

## **Of Manias, Shit, and Blood: The Reception of *Salò* as a 'Sick Film'**

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### **Abstract**

A discursively constructed niche within the online horror fan community asserts their subcultural capital by positioning the reputed 'sickest' films against 'mainstream' horror consumption. Fans argue over the affective and artistic merit of these films, including Pasolini's *Salò* (1975), which routinely tops fan lists of 'sick films'. Using discourse analysis of online discussion boards, I examine how *Salò*'s reputation among both 'sick film' fans and art film fans cues overlapping reading effects through intertextual comparisons to films from different taste cultures—complicating the appeals to (sub)cultural authenticity used by fans on both ends of the high/low cultural spectrum. The performativity of online identities allows 'sick film' fans to privilege and negotiate *Salò*'s displeasurable affectivity through classist and masculinist reading strategies, but their performed anxieties reveal the instability of cultural distinctions premised upon displays of (sub)cultural capital within both horror and art film fandom.

**Key Words:** subcultural capital, horror, cult film, fans, masculinity, performance, violence, abjection.

Critics have regarded filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975) as 'the leading figure'<sup>1</sup> of a 1960s generation of Italian directors (along with Bernardo Bertolucci and Michelangelo Antonioni) who gradually moved away from the neorealist school that had held sway in Italian art cinema during the previous decade. Among this younger generation who were 'promoted as heirs to the Italian art cinema *cinema d'autore* tradition',<sup>2</sup> Pasolini seemed 'a postwar one-man band, capable of transforming everything he touched into gold, from painting, poetry, and narrative to cinematography', and today 'the memory of Pasolini has taken on monumental proportions and his work continues to have prolific effects on international cinema'.<sup>3</sup> Remembered as a controversial artist and writer whose humanistic interpretations of Christian and secular mythology sometimes proved scandalous, Pasolini's films are often seen to envision a peasant working class that has 'retained a preindustrial, mythical, and

religious consciousness, a sense of mystery and awe in the face of physical reality',<sup>4</sup> positioning his characters 'as far away as possible from the modern, capitalist, bourgeois world of which he felt himself a member and a victim'.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps one of the most infamous films in cinema history, his final production (released shortly after his murder), *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), stands astride multiple cultural strata in its extreme vision of brutal victimization, allegedly signaling the director's loss of faith in the political potential of the working classes and the sexual liberation rhetoric of the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> This adaptation of the Marquis de Sade's subtitled novel (here transposed to the Republic of Salò in Mussolini's Italy), concerning four libertines who systematically degrade and kill many innocent youths, was banned in Italy upon its initial release due to the extremity of its depictions of sadism, provoking both violently denunciatory and thoughtfully appreciative reactions from cultural critics.<sup>7</sup> Naomi Greene argues that Pasolini's conflation of sadism and fascism 'reflected nothing less than a desire to fashion one of the most extremist, perhaps *the* most extremist, films ever made', resulting in 'a last, deliberate act of transgression: its scandalous political analogies outraged intellectuals, while its horrific depictions of sex repelled the mass audience'.<sup>8</sup> Today, many film scholars and aesthetes regard it as a classic work of transgression and a searing leftist indictment of fascism. For example, film critic Bruce Bennett deems the film a 'profoundly isolating, suffocatingly formalist, stomach-churning masterpiece' sought after for years by cinephiles<sup>9</sup>; while Gary Indiana, author of a BFI Film Classics volume on the film, deems it 'one of those rare works of art that really achieves shock value' and 'a metaphor for [fascism's] worst excesses'.<sup>10</sup> Sam Rohdie calls it 'beautifully formed and stylistically complicated, however repellent the scenes that it represents, as if its images of evil have been both highlighted and exorcised by the strength and sublimity of its style'.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, some of the same 'transgressive' qualities that contributed to the film's initial and continuing notoriety among viewers with high levels of what Pierre Bourdieu terms 'cultural capital' (i.e., 'knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education which confers social status'<sup>12</sup>) have allowed it to also find favor among horror audiences more attuned to low culture, specifically those privileging its shocking and viscerally affective depictions of sadism, coprophagia, sexual violence, mutilation, and murder. These horror fans often differentiate themselves from 'mainstream' middle-class viewers who disparagingly associate 'bad taste' with those films that make powerful appeals to the viewer's body.<sup>13</sup> Several critics and scholars have observed how it is no great revelation that *Salò* has a certain proximity to low culture through its reputation among cult and horror fans, whether due to its notoriety as an oft-banned film only fit for rare screenings, its spatial and temporal relation to the 1970s Italian exploitation tradition, or its powerful spurring of bodily affect. 'Given the extremeness of

its vision', write J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'it seems only fitting that *Sa/ò* should turn up in midnight shows, where the otherwise unacceptable can often be given an airing'.<sup>14</sup> In their reference book of Italian horror films, Luca M. Palmerini and Gaetano Mistretta consign the film to their section on 'strange and unclassified films', describing *Sa/ò* as a 'Frenzied and excessive report on fascist violence unleashed between the walls of occupied life. Sickening'.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Mikel J. Koven cites the film as one of several "high-art" precursor[s]' to the short-lived 'Nazisploitation' cycle in late-1970s Italian exploitation cinema.<sup>16</sup> And finally, Joan Hawkins has found 'high art' like *Sa/ò* mingling with 'low' films in cult film fanzines and catalogues, because even high art can offer affective appeals to the viewer's body that are often coded as culturally low, regardless of a filmmaker's intent.<sup>17</sup>

At this intersection of high and low art, *Sa/ò* has earned a particular cultish distinction among a niche segment of the horror fan community: it is seen as one of the very 'sickest' films ever made, according to those select horror fans who actively seek out this subculturally constructed corpus of films (see appendix). Though fandom of European art films is generally associated with viewers possessing higher levels of cultural capital than the 'mainstream' viewer, for devotees of particularly 'low', supposedly 'improper' cultural texts like horror cinema (especially at its most disturbing or potentially nauseating extremes), subcultural identification is a more likely strategy of distinction from the 'mainstream' viewer.<sup>18</sup> Fans with enough investment in their chosen texts to discuss them on online discussion boards, especially on the horror-specific boards upon which this research focuses, are more likely to possess greater interest in horror cinema than the casual horror consumer, and are more likely to align themselves with the horror fan subculture in general. This is not to say, however, that subcultural identification is a unified or coherent position, since intra-subcultural struggles for authenticity are common ways of jockeying for what Sarah Thornton terms 'subcultural capital', or a form of capital that circulates within youth subcultures as a sort of 'hipness' that 'confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder'.<sup>19</sup> In online horror fan discourse, it operates through demonstrations of extensive generic knowledge, especially when highlighting intertextual connections between semi-obscure texts that one has allegedly already seen. Consequently, I also distinguish between both the horror fan subculture in general (which may include fans of many different horror cycles and variations) and the niche fan viewership of the so-called 'sickest' films under consideration here—a group of films that might otherwise go unseen by most horror fans, but which certain horror fans intently locate, view, and discuss as a source of subcultural capital.

The reputation of these texts as the 'sickest' films is largely constructed through fan discourse, with a specific handful of titles consistently appearing together on the fan-made lists of 'sickest/most extreme/most brutal' films posted on online discussion boards. Adopting

one of the most prevalent descriptors used by horror fans in categorizing and ranking these films, I use the term 'sick films' for ease of reference to this corpus—but while these films may share textual commonalities in their portrayal of extremely violent, abject, and taboo content, often through a self-serious or realist tone that fans say enhances the texts' appeals to verisimilitude,<sup>20</sup> their so-called 'sickness' is less an objective quality possessed by every single text in every viewing context, than a discursive distinction that helps particular fans demarcate their own tastes as different from the general horror subculture. By tabulating the titles most often cited on these 'sickest' film lists, we can roughly discern their level of subcultural notoriety in this regard. Even if it does not fall comfortably into either the horror genre or low culture in general, horror fans of 'sick films' almost always cite *Salò* highly on their lists; in fact, having tallied the titles that appear with the most frequency on thirty such lists (each containing between ten and twenty titles on average) appearing on horror discussion boards between approximately 2005-2008, I have found that Pasolini's film currently emerges at the top of the combined list (see appendix), tied only with Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). Again, this is not to say that *Salò* is necessarily the 'sickest' film in any definitive textual sense, for such fan rankings are usually contested not only on the individual basis of one's personal threshold for violence and extremity, but also across time as a film's reputation changes within and beyond the horror subculture. Indeed, some 'sick film' fans would argue that there are considerably 'sicker' films than *Salò*—such as *August Underground's Mordum* (2003), which is arguably lower ranked because it is an 'underground' horror film less culturally well known than *Salò*; likewise, several recent films like *À L'Intérieur* (2007), *Snuff 102* (2007), *ReGOREgitated Sacrifice* (2008), *Philosophy of a Knife* (2008), *Martyrs* (2008), and *Antichrist* (2009) may one day possess higher connotations of 'sickness', but their reception tails are not currently long enough to garner significant subcultural notoriety. If we keep in mind Thornton's argument that media exposure often determines the circulation of subcultural capital by influencing what seems fashionably underground vs. mainstreamed and overexposed,<sup>21</sup> *Salò*'s widespread infamy for over three decades among cinephiles with high cultural capital—that is, its reputation as a film 'probably most famous for being more unseen than seen'<sup>22</sup>—has allowed horror fans ample time to seek it out over the ensuing years, yet its high-art pedigree, extreme representations, and uneasy fit into horror's traditional generic tropes has allowed it to remain a niche text around which subcultural capital can be built through intra-subcultural distinctions. While a detailed account of the historicity of particular conceptions of 'sickness' is a topic for further research, the rise of online culture yields greater reciprocity of fan exchanges than niche magazines, fanzines, and other fan-oriented texts of the pre-internet age allowed, so we can infer that fan-constructed reputations of 'sickness' have accumulated in the past two decades, whether by concentrating and intensifying earlier cultural reputations about a given film or by spawning new notorieties in their own right.

In addition to serving as broad barometers of a film's existing reputation in a particular historical moment, fan lists of so-called 'sickest' films also inform a film's meaning as it is received within alternative taste formations like 'sick film' fandom; that is, the actual experience of viewing the text cannot be cleanly separated from the fan discourse that shapes viewing expectations. For a film like *Salò*, then, reputation can precede authorial intention as alternative aesthetic criteria overwhelm artistically 'preferred readings' of supposed textual meaning. Following Tony Bennett's concept of 'reading formations', or the historically- and culturally-specific discursive fields through which both texts and their readers are constructed (displacing the culturally biased notion of inherent textual meanings to be 'correctly' interpreted),<sup>23</sup> the reception of *Salò* as a 'sick film' is a particular type of reading formation inflected by intersecting (sub)cultural discourses that underlie the performative social nature of fandom. For Bennett, readers of a text are 'productively/culturally activated' through 'an interaction structured by the material, social, ideological, and institutional relationships in which *both* text and readers are inescapably inscribed'.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, we must pay attention to the specific contexts through which Pasolini's film is 'productively activated' by 'culturally activated' horror fans who may occupy a markedly different cultural standing than the film's original intended audience, but who nevertheless create certain reading effects via the film's intertextual relations to other so-called 'sick films'. Such reading effects may overlap, however, with the same 'preferred readings' used by art film fans, thus complicating the appeals to (sub)cultural distinction used by fans on both ends of the high/low cultural spectrum. To examine these processes of distinction, I analyze fan discourse patterns that emerge over hundreds of English-language discussion board postings, in threads both related to 'sick films' in general and to *Salò* specifically, appearing on horror-exclusive websites like *The Rue Mortuary* (the discussion boards of the Canadian horror magazine *Rue Morgue*) and on general film websites like the *Internet Movie Database*. Not surprisingly, horror film websites frequently house the intra-subcultural struggles for subcultural capital between horror fans, whereas more general film websites are common settings for disagreements between art film fans, horror fans, and other viewers. Broadly speaking, though, these discussion board postings illustrate how different fan identities are performed through the variously constructed connotations of *Salò*'s 'sickness', typically through distinctions drawn in age, gender, class, taste, and pleasure.

### **Coding Difference and Notoriety: 'Sick' Films for 'Sick' Fans**

Although *Salò*, like many of the other films on 'sickest' film lists, has also been called one of the most 'disturbing', 'brutal', and 'extreme' films, the common label 'sick' is fittingly descriptive in its connotation—and, in common fan usage, conflation—of both the desired bodily affect (as in 'this film is nauseating', which viewers often cite as a reading effect of

screening *Salò*) and the cognitive state of would-be viewers (as in 'this film is made by and for the sick-minded').<sup>25</sup> The latter connotation largely derives from outside the horror subculture, especially from 'anti-fans' and 'non-fans' (who are far more likely to post on non-horror-specific discussion boards) willing to pathologize either Pasolini or *Salò* fans. According to Jonathan Gray, 'anti-fans' are viewers 'who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel'; while 'non-fans' are 'viewers or readers who do view or read a text, but not with any intense involvement'.<sup>26</sup> In this context, one anti-fan says, '*Salò* is just fucked up. I don't really see how a sane person can even think about making such a movie'.<sup>27</sup> Another claims that '*Salò* is the kind of movie that gets made when the director is clearly 1) totally misanthropic about society, and 2) quite probably mentally unstable'.<sup>28</sup> Other posters shift the emphasis from the filmmaker to the fans themselves, declaring the fans of such films to be 'sick', thereby allowing the stigmatized term to be either contested or adopted ironically by fans as a badge of honor; one anti-fan, for example, says 'I personally think the people hanging around this board [for discussing *Salò*] on a continuous basis are disturbed. [...] Defend the movie all you like, guys; we both know what's really going on here! Sickos!'<sup>29</sup> In another case, remarking upon Australia's refusal in 2008 to effectively un-ban *Salò*, an apparently chagrined poster complains that,

[E]verybody that comes to message boards like *IMDB* complaining that *Salò* wasn't graphic enough, or asking 'Should I watch this film? I didn't mind *Ich i the Killer*', create[s] this distorted, confused view of the film all over the world, where anybody [who] thinks that it is brilliant is a disturbed pervert who should be locked away.<sup>30</sup>

As this latter quote suggests, *Salò*'s (dis)reputation among some horror fans as a 'sick film' (e.g., through intertextual comparisons with *Ich i the Killer* (2001), another high-ranking 'sick film') may conflict with its culturally recuperative reception as a 'brilliant' work of art, because fan discourses can enable subcultural performances of 'difference' that are potentially seen as all the more 'authentic' when fans' (self-proclaimed) marginality bleeds over into the more general reception of their chosen text. As Matt Hills puts it:

Although not a secret society, horror fandom—specifically at the 'underground' end of the spectrum of horror fan identities—nevertheless positions itself as transgressive, and thus reflexively participates in connotations of secrecy, illegality, extremism (of representation), and deviance. To an extent, then, the cultural pathologization of horror audiences that tends to be opposed by fans closer to the 'mainstreamed' field of horror...may in fact be welcomed and embraced by 'transgressive' fans.<sup>31</sup>

When 'sick film' fans of *Salò* allude, ironically or not, to their own or other fans' possible 'sickness'—as with comments like 'maybe there is something wrong when one can watch this kind of stuff and not be that shocked'<sup>32</sup>—they make a bid for subcultural exclusivity by privileging culturally low reading effects as paramount, and in so doing, conceptually collapsing together the film's visceral affect (which is readily apparent to almost all viewers,

no matter their cultural standing) and the supposed psychological effects rumored by cultural conservatives to result from overexposure to violent media. However, 'sick film' fans often simultaneously seek culturally higher reading effects, in order to separate themselves from supposedly 'less authentic' fans seeking gore or shock value alone. There are thus at least two levels of distinction in play here: the subculturating distinction of the horror fan against the 'mainstream' moviegoer; and the intra-subcultural distinction of the 'sick film' fan against more 'inauthentic' horror fans, the latter including generalist horror buffs and even some so-called 'gorehounds'. While a sense of opposition to the 'mainstream' horror viewer remains the utmost distinction drawn by 'sick film' fans, the workings of subcultural capital become more intricate (and sometimes contradictory, indistinct, and idiosyncratic) in the finer lines drawn between other horror fans attempting to gain access to the nebulously defined 'sick film' niche; in this gate-keeping process, poseurs and wannabes must be slowly separated from more experienced, genre-literate fans seen as worthier of entering the fray, for selectiveness retains the power of subcultural capital.

'Sick films' like *Salò* gain cultish reputations because their fans perceive them as culturally inaccessible, very difficult to watch, and extremely different from 'mainstream' horror, supposedly rendering them the 'exclusive' domain of horror fans with higher levels of subcultural capital than more casual horror viewers, who are often looked down upon as immature children or teenagers unworthy of this 'hardened' niche viewership. The films themselves are frequently coded through fan discourse as 'foreign' or 'underground', situated in opposition to the supposed 'feminization' of contemporary Hollywood horror (including even the recent spate of so-called 'torture porn' films) and its viewers—a subcultural position replicating problematic cultural discourses linking consumerism and femininity, often here by way of desexualized immaturity.<sup>33</sup> 'It's an insult to even compare *Hostel II* with *Salò*', says one fan. '*Hostel II* is kid's stuff; *Salò* is a masterpiece for hardened adults only'.<sup>34</sup> Boasts another fan: 'You're an underground [newcomer] if you don't OWN the AU [*August Underground*] trilogy or have seen *Salò*'.<sup>35</sup> Because most 'sick films' are not common currency in the horror genre at large, knowledge about them is used by fans like trivia to establish their difference from the imagined 'mainstream', and to police subcultural boundaries for this intra-horror niche. Films that do not measure up in subcultural prestige as 'sick' enough are mocked, as are posters who apparently lack requisite levels of genre literacy, such as when one poster teases another for claiming *Hostel* (2005) to be a 'sick film': '*Hostel* wasn't even banned in any countries. TAME', says the disparaging fan, echoing an earlier post in which he applauds *Salò*'s 'impressive track record' for bans in six countries.<sup>36</sup> There are often disagreements between fans over the inclusion and exclusion of certain titles on 'sickest' film lists, but it is also common for fans to applaud at least some of each other's choices and ask other fans for viewing suggestions (provided they do not admit to having seen *none* of these films),

sometimes leading to trading offers. Judging by the number of threads dedicated to discussing lists of 'sick/extreme/brutal' films, these interactions are valued for allowing fans to demonstrate their subcultural capital by naming and justifying their textual choices through intertextual links to their other listed films, which productively activate, via a shared sense of comparable (dis)reputation, the affective reading effects of the titles in question.

In other words, the subcultural consumption of 'sick films' is directly tied to the construction of cult reputations that discursively carry an affective charge both informing, and informed by, the viewing experience. On the most obvious level, the pleasurable act of collecting and accumulating viewing experiences is a key part of the subcultural capital associated with them, and fans often note which listed 'sick films' they have seen or own. As Mark Jancovich says of the cult reputations surrounding 'underground' horror, 'inaccessibility is maintained throughout the scene not only through the selection of materials—they are not for everybody—but also through their virtual unobtainability',<sup>37</sup> conferring prestige upon fans with access to the films and therefore the ability to grant access to other 'worthy' fans (e.g., via trading or tips about where to otherwise obtain them). Fans celebrate the rarity of texts, even as they paradoxically oppose the dominant cultural standards that allow for the obscurity of their chosen objects; as Hills says of censorship, 'horror fans convert the very preconditions for their subcultural distinctions (consuming horror that is too distasteful/obscene for the "mainstream") into a force to be opposed and done away with'.<sup>38</sup> Finding uncut versions of films becomes highly privileged, which Hills deems a way that affect may circulate through fan discourse as it is transferred from the text itself to the material artifact, such as through rumors about a film's legal status<sup>39</sup>; speaking of *Salò*, for example, one fan says, 'And with all the different edits and so-called uncut versions out there, who knows whether I've seen EVERYTHING in that film? But I agree about it being the sickest'.<sup>40</sup> Joanne Hollows explains that these processes of finding and trading obscure or semi-obscure titles can become a game-like activity that makes their cultification seem the result of an adventurous masculine pursuit—especially when the means of obtaining culturally marginalized titles may be illegal or semi-legal, as with trading bootleg VHS tapes, importing banned films, or downloading films online.<sup>41</sup> When the original Criterion Collection DVD of *Salò* went out of print (until its re-release in fall 2008), its scarcity led to copies fetching hundreds of dollars each, which only enhanced its reputation among 'sick film' fans curious about the film's notoriety but unable to view it. In discursively framing films that may not be readily available, 'sick film' fans often reduce the films to simple statements about shocking content, as with these comments about *Salò*:

Does anyone remember a movie with children locked away, forced to eat feces, and tortured? I can't even remember the name but I remember it being difficult to watch.<sup>42</sup>



There's a movie I heard of a while back that had to do with shit-eating, rape, torture, etc....and it wasn't *Caligula*...but I can't find the title. Foreign film, strange title.<sup>43</sup>

Such descriptions contribute to the film's (dis)reputation among horror fans, potentially shaping its perceived textual meaning as a 'sick film' differently than in culturally higher reading contexts, since viewers may anxiously approach the text with the primary expectation of being shocked and disgusted. Readers may even decide from the descriptions alone that a film is among the 'sickest', adding to the thrill of finally encountering the text; take, for example, this exchange between several 'sick film' fans:

Has anyone seen *Salò*? I've heard it's a pretty rough one, but have never gotten my hands on it.<sup>44</sup>

*Salò* is quite a messed up movie. I don't recommend seeing it, though, unless you enjoy watching the following: male-on-male rim jobs (visual); excrement eating (off of plates); excrement being put back [in] places it came from, and other places as well. As for on screen violence there is actually very, very little, except for the last 5 minutes of the movie. Grade-A material, though, in a sick sort of way.<sup>45</sup>

I was going to put the *Guinea Pig* series that are mock snuff films, but after seeing the description of *Salò*, I believe that wins.<sup>46</sup>

As this exchange also suggests, homosexual acts (consensual or not) and non-normative sexual practices like coprophilia may be seen by fans as even 'sicker' than the grotesque tortures in faux-snuff films like *Guinea Pig: Flower of Flesh and Blood* (1985), revealing the normative heterosexism and potential homophobia behind the masculinist thrust of many male-dominated, homosocial fan cultures like the horror subculture.

Of course, other factors informing a film's reception may also contribute to its perceived meaning, such as extratextual knowledge about the filmmaker or pro-filmic events; with *Salò*, for example, fans vaguely familiar with the filmmaker's life sometimes circulate erroneous rumors (which are not subculturally exclusive) that Pasolini was murdered as retribution for the film's extreme representations.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the faceless anonymity of the internet, and the home viewing environment in which 'sick films' are almost exclusively consumed, may also lend them an additional air of mystery and danger by associating them with their use 'behind closed doors' by unseen, potentially (so-called) 'sick' people. These reputational factors combine to provide a sense of anxiety around submitting oneself to the powerfully affective text, such as when posters express trepidation while anticipating the viewing experience, with statements like 'I'm kinda afraid to see this [*Salò*]. I've read and read about, and at one point even bought it. But I can't bring myself to watch it'.<sup>48</sup> In another thread, an alleged 15-year-old says he/she was dared to watch the film, admitting that 'I'm interested in

seeing it, but I don't want to get myself into something that I'll regret'.<sup>49</sup> Certainly, it cannot be assumed that this apparent anxiety is a transparent reflection of the posters' actual experiences. However, as a means of performing one's subcultural identity (even for those who may yet have limited subcultural capital), it has become a recurrent part of the fan discourse surrounding 'sick films'—valuable as both a product of, and contributor to, a film's notoriety, and ultimately bolstering the subcultural capital of those who have experienced the film. In this way, there is often an affective quality to fans' expectations over whether a given film will live up to its reputation, with some fans typically offering dissenting opinions on the film's success in that regard, usually through appeals to 'sicker' films.

### **Unpleasure, Mastery, and Masculinity in 'Sick Film' Fan Discourse**

Based upon empirical research on gendered tastes in horror films—specifically, female horror fans' distaste for what Brigid Cherry calls 'excessive or gratuitous displays of violence, gore, or other effects used to evoke revulsion in the audience'—we can infer that most 'sick film' fans are probably male or at least have stereotypically 'masculine' tastes.<sup>50</sup> For example, a study of viewer responses to sexual violence, which used several 'sick films' as objects of inquiry, found that viewers embracing these films were indeed predominantly male or aligned themselves with 'masculine' tastes.<sup>51</sup> Fan discourses about 'sick films' are indeed suffused with masculinist notions of challenging oneself to withstand them, treating the completed viewing of each one as, like the label 'sick' applied to fans and films alike, a badge of honor: as one fan says, *Salò* 'is challenging on a whole lot of levels but getting through it is a trudge',<sup>52</sup> while another claims, 'I always try to challenge myself because so far nothing's really made me sick, but I've never seen *Salò* and I heard that's pretty messed up'.<sup>53</sup> Fans performing their subcultural capital as apparent veterans of these films may challenge or dare other viewers to watch:

The most disturbing movie of all time is now back in print. Of course, I'm talking about Pasolini's *Salò*. [...] Who has made it through a full viewing of the film? Who has tried and failed? Has anyone managed to watch it multiple times? For those that have (if any), how does the experience change on repeat viewings? I watched it once, about 10 years ago. I think I'm maybe ready to try watching it again.<sup>54</sup>

Circulating knowledge about certain titles, with the expectation that less experienced viewers will track down and watch them, can even take on a sadistic dimension by implicitly inflicting these films upon others; as one fan says, 'I love freaking "those kinds" of people out that say they've seen everything and nothing can "get to them"'.<sup>55</sup>

One's 'authenticity' as a 'sick film' fan depends upon performing 'authentic' responses to the films, and not departing too dramatically from certain subcultural scripts. There are, for example, limits to the amount of bravado one can perform before other fans read such

displays as mere performance, as mock shows of machismo unsupported by subcultural capital; outright denials of being viscerally affected are rejected as 'showing off', sometimes attributed to 'kids' or 'teenagers' with something to prove. As Thornton says, '[n]othing depletes [cultural or subcultural] capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard'.<sup>56</sup> In the block quote above, for example, the poster may be challenging others to see *Salò*, implying the value of viewing it at least once, but he/she also suggests that it has taken 'about 10 years' to muster the will to re-watch it. In another example, a fan responds sarcastically to another's flippant comments about finding humor in a particularly violent scene: 'You are fucking hard, my friend. Hard. Don't lose that; you're a tough guy, everyone respects that. Douche'.<sup>57</sup> Even if one disputes a highly reputed film's 'sickness' or its artistic merits (e.g., complaints that *Salò* is not gory enough to satisfy one's expectations), fans are implicitly expected to acknowledge the difficulty of getting through the film, not to utterly reject it as unaffecting; such flat-out rejections are discouraged because they represent not just attacks upon a given film as a text, but also upon the film's reputation, which has been built up within this 'exclusive' viewership as a cornerstone of subcultural capital. Instead, fans frequently confess the strong and lasting effects that the film had on them, such as making them want to vomit, avert their gaze, take a shower afterward, or leaving them feeling raw even days later. For example, one fan says, 'Okay, just finished watching *Salò*. In my opinion, VERY fucked up. I had to look away a few times, or take a break and walk around a moment'.<sup>58</sup> Sometimes specific scenes are named in reference to their affective impact (e.g., 'the shit banquet', 'the scalping scene'), which Hills (adapting Foucault) describes as a sort of 'affect-function' through which films are fragmented using fan knowledge in order to manage a film's affective power.<sup>59</sup> Using fan discussions of more 'mainstream' horror as examples, Hills argues that horror fans display (sub)cultural capital to artistically 'elevate' their viewing choices and stress their role as active, knowledgeable, genre-literate connoisseurs, thus avoiding being pathologized as deranged or 'sick' viewers made passive by bodily affect.<sup>60</sup> If, however, 'sick film' fans actually embrace that pathologization (even ironically), I would argue that they may also be more comfortable acknowledging their feelings of vulnerability during, and the long-term effects following, the viewing experience, thus tempering the potentially excessive appeals to mastery and machismo (e.g., through turns to ironic distance and humor as a means of laughing off discomfort with the abject) that may be more fashionable among more general horror fans than within the 'sick film' niche. Says one fan:

*Salò* has always found its way into my brain for quite some time now. Ever since I watched it, I can say that I am pretty fucked up after seeing it. Maybe I'm just not as experienced as you all; granted, I haven't seen most of the films that you all have described, which makes me want to kick my own ass.<sup>61</sup>

Because these films typically portray extreme cruelty and bodily abjection, intentionally submitting oneself to such visceral imagery and then discussing its impact seems a

sadomasochistic performance between fans, especially if one's viewing pleasure is based upon a masochistic identification with the pain of the victim onscreen, a victim whose torture one is both sadistically anticipating and complicit with as a viewer. Such pleasure speaks to the double nature of abjection: its ability to both threaten and bolster the ego by representing that which transgresses corporeal boundaries: blood, shit, viscera, bodily fluids, etc. On one hand, viewing 'sick films' entails a counterphobic exposure of oneself to that which one fears in order to withstand and gain mastery over it, reinforcing a sense of masculine hardness that allegedly cannot be proven through 'mainstream' horror films. On the other hand, admissions of lingering unpleasure complicate any easy sense of mastery over the powerful text. This conflicted response is suggested by a fan who explains,

I watched it [*August Underground's Mordum*] because I had heard so much about it and I was curious. I don't know why, but I like to be able to say, 'Oh yeah...I have seen that'. To be honest, I kind of feel ashamed that I watched it—it was rough.<sup>62</sup>

The extremity of these films' representations encourages the viewer to reflect upon his/her motives for watching, and to question his/her imagined relation to the films' so-called 'sick' target audience, even if that audience is only imagined. As another fan says,

I think for me it's that I'm fascinated with depravity, yet I have absolutely no interest whatsoever in taking part in it. Watching *Aftermath* for me has an S&M quality to it; it's just taking part in a sick fantasy without anyone being hurt and kind of experiencing that side of humanity without being tainted by it. I guess I'll have to second the idea of there being a voyeurist [sic] and a sadomasochist within us.<sup>63</sup>

This is not to say that a sense of mastery does not persist within fan discourses that regard successfully watching these films as a mark of status, but that mastery is seen as coming at a price; one must discursively display one's 'wounds' suffered at the hands of the powerful film in order for the accomplishment to be accepted as legitimate. This sense of legitimacy through a collective sharing of wounds supports the films' and their fans' assumed position against the supposedly 'feminizing' effects of mainstream horror, by seemingly distancing these viewers from the stereotypes of the desexualized fan-boy and the feminized 'mainstream' horror fan.<sup>64</sup> It is a subculturally accepted truism that one cannot emerge unfazed after viewing the 'sickest' of the 'sick', so acknowledging a film's powerful impact upon oneself also effectively serves as 'evidence' that one has actually seen the often semi-obscure or otherwise 'inaccessible' film in question. However, the fact that it is acceptable for many fans to ask each other for new (and, more often than not, 'sicker') viewing suggestions implies that the experience of being powerfully affected carries considerable weight within the subculture, rivaling the importance of simply seeing and 'mastering' every 'sick film'. As Julian Hoxter explains, (masculine) competitions of 'self-testing' by deliberately exposing oneself to the most extreme horrors may be based around a desire for mastery through knowledge, spread through fan discourses that can provide 'basic comfort and security simply through the

recognition of commonality of experience' and potentially serve a 'directly defensive or evasive purpose', but ultimately such discourses cannot fully contain the 'undigestible experience' of excessive affect.<sup>65</sup> (Because Hoxter's analysis concerns *The Exorcist* (1974), a film considerably tamer than the 'sick films' under consideration here, we can assume that the affect of the latter is even more difficult to contain.) Says one fan after viewing a highly ranked 'sick film':

Even after reading about it for months on the board and elsewhere and knowing exactly what I was in for, it still managed to shock and disturb me. Even this morning, I feel a little shaken when I think about it. I think watching it once was good enough for me.<sup>66</sup>

Because normative social values are less often recuperated at the end of 'sick film' narratives than in more mainstream horror films, the post-viewing affect is extended all the more. Complicating Hills's argument, then, it seems that discursively naming the affect attending the viewing experience of 'sick films' does not fully tame or minimize it (nor disproportionately privilege knowledge over affect), but rather extends that affect across an intertextual field, prospectively cueing fans' affective responses to other 'sick' titles.

Despite the importance placed by fans upon collecting and viewing 'sick films' like *Salò*, it is notable that, unlike most other films with cult reputations, there is far less emphasis placed upon re-watching them; even for many fans, once is enough, suggesting that any supposed sense of mastery over the powerful text is only a partial one. 'They are a badge of honor', as one fan says of 'sick films' in general. 'If you can make it through them, you never have to watch them again'.<sup>67</sup> Another fan condenses this sentiment by apparently valuing a film's affective qualities over possible authorial intent:

I own *Salò* (as well as CH [*Cannibal Holocaust*] and *Audition*), and while others go on about its classic 'status', its sex and shit-eating scenes are powerful and disturbing. It's definitely an interesting movie to watch, but its aim in my mind is not entirely clear, and [I] wouldn't call it a classic movie. I'd probably never see it again. But worth a watch if you haven't.<sup>68</sup>

Because these films are discursively constructed as unsettlingly 'extreme' texts to be endured with some discomfort (not casually consumed), there is a sense within fan discourse of neither 'enjoying' them nor reducing one's experiences to more 'mainstream' horror viewing pleasures. 'I'm also watching *Salò* right now', says one fan, for example, 'and so far, it's much more disturbing [than *August Underground's Mordum*] and I'm only 15 minutes in, because it feels more visceral and the build-up is so...tangible. I can tell I'm not going to enjoy *Salò* at all'.<sup>69</sup> This discursive move away from more 'traditional' horror viewing pleasures is another means of boundary policing via subcultural scripts, privileging certain responses in order to distinguish 'sick film' fandom as a niche within the horror subculture more generally. Fannish

pleasure may primarily come to the fore in the act of talking about one's viewing experiences and drawing intertextual connections to other 'sick films', rather than in one's private, individual experience with a text viewed fewer times than the more traditional (and traditionally mastered) horror film. In this sense, 'sick film' fandom may be less focused around the fan's deep dedication to singular texts than the fan's repeated submission to the visceral affect represented by the ever-shifting, never-fully-bounded corpus of 'sick films' more generally. In using the disembodied spaces of online discussion boards to discuss highly embodied viewing experiences, a film's visceral affect may become diffused into fan discourse, but those discourses retain an affective charge through the aforementioned subcultural performances—including various expressions of daring, hardness, trepidation, discomfort, and prolonged anxiety—all of which echo one's affective responses to the viewing experience. Without the circulation of these expressions as marks of subcultural status, the appeal of 'sick films' as a consistently grouped body, or intertextual field, would be greatly lessened. In inflicting this body of films upon each other and oneself, fans may certainly reinforce masculinist discourses, but the ego-sustaining effect of these sadomasochistic performances of fan identity is ultimately limited by its dispersal across turns toward the collective approval of fellow 'sick film' fans.

### **'Sick' but Art: Affect and Alternative Aesthetic Criteria**

What, then, of a film like *Salò* that might differ in its supposed 'high-art' pedigree from many of the 'underground' horror and 'exploitation' films with which it shares its vaunted position of 'sickness'? It is, after all, a film whose reputation preceded it in not just the horror subculture, but in high culture as well—and without its infamy among art film fans as a 'shocking' text, it is doubtful that horror fans would have been as receptive to it, even as the latter prioritize visceral affect over other reading effects. As alluded to earlier, this infamy followed in part from Pasolini's existing arthouse reputation as a provocateur, stemming from his religious-themed films like *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) and the earthy sexuality of his 'Trilogy of Life' (*The Decameron* (1971), *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), and *The Thousand and One Nights* (1974)) that directly preceded *Salò*; the latter films, in fact, inspired an Italian cycle of bawdy, medieval-themed sexploitation films, commonly dubbed 'Decamerotica', much the way *Salò* and its high-art kin inspired the Italian 'Nazisploitation' cycle. Indeed, *Salò*'s ability to cross cultural strata can be attributed to how the reception of its affectivity may well exceed its traditionally 'artworthy' textual characteristics; as Gary Indiana observes, 'One way that *Salò* differs from the unabashedly perverse epiphanies of the cinema of shock is in its pedantic moralism, which might have ruined it if the shock part didn't so completely overwhelm the moralism'.<sup>70</sup> Much as the viewing pleasures of 'sick films' are discursively constructed as 'different' from more 'mainstream' horror, their aesthetic value among fans often rests upon the primacy of affectivity over the formalist standards of artworthiness

frequently used in high-culture reading formations. Defending the viewing pleasures of 'sick film' fans, for example, one fan says, 'You can't use the same [aesthetic] criteria that you would use to judge, say, *The Exorcist* to also judge the merits of *Flower of Flesh and Blood* (and vice versa). To do so would cause a disservice to *both* movies'.<sup>71</sup> As this quote implies through the notion of 'disservice' to horror films both culturally accepted and rejected, 'sick film' fans primarily seeking visceral affect do not necessarily reject other aesthetic criteria, but value some criteria over others in the construction of subcultural distinctions. After all, following Jancovich, those with high enough levels of subcultural capital (to say nothing of the related economic capital represented by the luxury of expending disposable time and income on fannish pursuits) to gain access to 'sick films' are likely versed in bourgeois reading strategies (e.g., form over function) that may reinforce class biases against audiences without the 'proper' tastes for consuming 'difficult' films.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, as Jancovich points out, cult film and art film fandoms developed together 'out of a series of economic and intellectual developments in the post-war period, a process which created selective film markets that were defined by a sense of distinction from "mainstream, commercial cinema"', such as the 1970s growth of midnight movies shown in urban repertory cinemas.<sup>73</sup> Because cult film fans in general are, according to Jancovich, 'predominantly middle class and well educated in academic competences and dispositions',<sup>74</sup> the cultural distinctions drawn by 'sick film' fans and art film fans may overlap in significant ways through their shared opposition to an imagined 'mainstream' supposedly unable to stomach certain shocking films (or, in this case, comprehend *Salò's* 'preferred reading'). *Salò*, for example, was originally marketed not just as an art film under the prominent banner of Pasolini's name, but also as 'the most shocking and horrible picture you could see', according to one of the reviews quoted in the English-language trailer; according to another review quoted in the trailer, 'the best advice for many people: don't see *The 120 Days of Sodom*', enhancing the film's reputation as viewable only by an exclusive viewership. Again, Hawkins's argument bears repeating that 'one set of cultural uses—one kind of audience pleasure—does not necessarily preclude the other', because 'it is not so clear that low genres seek *only* to titillate', while 'high culture—even when it engages the body in the same way that low genres do—supposedly evokes a different kind of spectatorial pleasure and response than the one evoked by low genres'.<sup>75</sup> *Salò* seems an exemplary film in this regard, spawning somewhat similar reading effects (shock, disgust, etc.) in both high- and low-cultural reading formations, but arguably less as a direct result of textual traits alone than as a result of the film's notoriety being deployed by niche audiences in similar appeals for cultural distinction from the 'mainstream'. As Hills says of the 'transgressive' act of viewing culturally forbidden texts, fan pleasures 'take on a *discursive* existence in relation to the cultural history of the text concerned, and the discursive repertoires within which it has been placed, as well as the material history of its circulation (or lack thereof)'.<sup>76</sup>

Despite their general privileging of visceral affect as a central (un)pleasure, there are internal divisions within the niche viewership of 'sick film' fans—as previously seen with those who violate subcultural scripts by flat-out denying a film's affectivity, treating the film (or rather, the film's reputation) without a certain amount of cultish reverence—and such divisions often form around the aesthetic merits of certain films. Because of the special status they afford viewers who have experienced the 'sickest' of the 'sick', especially contentious are highly notorious films near the top of fan lists, such as *Salò* and a number of films more likely considered 'exploitation', such as *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Guinea Pig: Flower of Flesh and Blood* (1985); these latter films are sometimes praised for their affectivity, but other times denigrated by some fans for supposedly offering mere shock for shock's sake. Even if they might ironically wear the stigmatizing label 'sick' as a badge of honor, 'sick film' fans can invoke their subcultural capital by appealing to bourgeois reading competencies, including formalism and auteurism, in order to separate themselves from the connotations of 'immature' fans who also enjoy 'mainstream' horror and also fans supposedly interested in shock value alone.<sup>77</sup> Consider, for example, the following fan comments (from different threads), in which *Salò*'s subcultural reputation is constructed using language that draws upon traditional standards of artworthiness (importantly, after first proclaiming its affectivity), suggesting that *Salò* is not only 'sick' and 'disgusting', but also 'brave', 'realistic', 'well-made', 'brilliant', 'important', and deserving of being watched for the 'right reasons':

*Salò* is one of the sickest movies ever made. One of the only movies I literally had to turn my head away from the screen because I was getting sick watching. Gore is one thing. But scatology is something I just don't need to see. Extremely realistic and well-made to boot, which makes it different from other 'sick' movies, since most are complete amateur hour.<sup>78</sup>

When a film like *Visitor Q* is brave in what it does, or *Irreversible* for that matter, then getting through the imagery is part of the quest of watching the film. I can say 'I enjoy the film/effects/director' without enjoying horrible images. Nothing about seeing the brutal bits in [a] film like *Salò* gets me excited.... [Imitating so-called 'juvenile' fans:] 'Ohhh [people] force kids to eat shit; man, I got to see that one; awesome, they rape children! I will pay \$300.00 bucks for the Criterion edition of that!' Nevertheless, a film like *Salò* is important, and if viewed under the right pretenses, it's another film that is in fact a journey to watch. It will GUARANTEE you moments of being uncomfortable, of helplessness, of wanting to turn it off but being involved, scared, angry.... ANYONE who passes the film off as straight GORE is a complete idiot. [...] So yes, the films are 'sick'. They do contain disturbing images and scenes; some of them [in my



humble opinion] have NO merit at all, while others are very strong and brilliant bits of celluloid. Love them or leave them, but watch them for the right reasons.<sup>79</sup>

*Salò: 120 Days of Sodom* [sic] is the most brutal and disgusting movie I have ever seen, and I've seen most of those mentioned in this thread. *Salò* is not a horror movie and is difficult to compare to the pure exploitation titles like *Cannibal Holocaust* or *Last House on the Left*, but the fact that it is a serious attempt at art by an acclaimed director is part of what makes it so disturbing.<sup>80</sup>

There are a number of rhetorical moves at work in these statements. *Salò* may be differentiated somewhat from 'amateurish' exploitation titles, but is still compared to other 'sick films' like *Visitor Q* (2001) and *Irreversible* (2002)—which are notably the 'brave' work of filmmakers (Takashi Miike and Gaspar Noé, respectively) with reputations as auteurs straddling the high/low cultural divide—thus still allowing the performance of (sub)cultural capital through genre literacy. Also implied is *Salò*'s position as an 'important' work of art through its positioning as a Criterion Collection release for dedicated cinephiles, given Criterion's association 'with film as "high art", promoting the work of renowned directors and classic films', and the highly stylized packaging of Criterion DVDs as collectible art objects in themselves.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps most telling is the suggestion that *Salò* is all the more disturbing because it is a 'serious', artworthy film, not just an exploitative product that wallows in gore. Fans with high levels of subcultural capital may privilege *Salò* as having more narrative coherence and identificatory emotional resonance than other, more 'exploitative' sick films, and argue that *Salò*'s sustained atmosphere of systematic violence and abjection makes it 'sicker' than its individually shocking scenes alone. 'I think violence on an individual level is almost expected (there are sociopaths who do awful things)', says one fan, contrasting *Salò* with faux-snuff films, 'but seeing it institutionalized like it is in *Salò*, or carried out by someone, for reasons you can relate to, like in *Irreversible*, makes the impact much harsher'.<sup>82</sup> Another fan claims, 'I genuinely felt *Salò* was the most disturbing film I've ever seen, not just because of the depravity of the sadism, but also because Pasolini's point was so effective'.<sup>83</sup> Yet other fans deploy bourgeois reading strategies of form over function in considering the film's style—for example, when one fan says that the distanciation devices used by Pasolini make the film affectively harder to watch than 'a stereotypical gorefest'.<sup>84</sup> In short, then, (sub)culturally 'higher' fans are more likely to turn toward formalist/auteurist readings of the text to aesthetically justify the film's extremity, privileging *Salò*'s affectivity as the sum of its parts (rather than merely the effect of individual scenes), and as a result of Pasolini's filmmaking style and perceived anti-fascist sentiment. Fans may also point toward the film's historical setting as 'authenticating' its affective charge:

It may not be based on any one event, but it's known that many things seen in this movie (and far more extreme forms of torture) were used during the fascist reign in

Germany and Italy, so in a sense it did really happen—just not in the exact way it was shown in the film.<sup>85</sup>

As might be expected, non-horror-exclusive discussion boards (such as *IMDB*) are more likely to spawn direct disagreements between ‘sick film’ fans and art film fans over *Salò*, the latter of whom often complain that ‘those who simply like the film because it’s shocking or controversial and talk only of those aspects are doing [the] film a disservice’ and misrepresenting Pasolini’s oeuvre as a whole.<sup>86</sup> Recuperative, high-cultural readings of the film are seemingly made more difficult by the film’s reputation among culturally stigmatized horror fans (‘dumbass teenagers...watching it to impress their friends’<sup>87</sup>)—despite the fact that some ‘sick film’ fans overlap with art film fans in their appreciation of the film (and rejection of ‘immature gorehounds’), albeit privileging visceral affect itself as the foremost aesthetic feature. Barbara Klinger observes how ‘the bedrock proposition of aesthetic motivations for re-viewing’ is the ‘idea that a film cannot be adequately consumed on the first viewing’, especially ‘in relation to foreign cinema’.<sup>88</sup> While ‘sick film’ fans often claim that one viewing is enough, art film fans more likely advocate multiple viewings so that one might move past the immediate shock effect to focus on the film’s artistry and authorial intent; sometimes they directly offer this advice to disappointed ‘sick film’ fans with less (sub)cultural capital, those apparently seeking only shock value or gore. ‘My anticipation of seeing this film was far more agonizing than actually seeing it’, claims one poster about the need to re-view *Salò*. ‘After the first viewing, I felt like I needed a t-shirt announcing the accomplishment. After the second viewing, I started to pick up themes and ideas I had missed’.<sup>89</sup> If, however, fans are less likely to view ‘sick films’ twice, it makes sense that preserving a film’s (dis)reputation—and hence, the subcultural capital of those who experience the text—rests upon preserving the film’s initial affective punch, even if primarily privileging affect can complicate the formalist/auteurist aesthetic criteria that ‘sick film’ fans with higher (sub)cultural capital may treat as somewhat secondary yet nevertheless invoke to justify that affect. Meanwhile, some anti-fans claim that *Salò* is, at its core, an exploitation film wrapped in disingenuous artistic pretensions—for example, when one poster disparagingly compares it to Lucio Fulci’s gory horror film *The Beyond* (1981); when others remark that no film so blatantly showing coprophagia can have artistic merit; or when another claims that ‘Without the gross-out, we wouldn’t be talking about it and Criterion wouldn’t have released it. Show some shocking stuff, drop some names from literature, and you’re guaranteed to look deep’.<sup>90</sup> Based upon cultural assumptions that ‘exploitation’ and ‘art’ are mutually exclusive, and that visceral affect is necessarily coded as culturally low, this sentiment not only questions art film fans’ auteurist readings of *Salò*, but simultaneously questions the (sub)cultural capital of ‘sick film’ fans drawing upon overlapping aesthetic criteria to bolster their own status.

The textual meaning of *Salò* thus becomes discursively constructed at the intersection of broad cultural strata, its fraught reception evoking classist and masculinist connotations of fandom which are in turn mapped onto intra-subcultural struggles for authenticity among horror fans with tastes traditionally located on the lower end of the cultural spectrum, as well as onto art film fans attempting to recuperate Pasolini's final work (and by extension, assert their own cultural capital for appreciating the film) through the film's reception as a notoriously 'shocking' and 'disgusting' but 'important' work. As a film whose (dis)reputation thoroughly precedes it, *Salò* proves to be an especially slippery text to pin down in any reading formation, for its apparent meaning constantly shifts in relation to other reading formations across the cultural spectrum as somewhat different yet overlapping aesthetic standards are used by culturally activated readers to privilege certain textual qualities over others. This fact indicates that even the discourses used by fans of the so-called 'sickest' films share much with the discourses of high art aficionados, despite the frequent rejection and pathologization of the former by the latter, revealing the fundamental instability of cultural distinctions made by each side based upon (sub)cultural capital and performances of fannish 'authenticity'.

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**Appendix: List of 55 Highest Tallied 'Sick Films' (as of June 2008)**

1. *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) (22 votes)
2. *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) (22 votes)
3. *Guinea Pig: Flower of Flesh and Blood* (Hideshi Hino, 1985) (19 votes)
4. *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) (17 votes)
5. *Men Behind the Sun* (T.F. Mous, 1988) (16 votes)
6. *Aftermath* (Nacho Cerda, 1994) (15 votes)
7. *Ich the Killer* (Takashi Miike, 2001) (13 votes)
8. *Nekromantik* (Jörg Buttgereit, 1987) (13 votes)
9. *Guinea Pig: The Devil's Experiment* (Satoru Ogura, 1985) (12 votes)
10. *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1986) (12 votes)
11. *August Underground's Mordum* (Fred Vogel, et al., 2003) (11 votes)
12. *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) (11 votes)
13. *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) (10 votes)
14. *Visitor Q* (Takashi Miike, 2001) (10 votes)
15. *Guinea Pig: Mermaid in a Manhole* (Hideshi Hino, 1988) (10 votes)
16. *Cannibal Ferox* (Umberto Lenzi, 1981) (9 votes)
17. *August Underground* (Fred Vogel, 2001) (9 votes)
18. *Audition* (Takashi Miike, 1999) (9 votes)
19. *Schramm* (Jörg Buttgereit, 1993) (8 votes)
20. *Nekromantik 2* (Jörg Buttgereit, 1991) (8 votes)
21. *Splatter: Naked Blood* (Hisayasu Sato, 1995) (8 votes)
22. *Niku daruma* (Tamakichi Anaru, 1998) (7 votes)
23. *Subconscious Cruelty* (Karim Hussain, 2000) (7 votes)
24. *Caligula* (Tinto Brass & Bob Guccione, 1979) (7 votes)
25. *Braindead* (Peter Jackson, 1992) (7 votes)
26. *Bloodsucking Freaks* (Joel M. Reed, 1976) (6 votes)
27. *Slaughtered Vomit Dolls* (Lucifer Valentine, 2006) (6 votes)
28. *Oxen Split Torturing* (Yuuji Makiguchi, 1976) (6 votes)
29. *I Stand Alone* (Gaspar Noé, 1998) (5 votes)
30. *Muzan-E* (Daisuke Yamanouchi, 1999) (5 votes)
31. *In a Glass Cage* (Agustín Villaronga, 1987) (5 votes)
32. *The Untold Story* (Herman Yau, 1993) (5 votes)
33. *Murder-Set-Pieces* (Nick Palumbo, 2004) (5 votes)
34. *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters, 1972) (5 votes)
35. *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) (5 votes)
36. *Scrapbook* (Eric Stanze, 2000) (5 votes)

37. *Begotten* (E. Elias Merhige, 1990) (4 votes)
38. *Man Bites Dog* (Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, and Benoît Poelvoorde, 1992) (4 votes)
39. *Cannibal* (Marian Dora, 2006) (4 votes)
40. *Imprint* (Takashi Miike, 2006) (4 votes)
41. *Squirmfest* (1989) (4 votes)
42. *Organ* (Kei Fujiwara, 1996) (4 votes)
43. *Premutos: Lord of the Living Dead* (Olaf Ittenbach, 1997) (4 votes)
44. *Last House on Dead End Street* (Roger Watkins, 1977) (4 votes)
45. *Cutting Moments* (Douglas Buck, 1997) (4 votes)
46. *Kichiku dai enkaï* (Kazuyoshi Kumakiri, 1997) (4 votes)
47. *Ricki-Oh: The Story of Ricky* (Ngai Kai Lam, 1991) (4 votes)
48. *The Ebola Syndrome* (Herman Yau, 1996) (4 votes)
49. *Red Room 2* (Daisuke Yamanouchi, 2000) (4 votes)
50. *Beyond the Darkness* (Aristide Massaccesi, 1979) (3 votes)
51. *Thriller: A Cruel Picture* (Bo Arne Vibenius, 1974) (3 votes)
52. *Sweet Movie* (Dusan Makavejev, 1974) (3 votes)
53. *August Underground's Penance* (Fred Vogel, 2007) (3 votes)
54. *Red Room* (Daisuke Yamanouchi, 1999) (3 votes)
55. *House on the Edge of the Park* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) (3 votes)



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Many thanks to Barbara Klinger for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema*, trans. Roger Greaves and Oliver Stallybrass, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972, p. 237.

<sup>2</sup> Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones, *A New Guide to Italian Cinema*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p. 125.

<sup>3</sup> Gian Piero Brunetta, *The History of Italian Cinema: A Guide to Italian Film from its Origins to the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Jeremy Parzen, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 238, 261.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, New York: Continuum, 1990, pp. 180-81.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Pier Paolo Pasolini', in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (ed), *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 494-95.

<sup>6</sup> Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, pp. 293-94.

<sup>7</sup> On the film's critical reception, see Naomi Greene, 'Salò: The Refusal to Consume', in Patrick Rumble and Bart Testa (eds), *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Contemporary Perspectives*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994, pp. 232-242.

<sup>8</sup> Naomi Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 207-08.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Bennett, 'Pasolini's Cruel Masterpiece', *The New York Sun*, 26 August 2008, <http://www.nysun.com/arts/pasolinis-cruel-masterpiece/84572/>.

<sup>10</sup> Gary Indiana, *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom*, London: British Film Institute, 2000, pp. 11, 36-37.

<sup>11</sup> Sam Rohdie, 'Salò: A Cinema of Poetry', *The Criterion Collection*, URL <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/512> [visited 4/9/2009].

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Mikita Brottman, *Offensive Films*, Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, New York: Harper and Row, 1983, p. 299.

<sup>15</sup> Luca M. Palmerini and Gaetano Mistretta, *Spaghetti Nightmares: Italian Fantasy-Horrors as Seen Through the Eyes of Their Protagonists*, Key West, FL: Fantasma Books, 1996, p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> Mikel J. Koven, "'The Film You are About to See is Based on Documented Fact': Italian Nazi Sexploitation Cinema', in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds), *Alternative Europe: Eurotrash and Exploitation Cinema Since 1945*, London: Wallflower Press, 2004, p. 20. According to Koven, Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1975) and Tinto Brass's *Salon Kitty*

(1976) also share this distinction. Examples of 'Nazisploitation' titles produced following *Salò* include *Deported Women of the SS Special Section* (Rino Di Silvestro, 1976), *SS Hell Camp* (Luigi Batzella, 1977), *SS Experiment Camp* (Mario Caiano, 1977), and *Gestapo's Last Orgy* (Cesare Canevari, 1977). Although these films, lacking the cold detachment of Pasolini's camera, tend to focus more exploitatively on torture than *Salò*, virtually none of them appear on 'sickest film' lists, apparently because their cheapness, derivative nature, and deliberate appeals to 'bad taste' too easily translate into the tongue-in-cheek ironic readings associated with paracinema. For a discussion of these readings, see, Graeme Krautheim, 'Desecration Repackaged: the Negation of Taste and the Indifferent Auteur in Nazi Sexploitation', in *Masquerades of Self-Erasure: Pornography and Corporeal Memory in Liliana Cavani's The Night Porter*, Master Thesis, August 2009, University of British Columbia, 107-122.

<sup>17</sup> Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, art film fandom and horror film fandom are not mutually exclusive, especially in the sort of 'art-horror' titles described by Hawkins, but I use the broad terms 'art film fan' and 'horror film fan' to distinguish between those viewers whose identities are informed by rarified cinematic tastes more polarized toward either a high/art or low/horror sensibility (rather than viewers who willingly accept a fluid interaction between high- and low-coded textual qualities).

<sup>19</sup> Thornton, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> For example, according to one fan, 'I tend to judge "sick" by whether or not the movie actually affected me in some way. Most gore/exploitation/rape flicks are not "real" enough to bother me' (Shredi\_Knight, comment posted 27 September 2006 on 'The absolute sickest movie ever made—what is it?' *The Rue Mortuary*, URL <http://www.rue-morgue.com/boards/showthread.php?t=6120&page=7> [visited 4/9/2009]). Another fan, defending *August Underground's Mordum* (2003), says, 'I really think the movie shows the morbid reality of these maniacs, without the violence being glamorized or made "sexy" or "cool" like they do in Hollywood' (Diapason, comment posted 12 December 2007 on '10 sickest movies ever made—a good list', *Bloody-Disgusting.com* Forums, URL <http://www.bloody-disgusting.com/forums/showthread.php?t=3639&page=9> [visited 4/9/2009]). Because discussion board postings are notorious for shoddy spelling and grammar, some quotes henceforth have been corrected for readability but their content has not been otherwise altered.

<sup>21</sup> Thornton, pp. 13-14.

<sup>22</sup> Neal Bartlett, 'Watching *Salò*', *The Criterion Collection*, 25 August 2008, URL <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/509> [visited 4/9/2009].

<sup>23</sup> Tony Bennett, 'Texts, readers, reading formations', *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 16, Spring 1983, p. 5, 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

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<sup>25</sup> While there is some overlap between titles on lists of 'sickest' films and lists of films deemed 'most disturbing', 'goriest', 'most extreme', etc., the films judged 'sickest' tend to be a more self-contained group than those films grouped under other descriptors. *Salò's* nauseating effects are parodied in Brad Jones's (a.k.a. The Cinema Snob's) satirical video review of the film, in which the mock-pretentious reviewer extols the film's high-art virtues while repeatedly vomiting into a toilet at the thought of the film. See Brad Jones, 'Salò, or *The 120 Days of Sodom*', *The Cinema Snob*, URL <http://thecinemasnob.com/2009/08/16/salo-or-the-120-days-of-sodom.aspx?ref=rss> [visited 4/9/2009].

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Gray, 'New audiences, new textualities: anti-fans and non-fans', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, March 2003, pp. 70, 74.

<sup>27</sup> David\_slupper, comment posted 20 January 2008 on '10 Sickest Movies Ever Made', *eBaum's World Forum*, <http://forum.ebaumsworld.com/printthread.php?s=9ad5b47b8ea613a2eb65b22b61f294fc&t=239358&pp=50> [visited 10/11/08].

<sup>28</sup> Senator\_Corleone, comment posted 3 June 2008 on 'The most disturbing shot that no one really talks about', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/thread/107929866> [visited 03/12/08].

<sup>29</sup> Vipermelbourne, comment posted 2 October 2008 on 'Sick and EVIL movie', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/118958105?p=1> [visited 03/12/08].

<sup>30</sup> Wooooo\_bananas, comment posted 13 July 2008 on 'Refused classification in Australia (again)', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/111677857?p=1> [visited 03/12/08].

<sup>31</sup> Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror*, London: Continuum, 2005, pp. 101-02.

<sup>32</sup> Zebrasnake-1, comment posted 17 September 2008 on 'The most disturbing shot that no one ever talks about', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/107929866?p=2> [visited 03/12/08].

<sup>33</sup> The feminization of contemporary American horror has been examined in Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley, 'Teenage traumata: youth, affective politics, and the contemporary American horror film', in Steffen Hantke (ed), *American Horror Film at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi (forthcoming).

<sup>34</sup><sup>34</sup> Albert\_Fish, comment posted 27 July 2008 on 'Refused classification in Australia (again)', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/111677857?p=2> [visited 03/12/08].

<sup>35</sup> Slayer, comment posted 3 July 2008 on 'Rue Morgue's Sickest Films', *Upcoming Horror Movies Message Board*, <http://www.upcominghorrormovies.com/uhm/archive/index.php/t-40469.html>.

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<sup>36</sup> Arachnoidfreak, comments posted 31 March and 7 April 2006 on 'What's the SICKEST movie in da world?' *Killer Movies* Community Forums, <http://www.killermovies.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-33386-whats-the-sickest-movie-in-da-world.html> [visited 10/10/08].

<sup>37</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Cult fictions: cult movies, subcultural capital, and the production of cultural distinctions', *Cultural Studies* 16.2, 2002, p. 319.

<sup>38</sup> Hills, p. 105.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 106. According to Hills, this discursive displacement of affect onto the discovered artifact helps viewers diminish their experience of the film's affective power. While I agree that fan discourses can become affectively charged in this way, I believe readers of 'sick films' can experience especially powerful and lingering affects that are not displaced so easily, especially in comparison with less obviously affective films. On the issue of legality, for example, a poster seems to transfer post-viewing anxieties onto the DVD he/she has recently purchased, nervously asking about the ages of the actors in *Salò*, worried that it might be legally considered child pornography, despite its use of nudity for 'artistic purposes'; see Pingas, comment posted 5 December 2008 on 'This film comes close to child pornography...', *IMDB* Board: *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/124506560?p=1> [visited 07/12/08].

<sup>40</sup> Driftwood, comment posted 28 April 2006 on 'The absolute sickest movie ever made—what is it?' *The Rue Mortuary*, <http://www.rue-morgue.com/boards/printthread.php?t=6120&page=6&pp=50> [visited 02/10/08].

<sup>41</sup> Joanne Hollows, 'The masculinity of cult', in Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis (eds), *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 43, 47.

<sup>42</sup> Pornomancer, comment posted 7 September 2005 on 'The absolute sickest movie ever made—what is it?' *The Rue Mortuary*, <http://www.rue-morgue.com/boards/printthread.php?t=6120&page=3&pp=50> [visited 02/10/08].

<sup>43</sup> Fala, comment posted 4 April 2006 on 'The absolute sickest movie ever made—what is it?' *The Rue Mortuary*, <http://www.rue-morgue.com/boards/printthread.php?t=6120&page=5&pp=50> [visited 02/10/08].

<sup>44</sup> Hybrid Moments, comment posted 4 April 2007 on 'What is the sickest/grossest/most nauseating movie you've ever seen?' *Horror-Movies.ca* Forum, <http://www.horror-movies.ca/Forum/viewtopic.php?id=1390&p=3> [visited 04/11/08].

<sup>45</sup> Sypher, comment posted 18 May 2007 on 'What is the sickest/grossest/most nauseating movie you've ever seen?' *Horror-Movies.ca* Forum, <http://www.horror-movies.ca/Forum/viewtopic.php?id=1390&p=3> [visited 04/11/08].

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<sup>46</sup> DrChannard, comment posted 24 May 2007 on 'What is the sickest/grossest/most nauseating movie you've ever seen?' *Horror-Movies.ca* Forum, <http://www.horror-movies.ca/Forum/viewtopic.php?id=1390&p=3> [visited 04/11/08].

<sup>47</sup> At the time of *Salò*'s premiere, during the trial of Pasolini's accused murderer, several editorials in the Italian press even called the murder morally justified under the pretenses that the imagery in *Salò* proved what a 'violent' person Pasolini allegedly was. See Barth David Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1992, p. 669; and Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy*, p. 201.

<sup>48</sup> Torgoman-1, comment posted 23 November 2008 on 'I'm kinda afraid to see this', *IMDB* Board: *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/thread/123533058> [visited 07/12/08].

<sup>49</sup> Mgirls, comment posted 22 August 2008 on 'Would you find this film acceptable for a 15-year-old?' *IMDB* Board: *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/115617745?p=1> [visited 03/12/08].

<sup>50</sup> Brigid Cherry, 'Refusing to refuse to look: female viewers of the horror film', in Mark Jancovich (ed), *Horror: The Film Reader*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 172-73.

<sup>51</sup> See Martin Barker, Ernest Mathijs, Jamie Sexton, Kate Egan, Russell Hunter, and Melanie Selfe, 'Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Cinema', *British Board of Film Classification*, Aberystwyth: University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2007, pp. 6-8.

<sup>52</sup> Jack-O-Lantern, comment posted 28 August 2007 on 'The Sickest, Most Offensive, Brutal Movie Ever Made?' *Amazon.com* Horror Forum, [http://www.amazon.com/tag/horror/forum/ref=cm\\_cd\\_pg\\_next?\\_encoding=UTF8&cdForum=Fx2BCXSU68XSQM6&cdPage=5&cdThread=Tx8CRGPO964086&displayType=tagsDetail](http://www.amazon.com/tag/horror/forum/ref=cm_cd_pg_next?_encoding=UTF8&cdForum=Fx2BCXSU68XSQM6&cdPage=5&cdThread=Tx8CRGPO964086&displayType=tagsDetail) [visited 25/11/08].

<sup>53</sup> Murderous\_Squad, comment posted 24 January 2004 on 'The Grossest of the Gross', *JoBlo's Movie Club* Discussion Board, <http://www.joblo.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-68988.html> [visited 10/10/08]. Although this poster claims not to like 'sick shit', he/she nevertheless exhibits a prospective response common in the discussion of 'sick films'.

<sup>54</sup> Chaostrophy, comment posted 6 September 2008 on 'The most disturbing film of all time...', *NeoGAF* Forum, <http://www.neogaf.com/forum/printthread.php?t=334210&pp=100> [visited 10/10/08].

<sup>55</sup> Heretic, comment posted 12 November 2005 on '10 sickest movies ever made—a good list', *Bloody-Disgusting.com* Forums, <http://www.bloody-disgusting.com/forums/printthread.php?t=3639&pp=40> [visited 10/11/08].

<sup>56</sup> Thornton, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> Tudor, comment posted 10 January 2008 on '10 Sickest Movies Ever Made', *eBaum's World* Forum, <http://forum.ebaumsworld.com/printthread.php?t=239358> [visited 10/11/08].

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This comment is in reference to a scene from *August Underground's Mordum*, not *Salò*, but is representative of the hostility between fans who deviate from subcultural scripts.

<sup>58</sup> BurkeWorld, comment posted 10 January 2008 on '10 Sickest Movies Ever Made', *eBaum's World* Forum, <http://forum.ebaumsworld.com/printthread.php?t=239358&pp=50> [visited 10/11/08].

<sup>59</sup> Hills, pp. 83-84. It is, however, not always the case that fans name specific scenes, so this taming of affect through 'fragmentation' of the narrative may not always have as much ameliorative power as Hills suggests.

<sup>60</sup> Hills, pp. 78, 91-92, 97. Complicating Hills's argument that horror tends to be discursively constructed by fans as 'at least partially non-affective and disembodied', even when it is so-called 'disturbing' horror dealing with 'extreme and unsettling representations' (p. 82), fan lists of 'sickest' and 'most disturbing' films tend to overlap, indicating that discourses about horror viewing can remain highly affective and embodied (not just disembodied as psychological 'disturbance') for some segments of the horror community.

<sup>61</sup> Sindaddy58, comment posted 18 April 2006 on 'The absolute sickest movie ever made—what is it?' *The Rue Mortuary*, <http://www.rue-morgue.com/boards/printthread.php?t=6120&page=5&pp=50> [visited 02/10/08].

<sup>62</sup> Wlj, comment posted 13 February 2007 on 'The sickest horror movie ever...', *DVD Talk* Forum, comment, <http://forum.dvdtalk.com/movie-talk/491735-sickest-horror-movie-ever-2.html> [visited 10/11/08].

<sup>63</sup> The Assistant Warden, comment posted 23 September 2006 on 'The absolute sickest movie ever made—what is it?' *The Rue Mortuary*, <http://www.rue-morgue.com/boards/printthread.php?t=6120&page=7&pp=50> [visited 02/10/08].

<sup>64</sup> See Hollows, pp. 40-46; and, on the displays of white male suffering within a wider cultural climate of masculinity in crisis, see Martin Fradley, 'Maximus melodramaticus: masculinity, masochism, and white male paranoia in contemporary Hollywood cinema', in Yvonne Tasker (ed), *Action and Adventure Cinema*, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 239-40.

<sup>65</sup> Julian Hoxter, 'Taking possession: cult learning in *The Exorcist*', in Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper (eds), *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and its Critics*, Guildford, UK: FAB Press, 2000, p. 178, 185.

<sup>66</sup> Brainbug, comment posted 7 November 2004 on 'The absolute sickest movie ever made—what is it?' *The Rue Mortuary*, <http://www.rue-morgue.com/boards/printthread.php?t=6120&page=2&pp=50> [visited 02/10/08].

<sup>67</sup> SS316SRV, comment posted 22 September 2008 on 'Most disturbing movies you've ever seen', *Blu-ray.com* Forum, <http://forum.blu-ray.com/printthread.php?s=446a901b849f027a7efe539e361371cb&t=64334&page=2&pp=40> [visited 10/11/08].

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<sup>68</sup> SirStoneyOfBow, comment posted 19 November 2005 on '10 sickest movies ever made—a good list', *Bloody-Disgusting.com* Forums, <http://www.bloody-disgusting.com/forums/printthread.php?t=3639&pp=40> [visited 10/11/08].

<sup>69</sup> BurkeWorld, comment posted 10 January 2008 on '10 Sickest Movies Ever Made', *eBaum's World* Forum, <http://forum.ebaumsworld.com/printthread.php?t=239358> [visited 10/11/08].

<sup>70</sup> Indiana, pp. 12-13.

<sup>71</sup> KillerShrew, comment posted 17 September 2005 on 'The absolute sickest movie ever made—what is it?' *The Rue Mortuary*, <http://www.rue-morgue.com/boards/printthread.php?t=6120&page=4&pp=50> [visited 02/10/08]. Though *The Exorcist* may not be considered an 'art film' or part of high culture, it is notable as a canonical, 'serious' mainstream horror film, often attributed with helping rescue the genre from its connotations of low, 'juvenile' culture (regardless of its notable visceral qualities). At the same time, *Salò's* apparent 'foreignness' (as a product of continental Europe), much like the 'foreignness' of the *Flower of Flesh and Blood* entry in the Japanese *Guinea Pig* series alluded to in this quote, can also be seen as a factor in its supposed demand for 'different' aesthetic criteria than an American horror film.

<sup>72</sup> Jancovich, pp. 310-11.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 308.

<sup>75</sup> Hawkins, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Hills, p. 94.

<sup>77</sup> Adopting a move one might expect of art film fans, several 'sick film' fans posting on horror websites attempt to distance *Salò* from the traditional generic connotations of 'horror' altogether, though the film's notoriety within the horror community makes this a moot point, as Hills observes that 'genres such as horror do not only or even primarily exist "in" their texts, but also circulate at the level of audiences' moralizing discourses and performative displays of a range of cultural identities' (p. 206).

<sup>78</sup> Brainee, comment posted 6 February 2005 on 'The sickest horror movie ever...', *DVD Talk* Forum, <http://forum.dvdtalk.com/movie-talk/491735-sickest-horror-movie-ever.html#post7626211> [visited 10/11/08].

<sup>79</sup> Protectedbyuzi, comment posted 29 October 2006 on '10 sickest movies ever made—a good list', *Bloody-Disgusting.com* Forums, <http://www.bloody-disgusting.com/forums/printthread.php?t=3639&page=2&pp=40> [visited 10/11/08].

<sup>80</sup> Tepp, comment posted 30 August 2007 on 'The Sickest, Most Offensive, Brutal Movie Ever Made?' *Amazon.com* Horror Forum, [http://www.amazon.com/tag/horror/forum/ref=cm\\_cd\\_pg\\_pg5?\\_encoding=UTF8&cdForum=F](http://www.amazon.com/tag/horror/forum/ref=cm_cd_pg_pg5?_encoding=UTF8&cdForum=F)

x2BCXSU68XSQM6&cdPage=5&cdThread=Tx8CRGPO964086&displayType=tagsDetail  
[visited 25/11/08].

<sup>81</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, p. 60.

<sup>82</sup> TylerDurdenBuddha, comment posted 29 October 2008 on 'Which films have made you physically sick? (or close to it)', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/109357802?p=5> [visited 03/12/08].

<sup>83</sup> Seat, comment posted 7 September 2008 on 'The most disturbing movie of all time...', *NeoGAF Forum*, <http://www.neogaf.com/forum/printthread.php?t=334210&page=2&pp=100> [visited 10/10/08].

<sup>84</sup> Nimbleweevil, comment posted 7 September 2008 on 'Salò's ending? \*\*Spoiler Warning!\*\*', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/117083259?p=1> [visited 03/12/08].

<sup>85</sup> Sapphic-Lament, comment posted 10 October 2008 on 'Did this really happen?' *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/109910077?p=1> [visited 03/12/08].

<sup>86</sup> Ludichris83, comment posted 6 September 2008 on 'I must be really desensitized', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/116984030?p=1> [visited 03/12/08]. The issue of *Salò's* (dis)reputation 'misrepresenting' Pasolini's oeuvre is all the more prominent because, as Indiana writes, 'It has often been said that any single work by Pasolini needs to be seen in terms of his work as a whole', so the "auteur" way of considering films is more or less compulsory in Pasolini's case' (p. 21).

<sup>87</sup> Nimbleweevil, comment posted 5 September 2008 on 'When will this be recognized more as a masterpiece than a gross-out fest', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/116896295?p=1> [visited 03/12/08].

<sup>88</sup> Klinger, p. 157.

<sup>89</sup> Sober\_gaijin, comment posted 15 October 2008 on 'The most disturbing shot that no one really talks about', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/107929866?p=3> [visited 07/12/08].

<sup>90</sup> See Gigizirotti, comment posted 30 October 2008 on 'Chomsky on *Salò*', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/121012325?p=1> [visited 03/12/08]; and GuyWhoSezThatsNotGood, comment posted 7 September 2008 on 'When will this be recognized more as a masterpiece than a gross-out fest', *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/nest/116896295?p=2> [visited 03/12/08]. This sentiment is especially common in threads with titles like 'Do any non-intellectuals like this movie?' *IMDB Board: Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), posted



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18 September 2008, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073650/board/thread/118096424> [visited 03/12/08].