink**

It's weird that even as we reach adulthood, so many of us still choose to believe that sex is something simple. Even as people widen the scope of how they view sex in relation to gender, there's still this mass inability to publicly accept, or even acknowledge, the role of sexual appetites, assuming that a girl will either be smart enough to find a "nice guy" or she'll fall victim to some sleazy creep who keeps the complete works of Marquis De Sade in a secret compartment of his bookshelf. The ideas of *Blue Velvet*, much like the mysteries of sex, are immensely difficult to pin down and explain. However, I do think that the film's greatest quality is quite possibly its most obvious; its rebellious hatred of simplicity in all its forms.

*Blue Velvet* manages to take a series of noir tropes that almost every viewer would be familiar with, and dial all of them up a couple of notches. As a result, Lynch creates an experience kind of like listening to three genres of music simultaneously, where the volume of all three is just a little too loud. Jeffrey Beaumont (McLaughlin) is just a little too innocent, constantly talking like one of the Hardy Boys, even while he pursues a murder mystery with inexplicable obsession. The members of the town are too friendly, unable to utter any lines that don't come straight from an episode of *Leave it to Beaver*. Meanwhile, the malicious Frank (Hooper) is just too hedonistically crazy; constantly alternating between drinking, huffing gas, and attacking everyone around him. And then, of course, there's Dorothy (Rossellini), the

damsel in distress who's seemingly so fragile that she can't exist without the domination of a man... or can she?

There's a repulsive brilliance to Dorothy's character, because her behavior embodies masochism in the truest sense; she gains pleasure from being disparaged and objectified by everyone, including the audience. Take, for example, the sequence in which Kyle watches her and Frank have one of their midnight rendezvous. As we watch her get slapped and strangled by Frank, there's an automatic cringe that sets in, purely from the sight of a woman in a bathrobe getting struck with by a bigger man. However, this sympathy comes with a secondary expectation that, after being sexually abused, a woman is left as a battered and broken shell. So, when she proceeds to drag Kyle to her couch and unzip his trousers, a new kind of apprehension sets in, because she's now violating a tenant of how we believe she should deal with what happened.

This is the underlying tension that creates a weird power-play between the two main characters. When Kyle keeps trying to play detective and find the husband and daughter, it's she who consistently blocks his questions and makes sex the sole objective. This tension is probably at its most intense when Dorothy is dropped off naked at Kyle's doorstep. At first, the situation is very clearly in Kyle's hands as he takes Dorothy in his arms and drapes his coat over her; his act of chivalry even causes Ben (his love interests boyfriend) to awkwardly back away and recall his goons into the car. However, once they reach Sandy's home, Dorothy flips the power dynamic, suddenly trying to turn the moment into a strange love scene. There's something deeply repulsive in trying to extract romance out of such a traumatic circumstance.

Yet, isn't the entire point of masochism to find an exciting and erotic in moments of pain, humiliation, and anguish?

I don't think I can in good faith claim that there's a central purpose to what Lynch is doing, because I don't think his movies are meant to offer clear answers; there's probably no real reason why Dorothy's dead husband turns up at the very end of the movie, other than that it made sense at the time. However, if the viewer's journey through the movie could be encapsulated in one scene, it would be when Kyle recovers in his room after a violent interaction with Frank. We see Kyle break down and start crying, and naturally we assume he's just stunned by the nightmarish series of events he just experienced. However, through a flashback we see that he was most traumatized by the moment when Dorothy begged to be hit; we get this strange sequence where the sound of his punch, her pleased moans, and his animalistic grunting, mix into a bizarre cacophony. When he starts sobbing it's almost like a desperate cry for sense and simplicity. When Dorothy is abused, it's as if both Kyle and the audience want to first shout "stop hitting her!" then turn to Dorothy to shout "And stop enjoying being hit!"

Now, I realize that the argument I've made has been used by too many apologists who claimed "she enjoyed it!" as a means of navigating a Title IX charge. Masochism can be hard to comprehend because of the deceptively crucial role that consent plays. However, my apprehension is eased when I look back at a point in the movie when my roommate turned to me and asked "do you think there are actually people like this?" I think that there are, and I think that the power of *Blue Velvet* is that it can make its viewer stop and think, in even the most seemingly perfect of

locales, about the weird, kinky, and possibly even dangerous desires that surround them.

## The Strange Virtue of Re-Animator

Based on a series of short stories by H.P. Lovecraft, Brian Yuzna's 1985 *Re-Animator* opens with a man's eyeballs exploding out of his eye sockets and concludes with the villain's intestines shooting out of his stomach and coiling around the protagonist like an anaconda. This was a movie made for Joe Bob Briggs, a thrill-ride that constantly invents new ways to deliver body-horror to the audience, and even throw in some nudity for good measure. So the fact that Briggs called the movie an "*instant Drive-In Classic*" for its "Bone saw-fu," "lobotomy-fu," and "intestine-fu," should really come as no surprise.<sup>241</sup>

What is a little surprising, is that Roger Ebert gave the film three stars<sup>242</sup>, and that Kael would admit that the film left her feeling "light-headed and happy."<sup>243</sup> Indeed, both critics even managed to draw joy out of the rowdy theatre experience, with Ebert describing feeling "surprised and reinvigorated by a movie that had the audience emitting taxi whistles and wild goat cries<sup>244</sup>," and Kael remarking "the

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<sup>241</sup> Briggs, Joe Bob. "An Instant Classic 'Re-animator' Is Drive-in At Its Bloody Best." *Orlando Sentinel* 10 Nov. 1985. Web. <[http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1985-11-10/entertainment/0340290101\\_1\\_juice-carl-hill-herbert-west](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1985-11-10/entertainment/0340290101_1_juice-carl-hill-herbert-west)>.

<sup>242</sup> Ebert. Review of *Re-Animator*. October 18, 1985

<sup>243</sup> Kael. *For Keeps*. Pg. 1088

<sup>244</sup> Ebert. Review of *Re-Animator*. October 18, 1985

mockery here is the kind that needs a crowd to complete it.”<sup>245</sup> This is, after all, a movie in which a woman is tied to a gurney and almost given cunnilingus by a sentient decapitated head. So what is it about this strange, gross film that has managed to win over three distinctively separate crowds?

One obvious conclusion, is that Ebert and Kael were charmed by the film’s sheer creativity. In referring to its blending of slapstick and deadpan humor, along with its truly astounding creature effects, Ebert commended the film for being able to “transcend the genre, and go over the top with its creative vision, no matter how weird.”<sup>246</sup> Likewise, Kael praised moments such as the intestine-anaconda scene by writing “monkeyshines like these raise this horror-genre parody to the top of its class.”<sup>247</sup> The imagination of these effects conveyed a commitment to delivering unique thrills to an audience; had it been absent, it would have conveyed a laziness which might have even upset Joe Bob Briggs.

But then again, Ebert still called John Carpenter’s *The Thing* a “geek film”<sup>248</sup> and his review of *Re-Animator* is tinged with the same assaultive language of his early 80’s horror reviews, only with the terms tweaked into positive connotations, such as when he claims “we have been assaulted by lurid imagination, amazed by unspeakable sights, blind-sided by the movie’s curiously dry sense of humor.”<sup>249</sup> Likewise, Kael admitted that some particular moments did hold “an aggressive

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<sup>245</sup> Kael. *For Keeps*. Pg. 1088

<sup>246</sup> Ebert. Review of *Re-Animator*. October 18, 1985

<sup>247</sup> Kael. *For Keeps*. Pg. 1087

<sup>248</sup> Ebert. Review of *The Thing*. January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1982

<sup>249</sup> Ebert. Review of *Re-Animator*. October 18, 1985

meanness,”<sup>250</sup> even though it didn’t necessarily bother her. So, commending the successful scares of the film doesn’t explain how it avoids plummeting into the “geek” category.

Another possible reason, is that while the film definitely has its brutal sequences, it largely manages to avoid feeling mean-spirited, as opposed to something like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part II* which, for better or for worse, proudly boasts its cruelty. Even after describing the decapitated cunnilingus scene, Kael was still willing to assert “the scenes are like pop Buñuel; they’re explosively batty, yet the actors manage to keep their professional dignity.”<sup>251</sup> Meanwhile, Ebert asserts that the audience is “keenly aware that nothing of consequence has happened,” meaning that the laughter and heckling towards the screen wouldn’t carry the same implications of cruelty as, say, the audience’s reaction during *I Spit On Your Grave*.

Yet, as Ebert and Kael’s deliver praise, it’s important to note that they do so in a way that’s also rather patronizing. Ebert repeatedly claimed that, by nature of its material, *Re-Animator* shouldn’t be a good movie. He stated, “it’s charged by the tension between the director’s desire to make a good movie, and his realization that few movies about mad scientists and dead body parts are ever likely to be very good.”<sup>252</sup> Likewise, in favorably comparing the film to Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, Kael claimed, “it’s not out to scare you, it’s out to make you laugh at what other movies have scared you with, and at what they’d have scared you with if they hadn’t pulled back.” Indeed, Ebert even brings in a quote from Kael’s essay on trash,

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<sup>250</sup> Kael. *For Keeps*. Pg. 1085

<sup>251</sup> Kael. *For Keeps*. Pg. 1087

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

which states “The movies are so rarely great art, that if we can't appreciate great trash, there is little reason for us to go.”<sup>253</sup>

What’s troubling about this path of analysis is that both Kael and Ebert seemingly conclude that the only way a film like *Re-Animator* can succeed, is by taking jabs at other movies of its genre. This, in turn, seems to imply that the only way a horror film could make itself palatable by critics, is by pandering to some critical bias against horror movies. I would argue, however, that *Re-Animator* is actually doing something a lot more complex, something that both Ebert and Kael are aware of, without precisely articulating. Indeed, *Re-Animator* can actually stand as an important model of how to be offensive and crass in the right kind of way.

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The best way to understand what *Re-Animator* does right, is to consider where it had the potential to go horribly wrong, and the little changes that could have alienated and outraged Ebert and Kael. First, the movie could have made the mistake of turning Herbert West an outright villain, rather than an anti-hero. Even though West is largely responsible for all the atrocities of the film, he never intentionally inflicts pain on anyone; he has no ill will towards his fellow doctors and shows complete a-sexual disinterest in Megan. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, his ideals are relatively pure; even when he’s been strangled by sentient organs, the only thing he cares about is making sure that his notes are rescued. This might seem like a pedestrian observation, but it’s important to note because of how much of the movie’s humor comes from West’s inability to take the danger seriously. When he laughs at

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<sup>253</sup> Ebert. Review of *Re-Animator*. October 18,1985

the news that Doctor Hill has become obsessed with Megan, for example, he's not laughing at Megan's suffering, but rather at the weirdness of a doctor that he, and the audience, already dislike. This quality not only aides the comedy, but also serves as an essential narrative component. Ultimately, his character is able to stand in as someone outside of the chaos of the film, willing to remain unfazed by the horror, and thereby remind the audience to have fun.

As a point of contrast, imagine if the film had combined the rolls of West and Doctor Hill, so that West was obsessed with both his serum and with Megan. Suddenly, any jokes lead by West's idiosyncrasies would become far darker, because they would ask the audience to laugh with someone who bares ill intent towards the other characters. When Dr. Hill's decapitated head commits cunnilingus on Megan, the audience is torn between sympathizing with Megan, and laughing at the ludicrousness of the setup. However, if it was somehow West committing this action and still trying to pull humor from it, then the audience would suddenly be asked to partake in a much crueller spectacle and actively laugh at the suffering of the character. In that case, it would become a "geek show", in the worst sense of the phrase.

Another possible pitfall, is if the film had tweaked the supporting characters of Cain and Megan so that they weren't connected to the medical world. Cain is able to act as the moral lens of the story because he's both a doctor and a humanist, making him a stand-in for West's absent conscience. Consider if Cain was just a journalist writing a story on West's experiments and Megan was his girlfriend who got dragged along. This change would suddenly mean that every Doctor in the film

was either a creep, a geezer, or a maniac, leading the film to seem like some ham-fisted warning against the dangers of playing god. Granted, this theme wouldn't be on the same level as, say, *Dirty Harry's* conservative creed, yet it would still weight the movie down. There's just something so refreshing about medical science serving as both the cause and the solution to the characters' problems; it allows the movie to remain unburdened and focus on creating a spectacle for the audience.

Likewise, though Megan's primary role is as the protagonist's love interest, her presence in the film also presents the viewer with a reasonable set of reactions; her trepidations towards West, and her grief over her father's madness, both make her the most relatable character in the film. It's also worth noting that reducing Megan's role would make the film considerably more sexist, removing her agency in the situation and just turning her into the prey of a perverted psycho. While, granted, the current iteration does subject her to immense horrors, she still feels like a character with emotional stakes, rather than a tool of the filmmakers to titillate the viewer.

Lastly, it's important to consider that even though the film is willing to go to brutal lengths, it never feels needlessly cruel; there's a lot of gore, but very little inflicted pain. Beside the over-the-top opening, there are only three actual deaths in the movie, and all of them are accompanied by an emotional beat, whether it be tragedy (as in the case of Dr. Halsey and Megan), or triumph (as with the death, and re-death, of Dr. Hill). Granted, there are also half a dozen re-animated corpses, but they're so devoid of any humanity that they stand as movie monsters with slightly human faces. I would argue that, contrary to what Ebert, *Re-Animator* is a film with consequences precisely because it chooses to respectfully acknowledge the impact of

a character's death, even if it forces the film to occasionally refrain from going hog-wild.

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Perhaps consequences really are the secret, because they force the characters of a film to truly come to terms with the effects of their actions. This can come across in larger than life terms, like West and Cain realizing the death of Dr. Halsey could ruin them; or just in the subtler implications of what the characters believe, such as Hill's plagiarism representing elements of corruption and fame-obsession in the medical community. The ultimate effect, is that it conveys a sort of honesty to the audience, a willingness to be transparent about what exactly the film is showing. This means conceding to a graphic action being graphic, and admitting that the ideological basis behind one action isn't some sort of grand coda for people to live by. This isn't a case of trash accepting its place as such, but rather, of a film deciding not to lead the viewer to false emotional beats and conclusions. A critic can disagree with what a film believes, but it's pretty hard to damn its honesty.

## **Conclusion**

Until the end of their careers, Roger Ebert, Pauline Kael, and Joe Bob Briggs, perpetually reinforced the idea that they were writing their reviews in spite of some other force, something that one could even call an anti-audience. These were cretins, victims of an unexamined life, who would constantly give their money to whatever Hollywood told them was important. They would laugh when a movie told them to laugh, scream when it wanted them to scream, and cheer whenever it told them that the on-screen acts were righteous. This audience was gullible, and liable to be incited into a mob rage at the slightest provocation. Its members were also ignorant of their own nature, and could have their brutal impulses triggered by on-screen violence, without even realizing it.

For Ebert, they were hooligans looking for a “geek show” that satisfied their mean-spirited desires, and their affection for violence and humiliation. For Kael, they were uneducated plebeians who had allowed movies to goad them into believing a nihilistic portrait of society, and who constantly searched for an easy answer to complex issues of gender, class, and politics. And for Joe Bob Briggs, they were ‘wimps’, people so terrified of humanity’s dark nature that they would let social decorum dictate what they should and should not enjoy.

However, though these audiences were certainly out there, the movies that incited them were not necessarily evil. The downfall of Bosley Crowther was caused by his inability to understand that audiences wouldn’t all take a movie like *Bonnie*

*and Clyde* at face value. He couldn't consider that violence, if exposed to the right public, could provoke serious thought. Even if they were repulsed by the movie, both Ebert and Kael could still comprehend an audience seeing a film like *I Spit on Your Grave* or *Dirty Harry* from an ironic and intellectual perspective; their real fear was that the average viewer simply wouldn't be smart enough to do so.

Thus, when the Slasher movie became a significant genre, or when the American revenge narrative dominated Hollywood cinema, it was a sign that the "other" was dominant, and using their box-office receipts to fund the decline of American cinema. Both these trends naturally peaked, yet their continued popularity still represented something in the mainstream populace that Ebert and Kael simply couldn't stand for.

Ultimately, Ebert allowed himself to make specific movies less important than the grander struggle, focusing on what modern horror films meant to the ignorant masses, and largely neglecting what values a more intelligent viewer might pull out of them. Granted, his willfully one-sided approach never came to bite him in the ass as Crowther's did, but that's largely because he was fortunate enough to rail against the pleasures of a smaller, niche within his greater audience.

Kael, on the other hand, felt the need to carefully dole out her critical capital. Throughout the 80', the values she despised had become simultaneously embraced by mainstream cinema and watered down to a point of harmlessness, allowing her to occasionally look down on these films, rather than fighting them on their own level. As a result, she was able to observe the trends a little more carefully, and strike hard at the subtle evolutions that really struck her as dangerous.

In Joe Bob Briggs, we can find a cautionary tale of anarchy. His goal was to completely divorce criticism from morality and, in the process, speak directly to the audience that would appreciate cinema at an ironic and experiential level. The mistake he made, however, was overestimating just how far his audience was willing to detach itself from real life values. He believed that, as lovers of schlocky films, he could aim directly at a readership who could tolerate a joke regardless of far he took it. After this mistake cost him his job at the *Times Herald*, he decided that he couldn't have it both ways; he had to either be an absurd personality or a respected critic, so he chose the latter.

All three of these critics made a very careful decision about who, exactly, they wanted their audience to be. What I learned from writing the reviews of Chapter 4, is that once you decide what your audience values, the rest can follow pretty easily. You could be writing for a reader who is passionately opposed to all displays of misogyny, mean-spirited violence, and racist classism; or you could address the reader who is willing to distance themselves enough from these issues to analyze how a movie stands as a strange interpretation of its world. After you make this decision, the rest is just a matter of details.

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In 2011, the uncut version of *I Spit On Your Grave* was given the Blu-Ray treatment. The back cover contains two recommendations from critics; the first is from *HorrorNews.com* and reads "It stands alone as one of the most controversial films ever made... this is a piece of cinematic history to witness for yourself and

make your own decisions.”<sup>254</sup> The other, and in larger font, is clipped from Ebert’s *Chicago Sun-Times* review; the quote calls the movie “Sick, reprehensible and contemptible... This movie is an expression of the most diseased and perverted darker human natures.”<sup>255</sup>

In spite of Ebert’s fervent hatred, the film garnered a considerable cult following and was remade in 2010. Then, in October 2015, shortly before I started writing this thesis, director Meir Zarchi announced he had finished shooting *I Spit On Your Grave; Déjà vu*, a sequel that would return the surviving cast of the original film.<sup>256</sup>

In 2012, *Dirty Harry* was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry, by the Library of Congress, joining the ranks of *Citizen Kane* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. That same year, Clint Eastwood - the man whom Kael had spent one decade denouncing as fascist, and then another decade labeling a has-been, stood at the podium of the Republican National Convention and, beneath a silhouette of his most famous movie characters, announced his support of Mitt Romney.

As of 2013, there are just 357 Drive-Ins remaining in the United States, making them account for just 1.5% of American movie screens, as opposed to 25%

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<sup>254</sup> *HorrorNews.com*. Back Cover. *I Spit on Your Grave*. Dir. Meir Zarchi. Perf. Camille Keaton. Cinemagic Pictures, 1978. DVD. Anchor Bay. 2011.

<sup>255</sup> Ebert. Back Cover Back Cover. *I Spit on Your Grave*. Dir. Meir Zarchi. Perf. Camille Keaton. Cinemagic Pictures, 1978. DVD. Anchor Bay. 2011.

<sup>256</sup> Miska, Brad. "Meir Zarchi Just Finished a Sequel to His Own 'I Spit On Your Grave'!" *Bloody Disgusting!* 09 Nov. 2015. Web. 09 Nov. 2015. <<http://bloody-disgusting.com/indie/3369406/meir-zarchi-just-finished-a-sequel-to-his-own-i-spit-on-your-grave/>>.

during the 50's & 60's<sup>257</sup>; most of that land currently hosts shopping multiplexes.<sup>258</sup>

In the past ten years, low-budget horror films have come back in vogue. However, while some festivals specifically target creative and outrageous genre films – such as Austin's *Fantastic Fest*-- the horror market has become largely dominated by films that aim for a PG-13 release, particularly following the success of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise. This tends means no nudity, no blood, and, usually, no kung-fu.

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Looking at how many of the same trends have stuck around since the 80's (the prominence of Franchising, the over-bloating of studio budgets, the saturation of star-vehicles) one can't help but ask whether it's all worth it? Surely, if an audience demands them, Slasher flicks, nationalistic action movies, and even wimp horror movies, will continue to come out, regardless of what critics say or do.

Such cynicism is certainly tempting, but then again, if the critic wanted to prevent movies from being seen, they could have gotten a job at the MPAA instead. The truth is, readers don't look towards film critics for moral guidance. Every critic has their own boundaries, and their own reactions when these boundaries are crossed, and that's what makes their voices unique. Whether the reader agrees with them or not, I think that these reactions are so powerful because they make us realize how personal these limits truly are. Each and every one of us hold our own values and fears, and I think that the cases I've looked at show that the things that trigger a sense of revulsion are always particular to the individual.

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<sup>257</sup> Church. Pg. 64

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

Ultimately, the process of recognizing these reactions is its own exercise in understanding. It makes us stop and consider, even for a moment, that the things we shrug off as entertainment, can be based upon exploiting the anxieties, tragedies, and traumas of those around us. Even if this recognition doesn't stop our enjoyment, it at least creates an awareness and, possibly, even a desire to only let these acts exist within a work of fiction.

Roger Ebert was only half right. Films might not all be machines of empathy, but critics almost always are.

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